FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE

MAY—JUNE
25¢

A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL
A DELL MAGAZINE

MUSEUM OF THE DEAD
by Curtiss T. Gardner

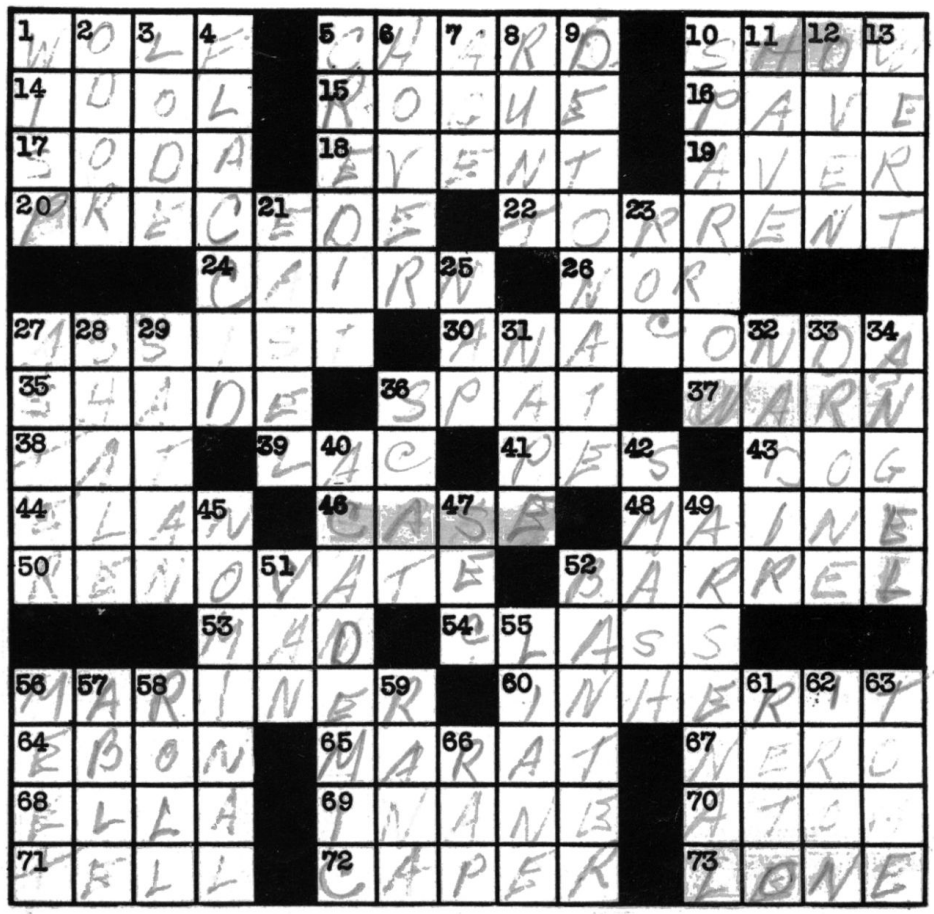
CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1. Fierce carnivorous animal
5. Leafy vegetable
10. Store
14. Image of worship
15. Rascal
16. Prepare
17. Drugstore drink
18. Happening
19. Declare
20. Go before
22. Violent rain
24. Breed of terrier
26. And not
27. Help
30. Large snake
35. Screen
36. Gaiter
37. Caution
38. Make lace
39. Resinous material
41. Footlike part
43. Canine
44. Dash
46. Box
48. N. England state
50. Restore
52. Wooden cask
53. Insane
54. Group of students
56. Sailor
60. Fall heir to
64. Very black
65. French revolutionary leader
67. Roman emperor
68. Feminine name
69. Silly
70. Latest bomb
71. Relate
72. Prank
73. Unaspirated consonant

DOWN

1. Fragment
2. Fragrance
3. Vein of ore
4. Flabby
5. Believe
6. Flutter over
7. Period
8. Dwarfed being
9. Explode
10. Common small bird
11. Possess
12. Baking apparatus
13. Lively
21. Artist's stand
23. Fabulous bird of prey
25. Short sleep
27. Fall flower
28. Clayey rock
29. Devil
31. Back of the neck
32. Lowest point
33. Male bee
34. Spiritual being
36. Begone!
40. Scholarly
42. Break into pieces
45. Existing only in name
47. Dry, as wine
49. Munitions repository
51. Truck
52. Jest
55. Twining plant
56. Encounter
57. Competent
58. Little bread loaf
59. Frog
61. Network
62. Press
63. Volume
66. Knock



FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE

K. RAFFERTY, Editor

Volume 65 MAY-JUNE, 1946 Number 8

CONTENTS

FORECAST

When the WILDFIRE WATERS of the Sacramento River poured into the delta region during the early days of big gold mining operations, the people got scared. And they had a good right to be. For they were the victims of a flooding river that was filled with waste from mammoth hydraulics. The big bosses who owned the machinery were trying to control everything and succeeding pretty well. Until Jim Custer and his men got after them. But they had to face a lot of breathtaking danger before they finally put an end to the dirty work, raised the levees, and made the river a friend instead of a threat. This novel by L. P. Holmes is packed with the live excitement and real drama that marked a turning point in mining history.

●

Seeing movies and writing about them was Jerry Maiden's business. And some people might have thought it was just dull routine. Jerry didn't think so after he was shot at, shoved around, and had a couple of knives tossed his way. Getting into a tangle involving a beautiful movie star, he had to go through hell and high water before it was straightened out, but he had good reasons for not considering it a waste of effort. FIVE NOVELS readers, who have met this murder mystery guy before, will be glad to see him come back in BLOOD ON A STAR, where he makes a bigger hit than ever.

●

Also

Two corking adventure stories and a swell sport story.

DON'T MISS THIS ISSUE
ON SALE JUNE 14th!

●

May-June Issue, Volume 65, Number 8 *25c a Copy* *#236514*

Subscriptions $1.50 a Year Domestic and Canada *Foreign, $2.10*

Published bi-monthly by Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 149 Madison Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A. Reentered as second-class matter January 11, 1946, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at post office at Chicago, Illinois. Title registered as a trade-mark in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted and registered under Serial No. 55959 in the City of Ottawa, in the Dominion of Canada, January 7, 1942. George T. Delacorte, Jr., President and Publisher; Helen Meyer, Executive Vice-President and General Manager; Albert Delacorte, Vice-President and Executive Editor; Margarita Delacorte, Secretary. We are not responsible for loss of unsolicited manuscripts. Names of characters used in stories and/or humorous and semi-fictional matter are fictitious. If the name of a living person is used it is purely a coincidence.

MUSEUM of the DEAD

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

IF I'D known Keefe Scanlan was around, I'd have left the dag hidden in my desk drawer. Whenever Titanic Casualty's Assistant General Claims Manager comes to town, I know automatically that I'm in for an unpleasant time. But he wasn't due for a couple more days.

I took the dag out, running my thumb lovingly over the bell-nosed barrel, the ivory butt. When I looked up, Scanlan was there in my office doorway, small eyes in his narrow, hatchet face regarding me frigidly behind his polished Oxford glasses.

I felt like a kid caught stealing jam. The grin I gave the Big Boss must have looked pretty silly.

"An antique pistol." I had to make some explanation. "It's a genuine fifteenth century chiseled Italian dag."

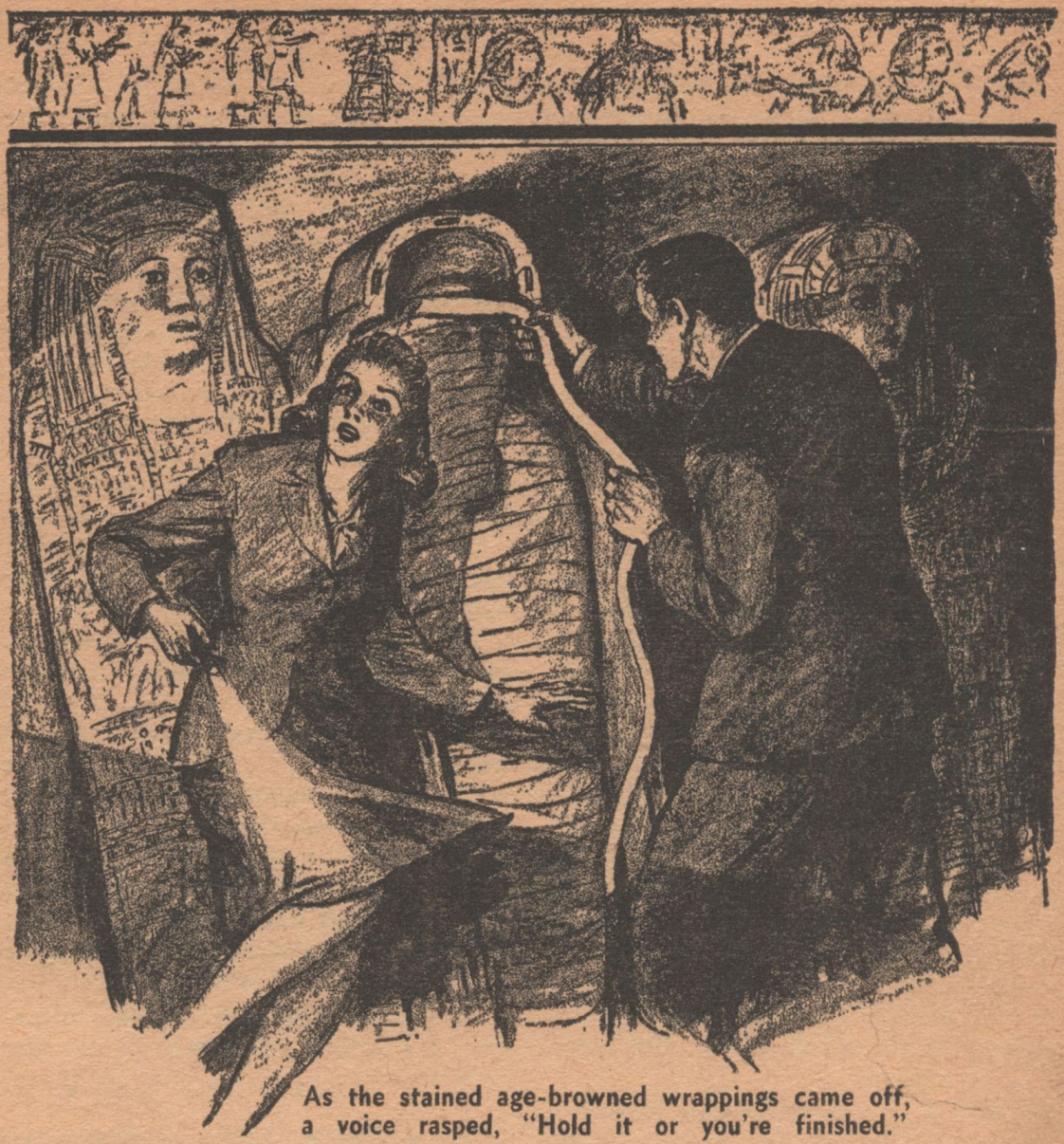
"Chiseled?" He picked me up on the word. "Are you referring, Webb, to that thing in your hand or the company's time you are wasting?"

Well we were off to a worse start than usual. "Collecting ancient curiosities is my hobby," I said defensively.

Scanlan took a seat across from my desk. He sat ramrod straight, not touching the chair back. "Too bad," he said in his precise, clipped manner, "you don't spend your time trying to be the best Resident Claims Manager in the Company. That was *my* hobby when I was running a branch office."

He looked as if he expected me to argue, but I kept my mouth shut. I put the dag back in my desk.

"I've been wondering what was wrong with this office lately," he said severely.



As the stained age-browned wrappings came off, a voice rasped, "Hold it or you're finished."

"Now I know: faulty supervision. The Manager sets a bad example." He jerked his thumb toward the general office beyond the thin glass partition of my private sweatbox. "Listen to them out there!"

The clerks and claims adjustors sounded like a nestful of sleepy birds. It was barely starting time; one of those drowsy midsummer mornings when everyone finds it hard buckling down to routine. Including myself.

"It's reflected in the loss ratio," he stated flatly. "Your office has the worst in our whole Mid-Atlantic Region."

It wasn't true, I was sure. Experience had taught me the foolishness of arguing when you can't possibly win. But only a combination of saint and deaf-mute could keep out of an argument with Keefe Scanlan. I think it's part of his management theory to provoke his men.

"Everything's been running very smoothly the past few weeks," I asserted. "Run of the mill claims and . . ."

He picked me up on it instantly. "What about the Vandervelte death case?"

"One of those things. Vandervelte was the victim of a hit-run driver."

"We paid ten thousand dollars under his Personal Accident policy. Would you call that run of the mill?"

"No, sir. But how could it have been avoided? We can't take each policyholder by the hand whenever they cross a street."

He didn't jump me for impertinence, as I probably deserved. "You can avoid large claims by prompter investigations," he said as if he were advising a rookie claims adjustor. "For instance this mummy claim at the museum. That could run into a very serious loss."

HE'D caught me by surprise. "Mummy claim?" I asked blankly. "I haven't heard about any such thing."

"That's just it!" He pounced triumphantly. "Instead of finding out what's in your mail, you sit here playing with some old piece of junk." He thrust a letterhead sheet toward me. "I've already done what *you* should have done."

That's why I hadn't seen him when I came into the office. The old devil had been inside the stock room. Going through the incoming mail while it was being sorted. Upsetting the mail clerk's routine and thus slowing down the machinery of the whole office. But could I say anything?

The letter was from the American Museum of Antiquities. Stating briefly that a mummy from their fine Egyptian collection had been stolen. Wanting someone to contact them in regard to a settlement under their Fine Arts Floater policy.

"I'll send out Paggett," I began. "He can . . ."

"You'll send out no one," Scanlon cut me off sharply. "This is something you should handle yourself."

"But it's not a casualty claim," I protested. "This comes under Titanic Fire."

"Nevertheless," the Big Boss insisted, "it's something for your personal attention. You're supposed to be the Manager. This claim may run into thousands. A mummy can very well be priceless. Only a really skillful claims job will cut our loss. You've got either to recover the mummy or sell the Museum on accepting a low settlement."

"If it's that serious, boss," I suggested, "maybe you'd better go along with me. Your advice and assistance . . ."

I thought he might react to the flattery. If something went wrong then he couldn't saddle me with all the blame.

It didn't work. "What does the Company pay you for, Webb?" he asked. "I'm down here to inspect this office, not to do your job. I'll be looking over the files while you're out."

Just what I dreaded. There'd be a mountain of grief waiting when I got back. I didn't know the half of it!

But he had me where the hair is short. Reluctantly I reached for my panama.

"Oh, Webb," he called as I reached the door.

I turned. Scanlan's eyes were gelid, unfriendly. "Something for you to keep in mind, Webb: If you *don't* keep the Company from suffering a heavy loss on this claim, you may find yourself back on the street taking orders from some more resourceful Claims Manager."

To hit him would have been a pleasure. I clamped my teeth on my lip, stalked out.

THE American Museum of Antiquities houses its unique collection of treasures in a huge new marble and limestone building facing the River Esplanade. I'm quite familiar with the institution, since ancient things are my hobby. Furthermore, I'd been there more than once for Bruno Steele.

As I passed through the entrance arch into the Gallery of Useful Arts, one of the Museum's uniformed attendants was perched on the top of a step-ladder, fastening a small six-by-four rug to the wall. On the floor, directing him, was a tall, thin, loose-lipped man I recognized at once as Clifford Ainsworth, a member of Titanic Casualty's local Advisory Board. As a prominent financier, Ains-

worth was also Chairman of the Museum's Finance Committee.

I don't know much about rugs, but anything old is interesting to me. I stopped, said, "Good morning, Mr. Ainsworth. That's a beautiful rug."

The new addition to the rugs and tapestries, which covered almost every square inch on this side of the long room, was predominately red. Its shades ranged from vermilion through claret and hollyhock to an almost magenta hue. It looked very old.

Ainsworth smiled at me. His lower lip, protruding beyond the upper, gave him somewhat the same facial expression as a friendly chimp. "It's a grave rug," he volunteered. "An old *Ghiordes.*"

At the quarterly Board Meetings, which I'm sometimes invited to attend, Ainsworth had always impressed me as a stuffed shirt. An aloof, cautious sort of individual. His friendliness now surprised me.

"See," he said, tracing the pattern in the deep pile of the fabric with a bony forefinger, "it has the scorpion design in the outer border, while the guard stripes carry out a tarantula motif."

The black figures he indicated didn't look like either scorpions or tarantulas to me. I said so.

"The inner pattern," Ainsworth told me, "is the tree of life. Almost every design you'll find in an oriental carpet is derived from the lotus, emblem of immortality. I've always had an interest in good rugs. This one's been on my floor at home, but I felt it should be donated for the education and enjoyment of the general public."

The letter in my brief case had been signed by Dr. Franklin O'Connor, Director and Chief Librarian of the Museum. I went to the reception room outside his large private office.

"Willard P. Webb," I told the elderly woman. "From Titanic Casualty Company about the missing mummy."

ANGRY voices were coming from the inner office. "Maybe it came from Tabriz and maybe from Brooklyn," a deep bass said positively. "One thing is sure: it *isn't* as represented!"

The answering voice held an innate quality of affability, even though at the moment it was frosty with disagreement. "Well, what could I do? The man is influential. He's certainly in a position to help us or hinder. You wouldn't want me to slap him in the face."

The conversation broke off as the elderly receptionist went in.

"Go right in, Mr. Webb," she said when she came out again.

The deeper voice belonged to the Museum Director. Dr. O'Connor sat in a red leather swivel chair behind a massive mahogany desk clear of papers. He was an essentially commonplace looking man. Most noteworthy were his peculiarly unlined, untroubled features. As if, in fifty odd years of life he had experienced neither pain nor disappointment. Aside from the unusual serenity of expression, he was average. Average height; average girth; clean shaven, with mild, lusterless, brown eyes in a small-boned, oval face.

The other man, Paul Bancroft, Administrative Assistant, standing before the desk, was as big as I am, but unlike myself he had a suggestion of a paunch. His face, plain as corned beef and nearly as red, had its homeliness counteracted by crinkles of humor around blue-grey eyes which still twinkled in spite of the controversy I had interrupted.

"Sometimes," O'Connor told me, "I've thought we were foolish to spend money year after year for that floater policy. Particularly since we've never had a claim. But I'm glad now we have the protection. This mummy was one of the most valuable in our entire Egyptian collection."

That was bad news. "I've handled some queer losses," I said, "but this is something new. What's the current market quotation on mummies?"

O'Connor rested his elbows on the desk top, regarding me serenely. "It's virtually impossible, of course, to set a valuation. The mummy is absolutely irre-

placeable. It happened to be the son-in-law and successor to Amenhotep IV, the heretic king who changed his name to Aknaton. Therefore, I think it is not unreasonable if we ask at least fifty thousand dollars from your company, Mr. Webb."

IT ROCKED me back on my heels. Keefe Scanlan would boil me alive in oil if I even considered such a figure. Yet the policyholder had an international reputation. The Sales Department would want us to lean over backward in making settlement. And with the Museum Finance Committee Chairman on our own Advisory Board, any attempt to reduce the amount asked by the Museum would be like juggling fulminate of mercury.

"Maybe a reward will get it back," I suggested. "If we make recovery. . . ."

"You can't." It was Bancroft who made the flat statement. He stepped to a small table across the office, picked up a pasteboard carton about the size of a large hatbox. "Look!"

The head inside the box was a leathery thing, the same drab color as old parchment, grotesquely in contrast to the dainty white tissue in which it rested. Shrunken too, it looked like a gourd which had withered on the vine.

"Boys swimming in the river near the East End coal docks found this," Bancroft informed me. "They took it to the police. Until then we didn't know the mummy was gone. Evidently the body itself is somewhere under water. In any event it is completely ruined."

Which disposed quite neatly of my chance to make recovery.

I stalled. "Who could possibly want to steal a mummy?"

"Must have been an act of sheer vandalism. I can see no other explanation."

Bancroft ran his hand through stiff, curly, black hair in which threads of grey were beginning to show. "The Egyptian Gallery is open to the public from ten to four each day."

"But our guards are efficient," O'Connor added.

"I'll have to make a full report to the Home Office," I said then. "Will you show me where this mummy was kept?"

THE Egyptian collection occupied one of the largest rooms in the eastern wing. I followed Bancroft and the Director past a long row of glass cases where a world-famous assortment of scarabs, amulets, canopic jars and other relics were displayed. They took me to the far end of the gallery, where rows of sarcophagi stood against the walls.

Many of these were closed. Wood and stone mummy cases, so the neatly printed sign announced, illustrating the development of Egyptian funerary art from the Vth and VIth dynasties to its peak during the XXIst dynasty and its decline and abandonment after the Ptolemaic period.

Other coffins, however, displayed their mummies. One or two with heads unwrapped, disclosing the shrunken, withered features of ancient dead, still crusted with the resinous paste used by the embalmers. Most mummies, however, remained swathed in the protective linen bandages which were their shrouds.

We stopped before a great alabaster sarcophagus of exquisite workmanship. The outer lid, beautifully carved and painted in colors, had been removed and stood against the wall.

"This," O'Connor said, "was where the mummy was kept."

I took out my pocket notebook and began to write. I spoke my thought aloud, rather than questioning the Museum officials. "How do you suppose it would be possible to get a thing like that out of here?"

Bancroft shrugged. O'Connor said, "It seems fantastic, but it happened."

My eyes wandered along the row of sarcophagi. They came to rest on a mummy case a little farther along the row. I gave an involuntary yell, darted forward and ducked under the brass rail which keeps the exhibits a safe distance from careless hands of the public.

From across the room a uniformed

guard came running. Bancroft and O'Connor were following my pointing finger with expressions of dismay.

At the bottom of that mummy case, a lot of blood had trickled to the stone floor and dried there.

IT WAS the guard who gave me a hand in lifting the highly ornamented lid of the inner coffin. Not that it was really a two man job, for the coffin top was remarkably light but it had to be handled with such care.

As the lid came off, we all gasped with horror. There was no mummy in the coffin. But there was a body!

A corpse.

My medical knowledge is elementary, of course, but I've seen enough death by violence in the course of my claims work to know that this man had been dead about two days.

He wore the neat blue uniform of a museum guard. His head had been crushed by blows from some heavy object. The plentiful blood, running down the back of the coffin, had collected in a terrifying pool at the dead man's feet. It was this which, blackened but still sticky, had spilled from the base of the mummy case.

"Your guard must have been murdered when the mummy was stolen." The voice behind me was almost as much of a shock as discovery of the dead man.

Keefe Scanlan had the rare knack of showing up always at the worst possible time.

"I thought . . ." I began.

"I changed my mind, Webb. I believe I have that privilege?" Then, ignoring me, Scanlan turned to O'Connor. His sarcastic tone changed miraculously to the oily smoothness he reserves for large policyholders. "This claim is so important I thought I should handle it personally. If Mr. Webb has not already done so, let me assure you we shall find the murderer of this watchman, who is also, undoubtedly, the thief who stole the mummy."

Now why did he have to get me in a worse jam? I'm no detective. But I saw Scanlan's object. By finding the killer, we could put O'Connor under obligation to Titanic Casualty. He might then be more reasonable in regard to a settlement.

But if I didn't produce the murderer, I'd be sunk for fair. Scanlan expects miracles in the course of my daily work.

I started away fast.

Just as quickly, Scanlan called after me. "Where do you think you're going, Webb?"

I didn't stop. "To work on the case," I said over my shoulder.

"Do you have any idea how you're going to start?"

Fortunately he hadn't actually ordered me to come back. I reached the door, said, "I sure do."

AND I did. I made a bee line for Bruno Steele's apartment at the Duncan. I had an ace in the hole Scanlan didn't suspect. The miracles I'd come up with before had been credited to me. Not that I wanted it that way, but Steele did.

I'm just an ordinary guy in the insurance game. But Bruno Steele is a Master Mind. I knew I needed a Master Mind on this claim of the mummy's head or I was finished. The dish set before me was far too rich for my unaided digestion.

Bruno Steele was at the desk in his book-lined study, busy with his collection of rare odors. Something about the man always reminds me of a picture in the ancient history books a sculptured figure of the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III.

Maybe it's his grim, massive face with its perpetual shadow of black beard beneath the swarthy skin. Or maybe his thin, cruel, bony hook of a nose. More likely it's the customary woodenness of his movements and the statue-like blankness of his eyes. For Bruno Steele is totally blind.

It happened as the result of an explosion and fire, years ago, in the great

chemical plant owned by his family. A kid then, working in the plant during a summer vacation, I'd been fortunate enough to drag Steele from the wreckage. A fact he had never since allowed me to forget.

Pride has kept me from accepting the financial assistance he continually wants to press upon me, but allowing him to help me with tough claim cases is something else again. Because he looks on it as a sort of game and it helps break the monotony of his life.

He'd heard me speak to Feodor in the other room and looked up as I came in, exactly as if he could see me.

"Glad you came in, Bill. It's been too long since your last visit." His hands moved over the desk top as if he were setting chessmen on invisibly numbered squares, as he picked up a wooden card file. His long sensitive fingers ran quickly over the Braille captions on the card corners. On those cards, preserved in oil, were exotic scents from all corners of the world. Like zdravtze from Bulgaria and oil of rose from Bagdad.

"Here's a new one I want you to smell." The card he handed me gave forth a minty sort of effluvium, highly aromatic and pungent. "Hyssop," he informed me. "Found in central Asia."

"Things have been going so smoothly I've kept my fingers crossed," I said. "But today the whole lid's blown off."

Methodically he put the card back in its proper place. "From a selfish viewpoint, I'm glad it did," he said in his deep, pleasant tone. "You have no idea how painfully circumscribed I find life at times. This collection commences to bore me, I tire of my violin, even of having Feodor read to me. So your difficulties offer a chance to keep the old brain from rusting solid. Tell me all about it, Bill."

WHEN he said *all*, that's exactly what he meant. From past experience I knew he wanted a most minute description of everything I had seen or heard since Keefe Scanlan showed up in the office that morning. And when I had finished, he made me repeat it all over again.

The exact words Scanlan had used: My conversation with O'Connor and Bancroft. What I had seen in the Museum. No matter how trivial, he wanted the complete picture. It was his method of actually living the situation. Vicariously. Seeing with my eyes.

As I talked, his expression of intense concentration showed he was tabbing each small item for storage in the prodigious file which is his memory.

"Tell me once more," he said, "what you saw in that display of ancient weapons."

He was referring to an exhibit in the last gallery before I left the Museum on my way to see him. I can never get past such relics without taking a good look, not even with a huge loss and a dead man on my mind.

The display case had contained Swiss pikes; headsman's axes; a medieval flail: a deadly affair consisting of an iron handle, a length of chain and an iron ball. There'd been a miniature guillotine and replicas of Roman ballista and catapults. I'd stood there a few minutes wishing I had the things for my own little collection of ancient curios. Particularly the Roman war engines.

What relation this trifling incident might bear to the problem in hand was incomprehensible to me. But the workings of a mind of genius is baffling to a practical insurance man, as I've discovered in the past. I inventoried the display case for him again painstakingly.

Bruno Steele raised his sightless eyes toward the ceiling. "O'Connor," he said, obviously thinking out loud rather than speaking to me. "Formerly connected with the Strang Observatory. Minor discoveries in connection with the planet Mars." The assorted information tucked away inside Steele's brain could serve as a metropolitan newspaper morgue. "Gossip that his appointment to fill the Museum post left vacant by Robert Wilder's death was due to relationship with an

influential politician rather than his own scientific achievements."

Hopefully, I leaped to conclusions. "You think maybe this mummy claim is a phony?"

"How's that?" Steele sounded startled. "Oh, no! The dead guard effectively spikes any such theory as that. Tell me now, this death payment your boss complained about: that was Melvin Vandervelte the pottery expert, was it not?"

I SAID yes. Vandervelte, a man of considerable inherited wealth, had devoted his life to a study of shards . . . fragments of pottery found in places where primitive pottery making peoples once lived. He had published several books on the subject, and as the foremost living authority on stratigraphy was on the scientific staff of the American Museum, as well as being a Museum Trustee.

"Vandervelte's death was accidental?" Steele asked.

"Yes. He was killed by a hit-run driver."

"Are you sure?"

"He was found in the middle of Parkside Boulevard with his head crushed as if it had been run over," I said. "We paid off under the accident policy."

"How long ago was this?"

"About three weeks."

An expression of satisfaction spread over Steele's dark features. "I rather think we'll find that Vandervelte was no victim of a reckless motorist. Rather, it seems to me, a combination of ignorance and coincidence has exposed a cunningly hidden pattern of multiple murder. In my opinion, Vandervelte was one of the early victims. The link with the Museum makes it rather obvious."

Nothing was obvious to me. Stupidly I said, "Huh?"

Bruno Steele became brisk. "Here's what you should do, Bill."

I expected him to come up with some suggestion like having the river dragged to locate the missing portion of the mummy. Instead, "Go to Vandervelte's home," he said. "Make an excuse . . . any excuse . . . to get inside. Then keep your eyes open for anything unusual. Inform me of the results at once."

It's good he couldn't see me; my mouth gaped idiotically. "What do you expect me to find?"

"I don't know. The main thing is to look around carefully. And find out also whatever you can about Vandervelte's finances. How much of an estate he left and whom he left it to. Meanwhile, I'll call Vandervelte's bank and make a few inquiries of my own along that line."

Believe you me, I was plenty confused. But I knew enough to do what Bruno Steele told me without an argument.

MELVIN VANDERVELTE had lived in one of the old residential sections little changed in the past two decades; a quiet backwater of big old-fashioned houses with spacious grounds. His own place, a large, brown-shingled, ornate structure dating back to the gay nineties, showed signs of neglect in even the short time since the owner's death. The grass was long and ragged; a morning-glory vine drooped sere and yellow on the trellis beside the front porch.

The maid who opened the door was an antique. She looked as if she'd come with the house when it was new. I took off my hat and gave her an ingratiating grin.

"I represent a publishing firm," I told the woman. "I'd like to talk with Miss Gisela Vandervelte." Gisela was Vandervelte's insurance beneficiary.

"Miss Gisela has been quite prostrated since her brother's death," the maid informed me. "She's in bed under doctor's care and forbidden to see anyone. Perhaps you'd like to talk with Miss Murcheson? She's the one who's preparing Mr. Vandervelte's new book."

I agreed quickly. The aged servant led me down a flight of basement steps. A room had been partitioned off from the cellar proper, but it was no modern basement rumpus room. Instead, it contained

long tables laden with broken fragments of earthenware, a battery of old-style, wooden filing cabinets and a couple of desks piled high with papers.

Behind a typewriter at one of these desks, a young woman was busy working. The clatter of the machine ceased as I walked in. The girl looked up inquiringly. Although not pretty, she was definitely the kind you'd turn to look at twice. Her face was triangular, her nose a bit too large and her mouth far too wide and too red. Her eyes were large and green, but matched nicely with her smooth, sleek, copper hair. She wore perfume that had a faint, subtle scent.

The maid said, "Gentleman to see you, Miss Sara." She started back up the stairs immediately, her old joints almost creaking with the effort.

Sara Murcheson gave me a coolly appraising glance. The light in her green eyes was predatory. She said, "Well?" and waited.

I assumed my oiliest manner. "My name is Webb. I'm here on behalf of the Signet Press. We understand that the late Mr. Vandervelte left a finished manuscript dealing with exciting adventures in the Levant. We thought our house might publish the book."

I KNEW well enough that Vandervelte's book was titled *Potsherds of Asia Minor* and was devoted entirely to a pedantic discussion of his obsession, fragments of ancient pottery. All that information was in the claims file back in my office.

Sara Murcheson replied icily, "I'm afraid 'Exciting Adventure' doesn't describe it at all, Mr. Webb. This book is so dry it's a wonder to me the pages don't crumble. You've been misinformed. Anyhow, another publisher has already contracted for it."

My eyes were busy surveying the room. The green-eyed gal picked a stack of typed sheets from her desk and riffled them. "Forty-seven pages about vases found in the sixth stratum at Hissarlik . . . ancient Troy. The whole book is like that. I've got so I dream about broken dishes."

"If you don't like your job, why do you work here, sister?" I asked.

She gave me a sharp look. "It so happens I'm paid well for doing it. Can you think of a better reason? I've worked a year for him on this thing. It'll be ready for the publisher in another month."

"When you're through," I suggested, pouring on the flattery, "there might be an opening in our own organization for a smart girl, like yourself."

She shrugged. "Maybe by that time I won't have to work."

It looked like a promising lead. "Of course," I said. "I'd forgotten that Mr. Vandervelte was a wealthy man. He remembered you in his will undoubtedly?"

SARA MURCHESON picked up a pack of cigarettes and lit up one. "He was wealthy," she said uncommunicatively.

"Very sad about his untimely death," I said.

"Yes, it was a shock." She blew smoke through her nostrils.

I tried again. "But if it fixes you up so you won't have to work, that's a break for you."

She said, "All I know is what the stars say. I'm a child of the Scorpion. The planet Mars is now in the ascendant. My horoscope says that sudden death for someone close means independence for me. Maybe that means Vandervelte, maybe not. But the stars don't lie."

The stars don't lie, I thought to myself, but liars can look at the stars. I'd had time by then to see a couple of things that might interest Bruno Steele.

The first was a card lying on the girl's desk. It had a printed picture of a guy with a small pointed black beard and a pinched face with a lot of deep wrinkles. He had a turban wound around his head. Under the picture were the words, *Prince Ronnoco. Private readings by appointment.* In one corner was an address and telephone number.

The other thing was a small wax figure about six inches high which stood on one of the tables where the pottery fragments were strewn. It had a formless body, but the shoulders of a man and the head and curved pointed beak of a hawk.

I felt a sudden thrill of excitement. It looked Egyptian to me. Which meant it might tie in with the missing mummy. I went over to the table and picked it up for a better look.

The girl's green eyes had narrowed. "Don't handle things," she ordered sharply. "They're all arranged in order."

Obediently I set it down. "Sure you don't want to consider that job?"

All of a sudden she seemed anxious to brush me off. "I'll remember the Signet Press," she said, "if the stars let me down." She turned back to the typewriter and the machine began to clatter again.

THE sweet sobbing notes of Bruno Steele's violin greeted me when I got back to the apartment at the Duncan His extreme sensitivity in regard to his physical handicap, plus his large private fortune, have combined to rob the world of a great concert artist. Were Bruno Steele a poorer man, I am sure his name would rank with those of Kreisler, Heifetz and Menuhin.

He took the Stradivarius from under his heavy chin as I entered, turning his sightless eyes toward me. "What luck?" There was controlled eagerness beneath his question.

"Fine!" he said softly, after I told him of my encounter with the green-eyed Sara Murcheson. "Better than I expected. Already the threads commence to unravel. This wax figure you saw: undoubtedly it was a representation of one of the four genii of *Amenti*, the sons of the Egyptian god, *Horus*. You're interested in ancient things, Bill, so maybe you've read up some on momiology, the science of mummification."

I grinned. "My heavy reading lately has been confined to Titanic Casualty's *Manual of Branch Office Claims Procedure*."

"It was the custom of the embalmers in the ancient Egypt," he told me, "to wrap the viscera of their clients in four separate packages, each under the protection of an amulet shaped like one of the four genii. Those packages were put back inside the mummy and sewn into the interior cavity."

"Then the wax figure . . ."

"Was the hawk-headed *Quebehsnewef*. Undoubtedly from some mummy."

"You're a never-failing source of amazement to me," I declared. "I just don't see how you do it!"

"Do what?"

"Trace that mummy from the Museum to Vandervelte's house without a single false start."

A pleased expression spread across Steele's grim features. But he raised a cautioning finger. "Don't jump to conclusions, Bill. We don't know what mummy the amulet came from. And I don't for a moment think the Museum mummy was ever in Vandervelte's possession."

"Then what . . ."

"While you were away," he said quietly, "I, also, made a significant discovery. I talked with my friend George Tracey at the Union Trust. It seems that on the day of his death, Vandervelte cashed a check for one hundred thousand dollars and took the money with him in thousand dollar bills. He remarked to George that he intended to make a gift to the Museum."

I BEGAN to see a little sense to the pattern for the first time. When a man carrying a hundred gees in cash turns up dead, with his pockets clean, it doesn't need a Bruno Steele to decide robbery has been committed. Robbery and murder. But what connection could Vandervelte's death have with the mummy claim?

Steele's next words provided a bit of enlightenment on that score. "Your in-

formation about this astrologer, Prince Ronnoco, is significant. It may provide the connecting link we need."

"How so?" I asked. "What earthly bearing . . ."

"Think, man, *think!*" There was a quick touch of acerbity in his tone. His infirmity had given Bruno Steele a slight touch of that megalomania not uncommon among the physically handicapped. Most of the time he keeps it carefully concealed, but at times my inability to follow his own involved mental processes makes him snap at me. And I am sure he always enjoys keeping me as much as possible in a state of mystification.

"I can't see any connection," I said a bit stiffly.

He chuckled. "Try spelling Ronnoco backward."

I did and my jaw dropped open. *Spelled backward the astrologer's name became O'Connor.*

"Why it's unbelievable," I stuttered.

"But true. And it provides, at least, a series of interesting possibilities. We shall certainly have to learn more of Dr. O'Connor's background. The Murcheson girl also will bear further investigation and. . . ."

He fell silent, without finishing his thought.

"What's the next move?" I asked.

"We've arrived," he said, "at a fork in the road. Before proceeding, a bit of serious deliberation is required."

"While you're thinking, then," I said, "I'll call the office."

I got my chief claims girl, Miss Grunewald. She sounded upset. Mr. Scanlan, she said, was back at the office and had been waiting for me to call. From her tone I gathered he'd managed to get the whole department into an uproar.

"Where are you, Webb?" Scanlan's thin, acid voice came over the wire. "What are you doing?"

"I'm on the job," I said. "Working on the mummy claim, of course."

"I don't like the way you rushed away from me at the Museum. I'd expected to discuss the case with you."

"You told me," I reminded him, "you hadn't come to town to do my job for me." With Bruno Steele backing me, I allowed myself the luxury of speaking more sharply to the boss than I might have dared otherwise. "You wanted results," I added. "That's what I'm getting for you right now."

"See that you do. Otherwise. . . ."

"Yes," I interrupted, "you made that all quite clear. But you didn't say what you'd do for me if I save the company a fifty thousand dollar loss."

"In that case," he snapped coldly, "I might be inclined to forget the laxity with which your office is managed. It may interest you to know we have a new serious claim reported."

"What is it?" My heart sank.

"Grebb's Funeral Home. A robbery. It occurred last week and only now do they bother to let us know their watchman's in the hospital with a fractured skull. It's going to cost us a beautiful Workmens' Compensation settlement."

"We'd better get someone over to the Funeral Home right away," I began. "And contact the hospital. . . ."

SCANLAN cut me short. "Are you trying to tell *me* how a claim should be handled? Don't you suppose I've already taken action?"

"That," I said, "is a help. What about the robbery?"

"Fortunately we get off light on that angle. Grebb says he had several thousand dollars in the safe. The robber must have overlooked it. The only items missing appear to be a carboy of embalming fluid and one of the big syringes the embalmers use."

"Then we don't need to worry. . . ."

"That's the trouble with you, Webb," Scanlan bawled. "You don't worry enough about our losses. Here I sit cooling my heels and waiting for you to contact the office. . . ."

He went on raving. I was plenty mad. What did he think I could do about it. If policyholders never had claims they'd have no need for insurance.

When he finally hung up, I was muttering to myself. I found Bruno Steele staring at me intently with his dark, blank eyes.

"What's all this about a Funeral Home?" he asked. "And a robbery?"

After I'd told him he sat quietly for a moment drumming a devil's tattoo with his long, slender fingers against the chair arm.

"I might have expected such a thing," he said. "Bill, the criminal behind all this is clever and cautious. Very cautious. But he's made one bad mistake. He failed to take into consideration that your Titanic Casualty Company writes the lion's share of all the casualty insurance in this part of the country."

I said, "What's that got to do with it?"

"Plenty. That one fact has tied everything into a neat package. It makes clear the motive behind the theft of Amenhotep's son-in-law. It keeps us from wasting valuable time following wrong trails. Your next step is quite clear."

"You think I should go to Grebb's place myself in spite of Scanlan's giving one of the boys that assignment?"

"No, no! Of *course* not, Bill! Recently you sent one of your Company's salesmen around to sell me a new kind of liability policy. Remember? A policy that covers any kind of claim that could possibly be brought against me on account of my ownership of property, my own actions, everything."

I was completely bewildered at this sudden change in the line of conversation. "Sure," I said. "Our new Comprehensive Personal Liability coverage. I asked Joe Foss to write one for you."

He went off immediately on still another tack. "This Advisory Board man, Ainsworth. He doesn't know much about insurance, does he?"

"Next to nothing. The company takes prominent policyholders from every line of business for the local Boards. Their purpose is simply as the name indicates: to advise on general business matters. And incidentally help the company get more business through use of their names."

"That's as I understood it. Don't you think, Bill, that Ainsworth should have the benefit of this new Comprehensive protection?"

"Certainly he should," I said impatiently. "And the Sales Department plans to contact all our important assureds. But . . ."

"I think you should go over and sell one of those policies to Ainsworth right away," he interrupted.

"But I'm not a salesman," I protested. "Are you forgetting my job is at stake on this mummy claim?"

"I'm forgetting nothing. But you could sell Ainsworth that protection as well as the salesman, couldn't you?"

"I suppose I could. But why not ask Foss to . . ."

"You told me," he said, "that claims men are now doing sales work, auditors are handling claims and engineers help get payroll figures. Everyone putting their shoulders to the wheel without regard to departmental lines. I think it's very important for *you* to see Ainsworth about this new policy *yourself*. Today! Now!"

SUDDEN sickening apprehension gripped me. I gave Bruno Steele a sharp look. Had continued long brooding over his affliction finally unhinged his mind?

A faint smile of amusement touched the grim line of his lips. His long fingers caressed the black shadow of ungrown beard which is always with him. "No, Bill. I'm not crazy," he said, as if he could read my thought, and was acidly answering it.

"That type of insurance requires a long application form," I said, still resisting. "I haven't any with me, naturally, and. . . ."

"Get them," he insisted. "And another thing, Bill: While you're at Ainsworth's, make an opportunity to get into his bathroom. Take a very careful look at the plumbing fixtures. Then, when

you've sold the policy, meet me at Prince Ronnoco's studio."

Screwy? You're telling me! But that's all I could get out of Bruno Steele. His method of approach was usually tortuous. This time it seemed even more devious than usual.

I called Miss Grunewald again, arranged for her to get the proper application forms from the Sales Department and meet me at the curb outside the office building. The last thing I wanted was to have further conversation with Keefe Scanlan until I could report something definite.

When I had picked up the blanks from the girl, I drove uptown to the Tudor Arms, the swanky apartment house where Clifford Ainsworth lived.

A widower, Ainsworth occupied a luxurious suite on the sixth floor, where he also maintained his office. The slim pretty maid who ushered me into the Advisory Board member's office wore a neat black uniform trimmed with white. The room was panelled with Circassian walnut and contained an ornate inlaid desk with other furnishings to match.

The slack-lipped financier was at home. On account of the warmth of the day, he had shucked coat and vest and sat at the desk in shirt sleeves, turning papers from one pile to another. He looked up inquiringly as I entered, but made no move to rise. To him, I was just one of the company's hired help.

"What can I do for you, Webb?"

"I'm going to do something for *you*," I told him and launched into a sales talk about the advantages of Comprehensive Personal Liability. It didn't take long for him to decide that the new type of protection was more to his advantage than the old-style Residence Liability he now carried. And the cost was attractively low.

I got out the application blank, began to fill it in. When they'd drawn up that form, the Underwriting Department hadn't forgotten a single question. Three full pages of them; everything except whether his grandmother had ever suffered from the seven year itch. By the time I got through filling it in, I knew as much about Ainsworth as if I'd boarded with him. And he was getting restless answering the inquiries.

When I took the pen back from him, after he'd signed, I managed to get some ink on my hand. I called it to his attention.

"I wonder if I might use your bathroom a moment?"

He pointed. "First door to your left off the hallway."

In accordance with Bruno Steele's instructions, I examined the plumbing with painstaking care. I couldn't see anything of possible interest to anyone. I didn't know what Steele expected. There was a small discoloration of the bathtub drain, as if the pipe was slightly corroded. That was absolutely all I could see.

When I came back to Ainsworth, I noticed the office rug. The deep, soft pile and its varied shades of reds looked strangely familiar. For a moment I was puzzled, then I got it.

"This is a duplicate of the rug you were hanging in the Museum this morning, isn't it?" I remarked. "The *Ghiordes?*"

Ainsworth smiled. "You're observant, Webb. It's the same pattern, yes. But the other rug is genuine; this is a replica. The other rug is far more valuable. Far more so."

I said, "Oh!" Ainsworth turned back to his papers.

"I'll send you a binder right away," I promised. "The new policy will be mailed next week."

PRINCE RONNOCO'S studio was on the top floor of a dingy brick building just beyond the edge of the respectable commercial district. A Coney Island hot dog joint occupied a hole-in-the-wall on the ground floor; the rest of the downstairs was a second-hand luggage shop. A long flight of unswept, badly cupped stairs led steeply up, past an offset printing establishment on the second floor and

a badge and pennant manufacturer on the third.

The studio door was at the head of the stairs on the fourth landing. It had been locked with a hasp and a cheap padlock, now unfastened. I pushed the door open, went in.

The place had evidently once served as a commercial photographer's studio. The roof of the building was broken by a series of long skylights. Now, the floor underneath was divided up into twelve painted sections, the way spokes divide a wheel. Each section was decorated with the painted picture of a zodiac sign: Archer, Crab, Scorpion and the rest. Drapes which carried on the astrological motif covered the walls.

Just inside the entrance I halted. I'd expected to find Bruno Steele waiting. But he wasn't.

I started for the back of the studio. The deep, throaty voice which came unexpectedly from a small room to the right of the entrance made me jump guiltily. "Who's there?"

The dark little cubby-hole was festooned with the same heavy drapes as outside. In the dim light I got a swift impression of a man with short pointed whiskers, a head wrapped with a silver turban. Prince Ronnoco sat in the far corner on a pile of rugs, Oriental fashion. In the center of the floor stood a small teakwood table, beautifully carved. And nearer the door a comfortable modern chair had been provided. For the gull, evidently, whose future was to be disclosed . . . for a price.

Suddenly I realized I was on a spot. Steele had given no instructions to help me cope with the Prince. Had his own plans miscarried? What significance had the fact that the letters of the astrologer's name, reversed in order, were the same as those of the Director of the American Museum of Antiquities? What possible significance?

I decided to stall. I didn't want to do anything that might interfere with Steele's plans.

"I came for advice," I told the swami. "Maybe you can guide me to a lost treasure."

"The stars tell me all," the Prince said gravely. "I see a man, who, though small in stature, occupies a position of considerable authority in respect to yourself. I see a thin man, sarcastic, unreasonable. He wears pince-nez glasses. He is not friendly toward you, my son. In fact, at this very moment, you are in trouble through his activities."

IN SPITE of myself, I was impressed. Here I walked in cold and this guy gave me a camera picture of Keefe Scanlan. The Prince was good.

"You can say that again, brother," I said fervently. "Now tell me how I can get out of that trouble."

"Trust Bruno Steele," the Prince said. "He will guide you to the lost treasure."

I boggled, speechless. Maybe there was something to this business about the stars after all. I'd better get out of here now, I decided, and tell Steele all about it.

I got up. "You've hit the nail square on the head, Prince. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm eternally in your debt, Bill."

The voice had changed. It was the voice of Bruno Steele himself. I sat down again weakly.

"Well, my impersonation must be a success," he said, laughing, "if I could deceive the eagle-eyed Willard P. Webb."

"But what . . . how. . . ." I was stammering.

"The false spinach? Found it in O'Connor's dressing room in back. I knew it was bound to be there. A man wouldn't carry his beard around with him in a brief case. Feodor must have done a good job with the make-up."

I'd always wondered how Bruno Steele would look if he'd let his stiff, wiry beard grow as nature intended. With his bony hook of a nose and expressionless eyes, the effect was truly sinister.

Sitting in deep shadow as he was, I had to strain my own eyes to see him

clearly. My nerves must have been more on edge than I thought, because I almost jumped out of my shoes when I realized suddenly that someone was concealed behind the heavy drapes at Steele's back.

The hangings moved stealthily as if stirred by a draft of air. I saw the eyes peering out at me. Then all at once the drapes parted and the man stepped from his hiding place.

After the first shock, I drew a sigh of relief. I should have known. It was only Feodor. Steele goes nowhere without the Russian. Rescued by Steele from some unpleasant fate in the other war, Feodor, whose last name is something even more unpronounceable than Stalin's real handle of Djugashvili, has been a combination servant, nurse and privileged companion ever since.

"Are you trying to scare me to death?" I demanded. Then to Steele. "This Prince Ronnoco and Franklin O'Connor are really one and the same?"

He seemed annoyed. "I've already told you so."

"But why? What reason would a scientific man have for. . . ."

"Later," Bruno Steele said. "It's very easily explainable. But I'm expecting another customer for Ronnoco any moment. You'd better get behind the drapery with Feodor. And while we're waiting, tell me about your call on Ainsworth."

It seemed to me there was little or nothing to report. But my recital, urged into the most minute detail by his prodding questions, appeared to give him great satisfaction.

"Then Ainsworth has only the one servant," he observed. "And that maid has been with him only two weeks?"

"That's right. The former maid had been employed a long time, but she took French leave a short time ago . . . simply failed to show up at the proper time one morning."

Bruno Steele rubbed his hands together in a high good humor. "Now you see why I wanted you to sell that Comprehensive policy. Otherwise, how could you have obtained such personal information?"

"Now you've got it, what are you going to do with it?" I demanded sharply. I had the feeling that I was being given a bouncing around.

"The future course of our investigation becomes quite clear," he informed me. "We must go through the entire Egyptian collection until. . . ."

THE opening of the outer door silenced him. Flattened against the wall, I could see out into the studio entrance. The new caller was the late Melvin Vandervelte's green-eyed typist, Sara Murcheson.

"Come in, my daughter," Steele's voice rumbled again against the back of his throat. I wondered if the gal would detect his impersonation.

But she didn't seem in the least suspicious as she dropped into the chair at the other side of the teakwood table, crossing her shapely legs and fumbling in her large handbag for a cigarette. Her face was suddenly illuminated as she struck the match. Bruno Steele kept his head bent until she had shaken out the flame.

"As I intimated in our telephone conversation," Steele said then, "the strong Mars of today is a golden opportunity for you, a child of the intense fiery sign of Scorpio. I have checked my observations and double-checked. I find that the man you are thinking about will now be willing to pay highly for the object he wants. Did you bring it with you as directed?"

Sara Murcheson snapped her handbag open again. She drew out something that looked like cloth, although I couldn't make it out clearly in the dim light.

She put the thing down on the little table, "There it is."

"How much do you think this is worth, my daughter?" Bruno Steele asked calmly.

The girl's voice was steady but her inner tension showed in the way she ground out the stub of her cigarette, al-

though it was only a fraction smoked. "I asked ten thousand," she said. "If the stars are so favorable, maybe I should get more?"

"Without a doubt. It is written that twenty thousand will be paid."

The girl lighted another cigarette. As the match flared briefly, I got a better flash of the cloth on the table. It was a piece of carpet, about one foot square, a dark red in color and splotched with an irregular pattern of darker, almost brownish hue. The match went out.

She said, "Maybe even that isn't enough. After all, *he* gets a hundred grand."

"The position of the planet Jupiter warns against greed," Bruno Steele declared. "Twenty thousand should satisfy you."

"Okay, okay." Her tone was expectant. "What do I do?"

"If you wish," Bruno Steele suggested, "you may leave this with me. I will obtain guidance from the heavens tonight and know how to proceed."

"Oh, no!" Suddenly she was alert, suspicious. She seized the fragment of carpet, thrust it back into her bag. She stubbed out the second cigarette. "I'm going to keep this all to myself."

"As you wish, my daughter. I merely offered assistance. Surely you don't mistrust me?"

She stood up. "Nothing personal, Prince. But if this is worth twenty grand, I want it where I can put my hand on it. After all, you could be working for him instead of me."

"If I were, it would be easy for me to take it from you now."

HER laugh was hard and scornful. "Prince, the stars must have told you I'm a sucker. But if they did, they lied! It wouldn't really matter if His Nibs did get this piece from me. Since the last time I saw him, I've found something else. And *that* ought to be worth another twenty grand. He can have this for twenty and give me twenty for the other, or I'll give him this free and he can pay forty for the other. *Cash in advance!*"

I held my breath in excitement, waiting for Bruno Steele to ask her the all-important question. Who was this other guy, the third party Sara Murcheson had not named? That name, undoubtedly, was the keystone of the whole arch, the reason for all this elaborate imposture.

To my disappointment and disgust, he allowed her to walk out of the studio without asking that question. All he said was, "Remember the warning of Jupiter, for your own safety."

At the hall door she called back, "See you again, Prince."

When we heard her high heels tapping down the stairs, Feodor and I came out of hiding.

"What was it?" Steele asked then, and when he learned it was a piece of carpet, he said, "Of course! And the other thing she mentioned must have been the wax figure of *Quebeh-snewef*."

"Sure," I cracked bitterly. "It's the reason why O'Connor didn't walk in on us while you were pulling all this hocus-pocus."

Bruno Steele's heavy face crinkled. "Do I detect a trace of peevishness? It was easy enough, Bill, to make sure O'Connor would not interrupt. I simply called and sent him on a wild goose chase for a non-existent astronomer of my acquaintance with a revolutionary new theory respecting the canals of Mars. By now O'Connor should be at Lime Ridge, a good thirty miles from here I should say."

His good humor vanished, his face grew grim once more. "The deception would not have been necessary had I found him more cooperative. As it is, we are forced to proceed by stealth."

"How did you know Ronnoco phoned the girl?" I asked.

"He didn't. *I* did. And asked her to bring the thing she was using for her attempt at extortion. Her part in this affair is obvious."

"It's a wonder," I exclaimed, "she

The man's loose lips writhed in agony. Blood gleamed sticky red in the light.

didn't detect the difference between your voice and Ronnoco's. How . . ."

"All these fakirs use the same technique," he explained patiently. "A low, deep, soothing tone. There is little difference between one and another. Naturally a small gamble was involved." With satisfaction he added, "The gamble paid off."

WHILE I drove Steele and Feodor back to the Duncan, Steele gave me further instructions. I was to go to the Museum, contrive to remain inside after the big bronze doors shut for the night, and then proceed to the Egyptian Room. Bruno Steele wanted me to re-

move the wrappings from each mummy in the Museum's collection.

"I asked O'Connor to do this," he said, "and was given an angry refusal. O'Connor called it vandalism. But we've got to find the other victim, Bill. Without the *corpus delicti* we have no case."

I was thunderstruck. "You think there's been another murder?"

"Of course." He was impatient. "There *must* be another. From all indications, the watchman was merely an incident. Without the real victim, we have only confusion instead of an orderly, logical design."

He refused to go into further explanation. "Prepare a release for O'Connor to sign on the mummy claim," he instructed me. "For the consideration of one dollar to make it legal. Have the release in your pocket when you go to the Museum."

As I left them in front of the big apartment house, Bruno Steele had a final word of warning. "Watch your step, Bill. We've been poking rattlesnakes with a stick. It would be an understatement to say merely that your mission tonight is dangerous."

IT WAS twenty to four when I reached the Museum. A uniformed guard just inside the entrance spoke to me as I went in. "We'll be closing pretty soon, mister."

"That's okay," I called back. "I just want to check on something. Won't take more than five minutes."

I went through several long halls and then to the Egyptian Room and spent ten minutes there, carefully planning to myself how I should work things that night, and trying to look like a casual loiterer.

People were gradually leaving the museum, all but a few late strollers. The place was growing hushed, and I suddenly became aware that I was alone in the Egyptian Room.

I'm not an imaginative or superstitious sort of cuss. But I swear there was something about this huge marble and limestone chamber that made me feel as if I were entombed in a gigantic crypt. The sight of the mummies in their sarcophagi helped intensify the feeling. And there was a dead, musty smell about the place I had not noticed in the daytime.

I can't describe the peculiar sensation that flashed over me. As if I were suddenly aware, for the first time, of my own utter insignificance, and the insignificance of all mankind, in the vastness of time and the universe.

With sickening realization, I knew that these mummies had once been actual people; like Bruno Steele and myself. They had walked the streets of their cities, breathed the freshness of spring-air, loved their women, enjoyed their food and drink.

Now they were here, rooted from the tombs where they had expected to rest for eternity. Transported thousands of miles from their native land, thousands of years in time.

A mummy? Simply a name for a pickled corpse. Some day Keefe Scanlan and Willard P. Webb would be men five thousand years dead.

"Hell," I muttered to myself, "This state of mind gets you nowhere," and I went back through the long quiet rooms until I reached the Gallery of Primitive Man. There were still a few people roaming about, gawking at the exhibits. I assumed an attitude of aimless curiosity, strolling like the others.

In the center of the room a series of tableaux had been arranged in large glass cases, showing various semi-civilized peoples in their native habitats. A group of African natives grouped around a straw-thatched hut: the wax figures, remarkably life-like, engaged in cooking over a primitive fireplace, sharpening a native spear, other characteristic activities. Similar scenes from Tibet; the Australian bush; Outer Mongolia; the Belgian Congo.

I picked a case containing a group of Eskimos gathered outside their igloo. That igloo fitted my plans as neatly as it would have fitted in the Arctic.

I waited until there were no loiterers

near me. Then I used a bent paper clip on the small padlock which secured the sliding glass panel at the back of the case. I've always been pretty good with locks. I stepped inside quickly, slid the glass shut and crawled inside the papier-mache igloo.

A moment later a gong clattered, signal the Museum was closing for the day. A guard entered the room, hastening the departure of lingering visitors. There were a few minutes of scuffling footsteps. Then silence. Silence so deep it was like being in a diving bell at the bottom of the ocean.

I WAS in no hurry to leave the involuntary hospitality of my Eskimo hosts. I waited an hour. By that time I was sure the daytime guards would all be off duty and only the relatively small number of night men around. I'd have to take a chance on the watchmen; there was nothing I could do about them.

Before I finally emerged from my hiding place, I removed my shoes so I could move soundlessly on the stone floors. I headed first for the administrative offices at the front of the building, before going to the Egyptian Room. It occurred to me that I had an excellent opportunity for a little extra snooping on my own account. I forgot Bruno Steele's warning completely.

The lapse of memory almost cost my life.

Dr. O'Connor's office was empty, as I had anticipated. His desk was locked, but that didn't stop me very long. When I got the top drawer open, I went through the whole desk carefully, expecting each moment to turn up something that would give me a new and startling insight into everything which baffled me.

I found nothing out of keeping with the desk of a museum director. I was disgusted.

While I was still standing in the luxuriously furnished office, looking around, I heard a faint sound like the creak of a door hinge from the reception room adjoining. I froze, holding my breath to catch the sound of footsteps coming toward the director's office.

But everything was utterly still. After a moment I crossed the room noiselessly, my stocking feet making no sound on the thick, rich, brown carpet.

No one was in the outer room. But I was beginning to feel my nerves again. I decided to give up my private search. I was thinking now about the job Bruno Steele had given me.

So completely engrossed was I in my own thoughts, and the man behind me moved so silently, I was entirely unaware that I was being followed.

DID someone say it's good luck to pick up a penny? Brother, if someone hadn't dropped that little coin right in that particular place, I'd be pushing up daisies right now!

But it was still light enough for me to see the glint of the copper and I stopped abruptly in my tracks, bending for it. And at that precise instant something like a small cannon ball whizzed over and past my head. It didn't hit me, but I nearly died just the same. It was so completely unexpected it nearly scared me to death.

From the corner of my eye I had just enough time to see that the cannon ball was fastened to a length of iron chain. Then, the next instant, the ball reached the end of its tether and bounced back. It was this recoil that caught me a glancing blow on the side of the skull. And it knocked whatever wits I had left clean out of my head.

The only way I can explain what happened after that is sheer animal instinct for survival. I was knocked cold, I'm sure of it. I didn't know where I was or what was going on. Everything went dark and blurry, as if a pair of dark glasses had suddenly been clamped over my eyes. I was knocked cold, yet my muscles still functioned and I had just enough spark of sense left to let them function at top speed.

I remember looking back over my shoulder as I ran. But I don't remember

the man's features. They were blotted out by the black, swirling mist which was actually swimming through my brain. All I recall is seeing the iron ball and the chain still in his hand. That and the fact that he was coming after me as fast as he could go.

The whole thing was like one of those nightmares everyone experiences at one time or another. The feeling of terror and unreality, the dreamlike quality of it all caused by the fact that I was practically unconscious all the time. I remember running, and I remember that somehow my brain recognized the significance of the iron ball and the chain.

The flail, I kept saying over and over again to myself as I dodged and twisted through the museum corridors.

How I finally gave my pursuer the slip is something I don't remember at all. It's all blank from the time I thought about the flail until I woke up suddenly to see a man standing over me with something poised in his hand ready to hurl at me.

I shrank, expecting the flail to crash again into my head. But the man remained motionless. I lay in a panic for what seemed an endless time. Actually I suppose it was a matter of seconds. The man did not move to administer the *coup de grace* to me.

Then, mercifully, my brain cleared. The figure looming above me was the wax figure of an Eskimo hunter, a bone tipped harpoon in his hand. I was lying just inside the igloo in that glass case there in the Gallery of Primitive Man.

One reason why I'd been slow to recognize the mannikin was because it was dark now inside the Museum. Hours must have elapsed. Hours while I lay absolutely at the mercy of my unknown assailant in search of me.

FOR a while I stayed right where I was. My head thumped as if a thousand little demons were working on it, inside, with miniature sledges. It seemed as if I could taste blood in my mouth.

But I was thoroughly enjoying the realization that I was still alive. Wondering at the same time how I'd ever had enough wits left to find my way back to the igloo hiding place.

Although my mind was beginning to function clearly once more, I hadn't figured my next move when the screaming commenced.

A woman was making the noise. A shrill, high pitched soprano note which could mean nothing except mortal terror.

I slid out from that Eskimo exhibit again, but fast, fully alert, ready for action. I felt confident of myself again. I flexed my cramped arms as I started on a run in the direction from which the screams were coming. If I met my friend with the flail now, I promised myself grimly, I'd take the deadly thing out of his hand and wrap it around his own neck. I'm a big, husky guy. Rough and tumble fighting is okay with me, so long as the other fellow doesn't pull a Pearl Harbor attack when I don't know he's anywhere around.

By the time I'd gone through the Gallery of Aboriginal Americans, the woman's screaming had shut off. Not suddenly, but trailing off into distance as if she were yelling and running at the same time. And then, finally, as if she'd come to her senses and deliberately decided to quit.

I didn't find the woman, but I found something else, just inside the entrance to the Gallery of Useful Arts. By this time I'd remembered my pencil flashlight which I always carry clipped in my coat pocket along with my fountain pen. I shot the beam out in front of me as I ran to keep me from blundering into one of the innumerable glass cases in the dark.

Coming around the corner under full steam, I put on the brakes so fast that even in my stocking feet I slid half a dozen feet on the polished terrazzo. The thin ray of my flashlight fingered a dark bundle on the floor next to the wall.

That bundle was Titanic Casualty's Advisory Board Member and Chairman of the Museum's Finance Committee, Clifford Ainsworth!

Ainsworth was still alive, but he had been badly hurt. There was blood on the terrazzo, and his white shirt, on the left side near the armpit, gleamed sticky red in the light beam. The weapon with which he had been stabbed was nowhere in evidence.

The man's loose lips writhed in agony. He attempted to speak but his words were jumbled, incoherent. I dropped to one knee, trying to gauge the extent of his injury and determine what should be done in the way of first aid.

"Bleed me. . ." I heard Ainsworth mutter. "Vandals . . . the rug."

I LET my flashlight beam travel upward on the wall. Ainsworth was lying almost directly underneath the red-hued grave carpet I had stopped to admire that morning. The rug was still there. But it was no longer beautiful. Someone had slashed the deep pile with a sharp knife; it hung in tattered streamers of ruined fabric!

"What happened, Mr. Ainsworth?" I asked and bent closer to catch his reply. Then abruptly I switched off my light and got to my feet.

Footsteps were approaching from the corridor leading to the front of the building and O'Connor's office. Running footsteps, leather heels clicking sharply against the stone flooring.

Whoever was coming would look after Ainsworth. Belatedly, I realized that I was in danger of failing in the task Bruno Steele had set for me. If I found another man parked in my chair at the office of Titanic Casualty, I'd have no one to thank but myself.

A flicker of light glimmered at the far side of the Gallery, blossoming rapidly into a cone of radiance. I yelled, "Help!" to bring assistance for the wounded man. Then I executed the strategic military maneuver known as getting the hell out of there.

From the darkness at the end of the long gallery, I saw the light go over toward Ainsworth, waver and shine along the floor. I went straight for the Egyptian Room.

Lights along the River Esplanade outside reflected through plate glass casements high on the wall of the vast room, turning the sable blackness which cloaked the interior corridors and galleries to an eerie twilight in here.

Somehow the thought of the murdered watchman, even Titanic Casualty's Advisory Board member stabbed and bleeding in the Museum corridor, had not struck under my thick hide. This idea of the endlessness of Time and the inevitability of Death for us all, did. I felt the short hairs at the back of my neck bristle.

Impatiently I pulled myself together. I was Claims Manager for Titanic Casualty. I was working on a fifty thousand dollar claim on which my job depended. If I wanted to read *Gray's Elegy* in the Museum at night, I'd better wait until my investigation was finished.

I'd start, I decided, with the sarcophagus from which Amenhotep's son-in-law had disappeared. Since morning, I noticed, the lid of the inner mummy case had been replaced.

I set my flashlight on the floor, shining against the great alabaster box. Then I lifted the light inner lid.

The coffin was not empty!

The light gleamed thinly in the loose, flying coppery strands of a woman's hair. It played across a triangular face and a wide red mouth and shone on green eyes open wide and frozen in a look of utter terror. Sara Murcheson!

THE apparition was so entirely unexpected that I recoiled with an exclamation. Bruno Steel had set me looking for another body, but I wasn't prepared to find the Murcheson gal. Not until she cut loose with a spine-chilling scream and commenced scrambling out of the alabaster mummy case, did I realize she wasn't dead.

The racket she was making wasn't going to help me any. I reached into the coffin and took her by the shoulder,

shaking her the way you'd shake a naughty child.

"Stop it!" I said sternly. With my free hand I shone the light on my own face. "No one's going to hurt you, sister."

She'd already started another yell, but switched it off in the middle like an air raid siren that's had the wiring pulled loose. I'll have to give Sara credit; she was a cool number. Mentally like a cat twisting in mid-air so she could land on her feet.

"Why you're the man from the Signet Press," she said quite calmly. "What are you doing here?"

"The same question applies to you, sister."

She didn't hesitate for the bat of an eyelid. "Why I lost track of time and found I'd been locked into the Museum," she said with a smile of what was supposed to be disarming candor. "I was wandering around trying to get out when I bumped into Mr. Ainsworth. He was escorting me to an exit when a man popped up suddenly like a jack-in-the-box and threatened us with a knife." She shuddered and the shudder was absolutely genuine. "I think Mr. Ainsworth was stabbed. I ran and hid in this box."

"How does it happen you know Ainsworth?" I demanded coldly.

"Why shouldn't I? Mr. Vandervelte was always around the Museum. I met all the Museum officials . . . often."

"Okay, sister," I said. "We'll let the fish story go at that for the present. I've got work to do. I only hope you haven't cooked me by rousing every watchman around the joint."

I MOVED to the mummy case nearest the big sarcophagus. "You'd better stick close to me," I advised Sara. "The guy with the knife is still somewhere around. Here, hold the light for me. This way."

I bent over the linen strips at the mummy's head, unwinding them like a surgeon removing a complex bandage. After the first few folds were off, the parchment-like skin of the mummy showed, leathery, revoltingly ancient.

I moved along to the next mummy on the long row, working fast against time. Sara followed with the flashlight. My warning had effectively eliminated any idea she might have had about ducking out on me.

When I reached the fourth mummy down the line, someone with a light came hammering along the corridor leading to the Egyptian room. My heart sank.

If I were interrupted before I found the second corpse Bruno Steele had predicted, I'd be in the soup tureen for fair. Even if I avoided a charge of breaking and entering, I'd be accused of damaging the Museum's priceless collection. Titanic Casualty would lose an important policyholder and my job would be gone with the wind. I couldn't even mention Bruno Steel or I'd get him into trouble, too.

Light flared on suddenly. "What's going on there?" an angry voice bellowed. "Hold it, or I'll fill you so full of lead they can use you for an elevator counterweight!"

I didn't look around. The linen bandages on this mummy looked different from the others. A more inexpert job. I pulled them loose hurriedly.

The watchman came running over, gun in hand, still mouthing threats. Ignoring him, I ripped at the bandages. As the stained, age-browned wrappings came off, I saw no parchment skin on the head concealed by those linen strips. Instead, the flesh might have been that of a living person. Only the occupant of the mummy case was no longer living!

"Take a look, buddy," I invited the watchman.

THE face of the corpse had been seared with acid until the features were beyond recognition. The hair had been cut off close to the scalp, so only a stubble remained, dirty yellow-blonde.

Most revolting of all, was the mouth of the corpse. Deprived of the support-

ing cloth strips, the jaw dropped open slackly. There were no teeth inside the skull. Only raw, blood-clotted sockets from which the teeth had been wrenched.

The watchman made a gagging sound. Sara Murcheson gave an involuntary sob deep in her throat.

As for me, the last instant's success brought a mixture of emotions. I was elated with my discovery, yet at the same time sickened. I felt like a grave robber, a ghoul. Yet I knew that under the direction of Bruno Steele, I was actually the agent of retribution for the criminal who had done this ghastly deed.

The watchman's reactions were less complicated. He prodded his gun into my spine. "Come along, now! We're going to call the cops."

"You can say that again, brother," I agreed heartily. "And I've another call to make, too."

FOR the next half hour the American Museum resembled Grand Central Station. O'Connor and Bancroft came in. Then a red-headed detective-lieutenant from headquarters with a squad of plainclothes cops. Under the care of a white-jacketed interne, Ainsworth was carried away in an ambulance, unconscious but alive. Finally, to my own great relief, Bruno Steele walked into O'Connor's office, his hand resting lightly on the arm of his faithful Feodor.

O'Connor was in his leather-upholstered chair behind the vast spread of desk. Bancroft, red-faced and puffy, lounged comfortably in a seat near the wall. He pulled himself erect as Steele entered, running his hand through his stiff, curly hair and giving my friend an oblique, questioning glance.

Both Museum officials had been trying in vain to get information from me. All I would tell them was, "Wait. Everything will be explained." Fervently I hoped Bruno Steele could make good the promise. To me the whole affair was still a confused jumble of meaningless surprises. With me in the middle . . . literally.

"Who are these men?" Bancroft asked curtly. I think he had no idea that Steele was blind.

Bruno Steele carried the ball. "We're special investigators for Mr. Webb," he said in a tone which matched Bancroft's for brusqueness. "We're going to wind up this mummy claim. And if you don't mind now, we'd like to talk to Dr. O'Connor alone."

Bancroft's face got redder. O'Connor said, "I'd like Mr. Bancroft to sit in on any discussion. . ."

"Would you?" Bruno Steele planted himself directly in front of O'Connor's desk, feet wide apart as if he were bracing himself. "Does that include the activities of the Prince, with whom you are acquainted?"

A startled expression came into O'Connor's lusterless brown eyes. He hesitated, then said, "You'd better leave us, Paul."

Reluctantly, Bancroft crossed the room.

Steele said, "Close the door, Bill." I did.

"We've penetrated your secret," Bruno Steele told O'Connor then. "I wished to warn you in advance."

I WAS ready for O'Connor to dive for a gun, upset the desk, make a dash for the windows. He did none of those things. Just sat quietly in his chair, his shoulders slumping a little. Unexpected lines sprang out, twisting his baby-smooth face, making it look suddenly much older. Somehow I got the impression of a balloon that's been jabbed with a pin.

"I want you to know I don't blame you," Bruno Steele went on, while I wondered if I could believe my own ears. "It's shameful that a man of scientific attainment is so often unable to earn comparably with a storekeeper or a skilled workman. So what more natural than your decision to augment your income with a little harmless fortune telling on the side. As an astronomer, a trifling hocus-pocus about the stars was

both easy and lucrative for you. I shouldn't be surprised if you made more as Prince Ronnoco than as Director of the American Museum."

O'Connor's brown eyes were sad, like a whipped dog. "It's true," he said very low. "Nearly twice as much. I needed the money desperately and yet. . ."

"And yet you had to remember your dignity as head of this institution," Bruno Steele interrupted. "You couldn't just go out and do overtime work on the side. I understand your predicament, Doctor."

I was in a mental tailspin. I'd been sure Franklin O'Connor was the man responsible for these several killings. I thought he'd been the one who'd tried to bounce that iron ball off my dome. Now I didn't know whether I was on foot or horseback.

"Bill, where's that release?" Steele asked.

I took it from my pocket. Bruno Steele held it toward O'Connor. "Sign this," he told the Director, "and you may be sure no one will ever mention your extra-curricular activities, Doctor."

O'Connor glanced over the paper. His face was very white.

"I can't sign away the Museum's claim," he said. "That would be acceptance of a bribe, betrayal of my trust."

"Your principles do you credit," Bruno Steele assured the man. "But let me assure you that the Museum will gain rather than lose by relinquishment of this claim. Instead of fifty thousand dollars, we shall undertake to recover one hundred thousand which has been wrongfully withheld from your institution. A bequest the Museum has never received and would not now receive except for Mr. Webb's brilliant work."

It had all the earmarks of a dirty dig, but I was too much fascinated to care. Besides, it was okay with me if Bruno Steele wanted a little private fun at my expense.

Listening for the scratch of O'Connor's pen, Steele said, "Take it, Bill." He was completely sure of himself.

I stowed the precious paper away in my inside pocket.

Bruno Steele said, "Now, Bill, let's get Lieutenant Lacey and the others. And I'd like a little more information about the new corpse you found tonight."

LACEY was coming along the corridor as I stepped out. With two men carrying a wicker basket. They lugged it into O'Connor's office.

"A woman," Lacey said. "She's been stabbed. And whoever killed her was taking no chances on possible identification."

"He might very well have succeeded, too," Bruno Steel said grimly, "if only he'd take the trouble to read up on momiology. Then he'd have known that a mummy's neck is its weakest point. That knowledge might have saved his own neck."

He spoke to Feodor. "Let me feel the dead woman's hands."

They'd unwrapped the body completely. Guided by the Russian, Steele ran the tips of his sensitive fingers over the flaccid hand of the corpse. An expression of satisfaction came to him.

"Just as I expected," he said. "Characteristic calluses. Indicative of a manual worker . . . specifically a house-maid. There will be no difficulty, Lieutenant, in making identification of this body."

Everyone was staring at the blind man. Bruno Steele remained standing in the center of the room, his sightless eyes raised, as if he were looking over the heads of his audience.

"When Mr. Webb called to see you this morning," he said, addressing O'Connor, "You were in the midst of an argument. You were suggesting that something was not as represented . . . that it probably came from Brooklyn instead of from Tabriz. You were referring, of course, to the rug which at that moment was being added to the collection in the Gallery of Useful Arts. When Bill Webb described that rug to me, it provided our first important clue to the claim of the missing mummy."

"What's the rug got to do with the mummy," O'Connor asked promptly.

"Rugs are like written pages," Bruno Steele said didactically. "Their maze of design is a symbol language which the initiate can still read, although, unfortunately, much of the symbolism has been lost in ceaseless transmission through the centuries. One glance at that rug was sufficient to show it had no place on the walls of the American Museum."

EVEN as he was speaking I beat my brains trying to dope out anything about that rug which might have a bearing on the murder of two or more persons. I'd taken a good look at the rug. It was a beautiful thing. That's all I could tell about it.

"Undoubtedly a factory-made product," Bruno Steele continued. "From Brooklyn, maybe, as you, Dr. O'Connor, suggested. You were not fooled for an instant. Artificial ageing can be caused by doctoring with lemon juice and oxalic acid. To change the flaring analine reds to old native shades. But the complete give-away was the tarantula and scorpion design."

"I don't follow you." It was Paul Bancroft speaking.

"Oh, yes, you do!" Bruno Steele's tone was whiplike. "That rug was supposedly a *Ghiordes,* a Turkish rug. But the tarantula and the scorpion designs are characteristic of the Caucasus. *A rule of the Koran prohibits Mohammedan peoples from depicting any living creatures in their art.* Clifford Ainsworth's rare antique was nothing more than a cheap fraud."

"What does all this about a rug prove?" the police officer, Lacey, demanded.

"It proves," Bruno Steele said flatly, "the identity of the murderer of Melvin Vandervelte." He heard Sara Murcheson's gasp and his sightless eyes turned in her direction. "You knew all about the munificent gift Vandervelte intended to make the Museum, didn't you? Of course it was a completely crazy whim for him to take the money in cash, instead of writing out a check. But Vandervelte was a genius in his particular field. The strange foibles common to genius are frequently completely incomprehensible to the ordinary mind."

The girl's face was very white. But her green eyes were wary and alert. She said nothing and Bruno Steele did not wait for her to speak.

"Vandervelte took his hundred thousand in thousand dollar bills to Ainsworth, as Chairman of the Museum Finance Committee. To Ainsworth's home, where he maintains his office. Unhappily for Vandervelte, he did not suspect what I have only just learned through my own friends in high financial circles. That Clifford Ainsworth had engaged in market operations which left him virtually penniless. One hundred thousand dollars must have seemed as big to him as ten million would have seemed a short while ago."

AN AUDIBLE gasp ran through the room at Steele's words. The news was as unexpected as if Mr. Rockefeller had just been announced a bankrupt.

"*The rug proves Clifford Ainsworth the murderer,*" Steele insisted. "He killed Vandervelte by a blow across the head, hid the money in his rug by cutting a slit in the backing and slipping the bills between the backing and the unusually thick pile. That night he disposed of Vandervelte's body by loading it into his car and dropping it into the street a safe distance across town. As Ainsworth intended, Vandervelte was thought to be the victim of a hit-run driver.

"Ainsworth supposed he would be quite free from suspicion. Vandervelte had left the bank many hours before his body was found. Vandervelte probably told him he had suddenly decided to make the gift, that he had told no one of it yet. That Ainsworth could announce the news.

"But Ainsworth miscalculated on two factors. First was the mercenary Miss

Sara Murcheson who was quite aware that her employer had gone to Ainsworth with a hundred thousand-dollar bills. Knowing that the money had disappeared by the time Vandervelte's body was found, it required little ingenuity for her to put two and two together. It looked like an incredible opportunity for blackmail, so she went to Ainsworth."

The girl said sullenly, "That's a lie!"

Without paying the slightest attention to her denial, Bruno Steele went on. "The second factor which upset Ainsworth's apple cart was his own housemaid. Maybe the maid heard the crisp new bills crackle inside the rug when she walked on it. In any event, she discovered his hiding place. And Ainsworth found her snooping and killed her to prevent exposure of his previous crime. It's the old story: murder begets more murder.

"Ainsworth stabbed the housemaid, but he couldn't get by this time with the hit-run play. His connection with the Museum gave him another idea for disposal of the corpse. With the aid of the syringe and embalming fluid taken from Grebb's Funeral Home, he did a home-made embalming job. A good, workmanlike job, too, which might have remained undetected for years if it had not been for the head of Amenhotep's son-in-law breaking away from the weighted body.

"But it was Ainsworth's excessive caution which first proved to Bill Webb the identity of the killer. Ainsworth worked over the dead girl in his bathtub. And when Bill walked into Ainsworth's bathroom this morning, he noted immediately the corrosive effects of the acid used on the maid's features. Seeing those marks on the drain told Bill that Ainsworth was the murderer."

HE SHOULD have embalmed the watchman, too," I said, trying to sound profound. "That corpse would certainly have been discovered within a few more days at most."

"The embalming of the watchman was undoubtedly the next step on the slayer's programme," Bruno Steele said quickly. "The watchman's killing was, of course, entirely unpremeditated. The poor fellow must have blundered in just as the maid was being readied for the sarcophagus. It cost him his life. The slayer lashed out with his flail. . ."

A centipede with chilly feet walked briskly the length of my spine.

"At least two mummies were thrown into the river," Steele went on. "The one in the case where the maid was found, as well as Amenhotep's relative. That was one of the confusing elements which obscured the picture for Bill Webb. Others were provided by the further activities of Miss Murcheson.

"In her search for a club to hold over Ainsworth's head, she examined the tonneau of his big, expensive car. And found on the purple plush carpet, blood stains from Vandervelte's murder. Later, she went back to cut a strip of this stained carpet from the car floor. But in the meantime, Ainsworth had again used the car as his private morgue wagon, this time for the disposal of the mummy's weighted body into the river. And one of the symbolic amulets attached to the wrapped vicera of the dead Egyptian had dropped out on the car floor. So, Miss Murcheson, you actually had *two* clubs to use on Ainsworth after that. Isn't that true?"

The girl glared. "Nothing but imagination. You can't prove a word of it. How could you know such things?"

"The stars told me about the carpet," Bruno Steele laughed. "You told me about the amulet yourself."

I almost laughed aloud at the bewilderment in Sara's green eyes.

"If you remember how to give thanks by prayer," Steele told her, "you should do so, immediately and fervently. Only some guardian angel saved you from ending up as corpse number three in one of those mummy cases. You let Ainsworth inveigle you into coming here tonight for the ostensible purpose of paying you the blackmail money you de-

manded. Ainsworth had no idea of paying you a dime. He intended to cut your throat and only the activity of another double-crosser kept him from carrying out his purpose."

Paul Bancroft spoke up quickly. "Do I understand you to say that one hundred thousand dollars in cash is secreted in that rug out in the Arts Gallery? We should secure that immediately . . . for the Museum."

OLD Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria could never have given an enemy captured in battle a more merciless look than Steele's blank eyes gave Bancroft.

"You know very well there's no money in that rug. You slashed the rug to pieces tonight trying to find it . . . not for the Museum, but for yourself. The fact that Ainsworth interrupted you in the act is why you stabbed him, and as a corollary, saved Miss Murcheson's life."

"Preposterous!" Bancroft blustered.

Bruno Steele was cheerful. "Quite preposterous. But true. Second only to Ainsworth himself, you have engaged in an astounding amount of skullduggery within the last few days. How did you happen to become Ainsworth's partner in crime? Did you perhaps discover him trying to fit the mummified housemaid into the sarcophagus of Amenhotep's heir?"

He paused as if expecting Bancroft to reply, but the Administrative Assistant held his tongue. His red face was even redder than usual. Drops of oily sweat beaded the man's short upper lip.

"It doesn't matter," Steele assured him. "You had something on Ainsworth and he probably offered you a large sum for your assistance. It was you who kept the Museum guards and the watchman out of the way; it was you who used the flail on the one watchman who blundered in upon you at the wrong time. The same way you attempted to use it on Mr. Webb, tonight. You intended to help yourself to the stolen money which you thought, as Ainsworth intended you to think, was concealed in the rug. You are an accessory after the fact in two murders, the actual killer of the watchman and the attempted murderer of Ainsworth. I shall leave the other rather long list of your crimes and misdemeanors to Lieutenant Lacey, whom I hereby advise to place you under arrest immediately."

FOR a large man, Bancroft got under way with remarkable speed. He was a walking arsenal. A knife appeared from somewhere inside his sleeve and a gun from a spring clip under his armpit. He had picked Bruno Steele as his target and was throwing down on him with the gun when I went into action.

"How do you like this for a good, old-fashioned flail?" I asked as I clipped him. I put everything I had behind the punch. My head still ached where he'd massaged me with that iron ball. I wanted to even the score.

I guess I did. You could hear bone crunch when I landed, and only one of the bones was in my hand. The rest was Bancroft's jaw.

Dr. O'Connor had been making a noise like a clam since he'd found Steele knew about Prince Ronnoco. He spoke now for the first time. His deep bass was squeaky with nervousness. His mind was still following the financial line.

"The missing money, if it's not in the rug, has someone else taken it?"

"The money is still in the rug," Bruno Steele assured him. "Ainsworth, in his extreme caution, wanted to keep the stolen funds hidden, fearing maybe that serial numbers had been recorded by the bank. But the rug he brought to the Museum was just a ruse to throw Bancroft off the track. You see, the two men had a thieves' agreement that they would hang the rug with the money in the gallery until any possible hue and cry was past. Then they would divide the loot.

"Like most thieves' agreements, this one was utterly without honor on either side. Ainsworth had two rugs, both the

same pattern. He brought in the one without the money. And Bancroft's attempt to double-cross Ainsworth and take all the money for himself was, therefore, fruitless. The rug with the money is still in Ainsworth's home. Mr. Webb saw it there, himself, this morning."

Another voice, thin and acid, cut in from near the doorway. "What was it Webb saw?"

IT WAS Keefe Scanlan, his lips compressed ominously, small eyes gleaming behind his Oxford lenses.

Like a buzzard attracted by carrion, I thought. Aloud, I said, "How in the world did *you* happen to come here, Mr. Scanlan?"

"Dr. O'Connor called me," he said severely. "I understand you've managed to create ill-will toward the Company, Webb. That you've given our claims service a black eye and . . ."

"Not at all," O'Connor cut in hurriedly. "Quite the reverse, in fact. We're more than pleased with the way Mr. Webb has handled things. Our claim has been settled in full since I phoned you. To our complete satisfaction."

A stricken look came into Scanlan's small eyes. "Webb! You haven't paid out fifty thousand dollars without. . ."

I handed him the signed release. "Divide that by fifty grand, boss. You're a little late getting here, but you can relax. I've done *almost* as well as you could have done."

"You should have consulted me," Scanlan began to complain, "before. . ."

Bruno Steele's dark face took on a vulpine smile. "Your trouble, Mr. Scanlan, seems to be the same as everyone else connected with this case. They've all made the error of being preoccupied with their own selfish interests. Each has wrongly considered himself the central figure in this bizarre pattern of violence. All but Bill Webb. Bill realized immediately that he was merely one shifting particle in the big human kaleidoscope, fitting only momentarily into the pattern. Therefore, he has kept his eyes fixed at all times upon the motivating force. To put it bluntly, upon the dough-re-mi."

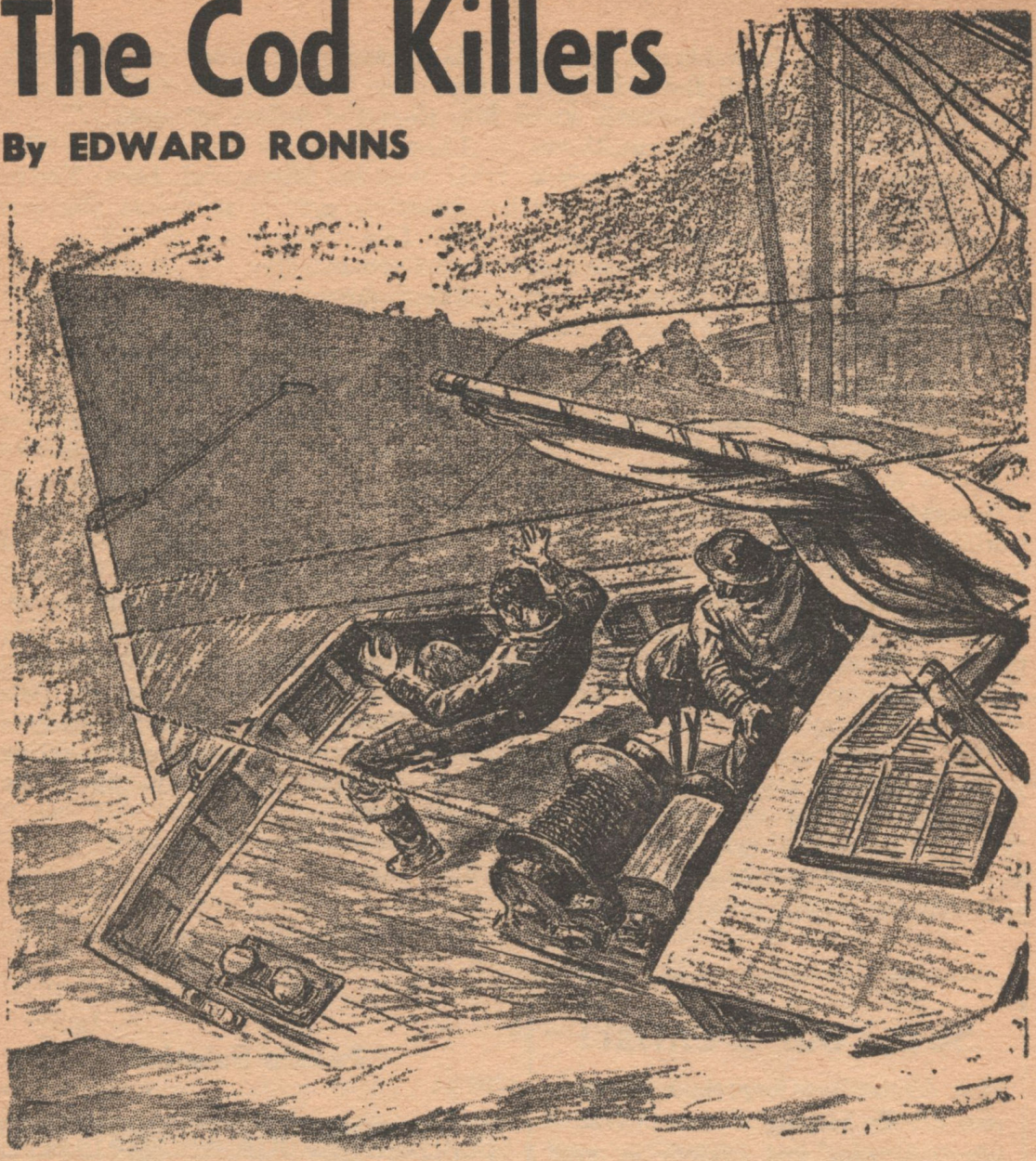
I guess that was telling him!

Puzzle Solution

W	O	L	F	■	C	H	A	R	D	■	S	H	O	P
I	D	O	L	■	R	O	G	U	E	■	P	A	V	E
S	O	D	A	■	E	V	E	N	T	■	A	V	E	R
P	R	E	C	E	D	E	■	T	O	R	R	E	N	T
■	■	■	C	A	I	R	N	■	N	O	R	■	■	■
A	S	S	I	S	T	■	A	N	A	C	O	N	D	A
S	H	A	D	E	■	S	P	A	T	■	W	A	R	N
T	A	T	■	L	A	C	■	P	E	S	■	D	O	G
E	L	A	N	■	C	A	S	E	■	M	A	I	N	E
R	E	N	O	V	A	T	E	■	B	A	R	R	E	L
■	■	■	M	A	D	■	C	L	A	S	S	■	■	■
M	A	R	I	N	E	R	■	I	N	H	E	R	I	T
E	B	O	N	■	M	A	R	A	T	■	N	E	R	O
E	L	L	A	■	I	N	A	N	E	■	A	T	O	M
T	E	L	L	■	C	A	P	E	R	■	L	E	N	E

The Cod Killers

By EDWARD RONNS



THE FOG came down from the north, alive with the Labrador wind, closing a dank murky hand over the fishing banks.

The *Zephyr,* three days out of Easterly, plowed slowly across the tidal currents of George's Bank, her gallows trembling with the weight of the drag as she fished the bottom. The little fishing schooner ignored the fog, intent on the harvest she was reaping.

Fernando Elvas, winchman on the *Zephyr,* took a last look at the straining tow wires and climbed down to the crew's quarters. He was a squat, chunky man with thick, grey-shot hair and the sturdy build of an Easterly draggerman. His weathered face was deeply troubled. He squinted in the light of the lamp hanging on the bulkhead, searching the tiers of rough wooden bunks. They were all empty but one. Satisfied, Fernando left the ladder and shook Johnny Royal's leg.

A giant bow grazed the Zephyr's stern. The deck trembled. Johnny felt the schooner tilt crazily.

"Johnny," he said. "Wake up, quick."

The man in the bunk yawned and sat up. He looked out of place in the uncouth quarters of the fishing schooner. His thick sandy hair, his suede jacket and Fifth Avenue slacks didn't belong among the clumsy fishermen's trappings draped around the bunk. A fine web of scars over his brows didn't mar his looks. His hands were lean and brown as he swung from the bunk.

"What is it, Fernando?"

"It is just that I would like to talk to you, Johnny Royal—alone. Is nothing to do for an hour. The crew is in the pens."

"What's the trouble?" Johnny asked again.

"I cannot talk to Cap'n Taylor. But you, you are a guest aboard, you are not skipper nor a draggerman, but you are Cap'n Arch's good friend, and you were once fisherman yourself, Johnny Royal, before you become great prize-fighter—"

"That's enough," Johnny laughed. "I know I'm just a guest package aboard the *Zephyr*. What's wrong?"

Fernando spread his great, rough hands.

"I am troubled in my mind and heart. I have great fear for the *Zephyr* and we, who work aboard her. There is fog outside, and there is danger in the fog. I have heard it."

Johnny frowned. "Danger?"

"You come back to Easterly at a bad time, Johnny Royal. You know the troubles of your friends, the Taylors, and Cap'n Arch. You know the evil thing Peter Hurd has done with the fishermen. Hard times have come to us all. If a fisherman refuses to obey Hurd, something happens—poof! A man is knifed, a vessel's gear is wrecked, or she comes home with no fish in the pens and damages to be repaired. Next time, the owner sails as Hurd orders."

JOHNNY stamped into his boots. "What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Is trouble for Arch Taylor. He fights Pete Hurd and his syndicate, and to avoid danger, he fishes here on George's, for cod. He tells everyone he goes to Cashe's Ledge, and then comes here, thinking Hurd cannot interfere if he cannot find us."

Johnny nodded. "I know all that. Besides, Hurd wouldn't try anything openly. That would be piracy, and there's a law."

"Hurd is the law in Easterly," Fernando muttered. "And there is fog on the sea above. It is in my mind that Hurd knows where we are, no matter what tales Cap'n Arch told ashore about our destination."

"How could he know?"

The fisherman's big, brawny hand opened, revealing a key.

"Someone had this key to the radio. Someone used the radio to get a message to Hurd."

"Someone aboard the *Zephyr?*" Johnny frowned.

"A traitor," Fernando nodded. "That is why I wait to see you alone. There is danger. We are helpless, while we make the set. And just now, I hear something in the fog—a vessel—"

"Come on," Johnny said grimly. "We'll see Cap'n Arch about this."

"No, not I. *You* tell him. If there is someone in the crew who knows I told—"

Johnny paused at the ladder.

"Do you know who Hurd's man is?"

Fernando licked his lips. "No. But one of them is Hurd's man, and a great danger to us."

Johnny stared at the winchman. *Superstition,* he thought. These Easterly men were full of it. But if there was any truth in his fears—

"When did you find this extra key?"

"An hour ago—under the mess table."

"Why didn't you speak up then?"

Fernando looked disturbed. "I do not think swiftly. I do not know what it means, until I hear that other vessel just now, prowling in the fog."

Johnny came out on deck, shivered in the cold air. The mist was all around, entwined about the schooner in moving columns of vapor. A sea washed along the weather rail. He slogged aft, passing Clee Duggan and the old Morales twins at the main fish hold, and glanced down the engineroom hatch, at Newfie Joe, the engineer, at his laboring Diesel. The engineer's assistant, Carl Macklin, met Johnny's eye and winked for no reason at all. Johnny moved aft, to where the humming tow-lines hitched to the quarter bitts were swallowed in the yellowish sea.

JOHNNY had his hand on the pilothouse door when he felt the shock. Astern, a shape moved through the fog at reckless speed, and a throbbing engine sounded over the water. The crew heard it at the same time.

Out of the fog rose a giant green bow that grazed the *Zephyr's* stern. Something bright and hard sheared across the towing wires. The deck trem-

bled, the schooner's bow rose high on a swell as the tow-lines snapped. The gallows creaked and shattered; the foremast splintered with a scream of rending oak. Johnny felt his legs knocked out from under him. He fell sprawling on the deck. A sea thundered over the rail, swept him headlong against the winch. His hands grasped frantically for support, closed on an icy line, and clung there. Choking and gasping, he felt the *Zephyr* tilt crazily under him. Something struck across his ribs with stunning force. From within the depths of the stricken schooner came a high, wild booming sound.

Johnny struggled to his feet as the water subsided. His first glance was seaward, over the fantail. The fog was just swallowing the massive shape of the big green dragger that had swiped them. Over the water came a man's taunting bellowing laugh.

"Ahoy, *Captain* Taylor!"

One look at the damage to the *Zephyr* sickened him. Disaster had come in a matter of seconds. The foremast was down, the gallows wrecked—and there was worse. The huge, costly linen net, cut free of the tow-lines, rose bubbling and frothing to the surface of the sea behind them. Fish glistened and threshed in a mad circle, seeking escape from the torn netting. It would have been a rich harvest. But even as Johnny looked, the mass of tangled line and fish sank in a seething foam beneath the next sea.

The *Zephyr* shuddered and righted herself.

Carl Macklin, Newfie Joe's assistant in the engine room, ran into him. The stocky man's face was ash-white.

"He's dying," Carl gasped. "I must tell Cap'n Arch—"

Johnny grabbed the panicked man's arm.

"Who is it? Who got hurt?"

Macklin's eyes were wild, "Fernando. Fernando Elvas.

"The foremast fell on him! He's trapped under it!"

Captain Arch Taylor walked slowly up from the foredeck. He was a thin, dark-haired man, in his late twenties, about Johnny's age. His face was haggard, his eyes shocked.

"You all right, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded. "You?"

"I'm not hurt. But the *Zephyr's* a wreck. We've lost all our gear to that damned hit-and-run expert."

"Who was it?" Johnny demanded. "What vessel?"

Arch Taylor looked wry. "You saw as much as I did."

"Fernando's been hurt—"

"Fernando is dead."

AT NOON the next day the fog burned off and the *Zephyr* jogged easily so'sou'west, governed by her battered riding sail.

Johnny Royal looked at the dead man up forward and frowned, considering his blistered hands. *Six years,* he thought. *I've been away from all this for six years.* His hands had carried him far from Easterly and the life of a fisherman. Magic hands, the sports writers called them. Johnny Royal, King of Broadway.

He watched Arch Taylor climb up from the engine-room, his corduroy trousers stuffed carelessly into clumsy boots. They had been friends since they were kids. A livid welt stood out on Taylor's thin jaw, a memento of the disaster of yesterday. He looked tired and worried and his voice was heavy with exhaustion.

"Fernando was a good man."

"He was a fisherman," Johnny said flatly. "It happens all the time."

"Not like this, though."

Johnny frowned. "He was trying to warn you, you know. He said someone used the radio to call Hurd's vessel after us."

"It was the *Lazy Lady,* all right. Any fisherman along the coast knows that dragger's lines."

The battered little schooner was bearing her scars bravely. Thinking of the loss of gear and fish, Johnny felt quick

sympathy for Arch Taylor's troubles. He remembered how exultant Arch had been when they struck cod. Now they were lucky to be alive and homeward bound.

Johnny stepped into the pilot house.

"Which of the men would use your radio, Arch?"

Taylor shrugged. "I'd have trusted them all."

"Money makes a man do queer things," Johnny said bitterly. "I ought to know. That's why I'm here." He shrugged off his own thoughts. "Tell me about this guy Hurd."

"The local waterfront boss. His *Lazy Lady* is the biggest vessel in Easterly's fleet, and I guess Pete Hurd is the biggest operator in Easterly. But he's no good for the fishermen." Arch gestured to the shattered wreckage of the *Zephyr's* tackle. "You see what his *Lazy Lady* did to us in the fog. It was no accident."

"You can't prove it, though," Johnny said.

Arch said bitterly: "No, Hurd chose the time and place. Lots of accidents happen in the fog. It's his usual method of terrorizing men into obeying his orders. I've fought him since he started his strong-arm methods, and he's been out to get me. This time he succeeded. I needed that fare badly."

"If it was no accident, Fernando was murdered."

"But we can't prove it, Johnny."

EASTERLY was bathed in late afternoon sunlight when the *Zephyr* limped into the Town Landing. A little crowd was gathered on the wharf, forewarned by radio of the schooner's grim burden. From the fish wharves came the clatter of canning machines, the rumble of ice, and the hoarse bellowing of the lumpers. A powerful dragger, her eighty-foot hull painted bright green, was moored at the Sea Pride cannery, discharging her fare. Johnny's jaw tightened as he watched her.

The lumpers swarmed aboard, turning to the fish pens. The crew moved awkwardly aft, embarrassed as they approached Arch. Their voices were quick in the afternoon air, rapid Portuguese and Italian. Newfie Joe, the engineer, looked serious.

"Cap'n Arch," he said, "there's more bad luck." He jerked a grimy thumb toward the *Lazy Lady*, at the next dock. "She brings in a high-line fare and knocks the price to hell. You take a loss on grub and oil alone."

Arch stared at the crew's silent, watchful faces.

"They'll all get their share," he said.

"From what, Cap'n Arch? You know the rules, we take sides with you for good or bad. You lose money, we lose too. The men say they can't keep on starving—or dying, either. They want to take their gear ashore." The bearded man sighed heavily. "They say you're broke. You can't even buy a new drag."

Arch looked white. "They're going on Hurd's ships?"

Old Pedro Morales spoke up, standing beside his twin brother.

"It is a question of feeding one's family."

"You'll feed them less and less as Hurd gets you!" Arch said bitterly.

THE crew broke away, uncertain. Johnny's glance swung ashore again. A girl was coming down the twisted, cobblestones of the Landing. He dropped over the side and caught her as she reached the outskirts of the crowd.

"Jessie," he said gently. "Wait a minute."

Her thick, dark hair tumbled in sleek waves about her shoulders. She wore gray slacks and a red sweater under her tan boxcoat. Her eyes were wide and gray, filled with sudden, overwhelming relief. Johnny thought he had never seen anyone lovelier. He felt, as always, a confusion he hated, because Jessie Stuart was Arch's girl.

She said: "I was so afraid, Johnny, that something had happened to you or Arch. When I heard of the accident—

someone *was* killed, wasn't he?"

"Fernando Elvas," he said flatly. "You'd better go see Arch now. He needs some moral support."

"I'm glad you're all right, Johnny. Was the trip too bad otherwise?"

"I'm not cut out for the sea," he said. "You know that."

"Will you fight tonight?" she asked. "I wanted to see you in the ring, though I'd hate that as much as you hate Easterly."

"I'll fight," he said. "I'm fighting Eddie Revere."

"Will you see me before you go to the club?"

"I don't know."

"Please," she said. "I'll be on the *South Wind*."

"All right," he said.

He watched her slip easily aboard the *Zephyr*, watched her kiss Arch, and swallowed an ache in his throat. Shrugging, he crossed the cobblestones of the Town Landing and skirted the waterfront, with its moored draggers rocking on the tide.

The lumpers working on the *Lazy Lady* were a noisy crew of brawny, sweating men.

"Where's Hurd?" Johnny asked the nearest man.

"Skipper's gone to his office."

"Where is that?"

The big man grinned. "It's your funeral, chum. Look in Frisbee's Sail Loft—next wharf down."

HE ENTERED Hurd's office without knocking. A big man sat behind a desk, cleaning his nails with a fish-knife. He had a square, dark face with a wide, thin mouth; his eyes were dark gray under thick, heavy brows. On the desk was a framed photo of the *Lazy Lady*. On the wall was an oil painting of a topmast fishing schooner of the Thebaud class, rail down under a smother of white canvas.

"Come in," said the big man. "Don't bother to knock."

"I didn't," Johnny said. He took his glance from the oil painting. "You're Pete Hurd, aren't you?"

"I'm Hurd," said the big man. He took his feet from the desk top, and waved to a chair. "Sit down. What's on your mind?"

"You," said Johnny. "You bother me."

The big man stared, folded his hands, and laughed.

"You used to be an Easterly boy, wasn't you?"

"I came from here, if that's what you mean."

"That's right. That's what I mean. Easterly isn't any of your business any more."

"Arch Taylor is my business," Johnny said. "What you do to him is my business."

"You're Johnny Royal, the middleweight. You're fightin' tonight at the Mariner's Club." he leaned forward. "For fun?"

"I like to keep my hand in."

"Then what did you go fishing on the *Zephyr* for?"

"I went along for the ride," said Johnny.

"Just for the ride," Hurd repeated. His voice and eyes went flat. "I hear you had some trouble on the trip."

Johnny said: "You ought to know. You caused it."

"Not me," said Hurd.

"It was your ship deliberately ran across the *Zephyr's* drag and tore her gear to pieces!"

The big man said quietly: "Don't you know better, kid, than to come in here and say that?"

Johnny said: "I'm saying it. You owe Arch a new drag."

Hurd shook his head and grinned.

"You can take it to a court of inquiry," he said. "If you think you'll get any satisfaction from one."

Johnny said: "I'm not thinking of just the damages. I've seen plenty of operators like you. Cheap hoodlums who ride along on their muscle. I'm just telling you to lay off Arch Taylor—or you'll face a murder rap."

The big man lunged to his feet, his eyes dark with anger. He leaned forward over the desk, his knife in the palm of his big hand, pointed toward Johnny.

"I don't like that word, chum."

"The Elvas family won't like it, either. Fernando found out you had planted one of your men aboard the *Zephyr* to radio you where we were."

Hurd said: "I got lots of men working for me. So what? If Arch Taylor had a collision at sea with an unidentified vessel, and one of his men got killed, that's nothing to me."

"Maybe I can make something out of it," said Johnny.

FOR a moment the room was filled with quick, silent anger. There came a quick rap on the door and two men filed in. Johnny didn't know these bearded fishermen. They were Hurd's strong-arm importations into Easterly. Hurd stood up, his bulk crowding the little office. He nodded to his two men and gestured to Johnny.

"Throw this trouble-maker out," he said. "But go easy on him. I got money on the bum tonight."

The two men advanced, grinning, their arms swinging. Johnny ducked under the first man's reach and swung a hard right. The man grunted, fell backward, arms outflung, fingers splayed wide. He crashed against the wall and stood there, eyes dazed. A trickle of blood wriggled down his bearded jaw. The second man grabbed at Johnny. Johnny sank two quick lefts into his middle and drove him back. The man tripped over a chair with a crash.

Without warning, Hurd flipped his knife, butt-first, at Johnny's head. He had not time to duck. The heavy bone handle crashed sickeningly across his eye and he went staggering to his knees. The first of the two men came away from the wall and kicked him, his heavy boot slamming viciously into Johnny's ribs. Johnny gasped, rolled desperately aside toward the door. Hurd grabbed him, shoved him through. He lost his footing and stumbled down the three wooden steps to the wharf outside.

Hurd balanced lightly on his toes, standing over him.

"That's just a sample," he said. "Now shove off."

"Sure," Johnny said. Blood trickled from the cut over his eye as he got to his feet. "But I'll be back."

Storm warning flags fluttered from the lighthouse on Five Penny Island. They had fluttered there before, Johnny remembered, when the topmast schooner *Royal Blue,* his father its skipper, was six days out on the Grand Banks. He wasn't more than ten years old then, but he remembered the night, with its howling wind that turned the Atlantic into a foam-smothered death trap. He had climbed to the widow's walk of the Royal house and watched for his father's ship, and no coaxing could get him down until the storm blew itself out.

BUT the sails of the *Royal Blue* had never rounded the breakwater again. She had found her resting place somewhere under the broad, glittering sea.

The Taylors had been kind. Their home became Johnny's home, and Arch and Tom Taylor became his brothers. Tom, like his father, had nursed the hope of one day seeing the *South Wind* refitted and flying the Taylor flag again, as in the old days. In the gallant hull of the great schooner lived the long tradition of the Taylor family. The old Commodore still trod her decks daily as she lay on the ways, half dismantled, the money lacking to fit her out to seek her fortune on the fishing banks.

Later, Johnny had chosen a college far from the sea, and there his life took a crazy spin. Marco Walter, a fight promoter from New York, saw Johnny in the amateur collegiate bouts and fired his imagination for a career in the ring. Johnny tossed his books aside to hit Broadway. He made quite a splash, he reflected ruefully, until he was barred from the ring for a year and driven back to Easterly to cool off his temper.

Johnny moved slowly down to the silvery river and the shipyards where Easterly's vessels were born. The *South Wind,* trapped in her ways, still looked graceful despite the scaffolding around her. Pausing, Johnny was startled to hear Jessie Stuart's voice.

Her eyes didn't miss the cut on his brow. Her voice was quick with concern.

"You went to see Hurd," she said softly.

"We had words," Johnny nodded.

"You've never seen the *Wind* sail, have you, Johnny?"

He said: "She can be a killer."

"Not the *Wind.*" Her hand touched his. "She's a poem, when she sails. When the water comes over her rail and you hear the wind in her rigging—"

She paused. "It was good of you to offer to help Arch."

"The Taylors are the only family I have," Johnny said.

"I wish you'd stay, Johnny. The Taylors do need you."

"What about you and Arch?" he asked quietly.

"Let's not talk about that."

"I know," Johnny said bitterly. "It's dangerous."

"Johnny, listen. The Taylors chose to fight Hurd's control over the fishermen. Hurd's no good for them. He'll squeeze them until they starve. Tom and Arch refused to take Hurd's orders, and that's how Tom was lost at sea, I'm sure."

SHE was silent for a moment, watching old Commodore Taylor climb the hill from the shipyard. For all of his eighty years, the white-haired old sailorman stood as straight and firm as the beloved spars of his sailing ships.

"Ahoy, Johnny Royal," he said. "Feller's been pesterin' me about you. Came the day you sailed. New Yorker, he looked to be."

Johnny's voice turned grim. "Fat? Smooth?"

"Aye, like a squid, he looked. I didn't like him. Marco Walter, he said he was christened. He said he used to be your manager when you were a prize-fighter, lad."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Just to see you, Johnny. He looked well trimmed, he did. Had a lot of smart-lookin' friends. I didn't like them, neither."

Johnny smiled wryly. "Forget it, Commodore. Have you heard of the *Zephyr?*"

"Aye, I heard about her, and Arch, and Fernando dying like a poor trapped dog. He wanted to die in the sea, wrapped in foam and carried to the good Banks' floor; but not a death like that." The old man looked angry. "That blasted Hurd. How did he know the *Zephyr* was going to the Banks to kill cod?"

"Someone in Arch's crew told him. Fernando found an extra key to the radio box, sir. Someone must have used it to radio our position to the *Lazy Lady.*"

The old man's white brows became winged with surprise.

"This beats Arch. He won't have money to buy a new rig for the *Zephyr,* let alone finish fitting the *Wind.* She'll never sail again, I fear."

Johnny said: "Maybe I can get the money, Commodore."

"You?" Jessie asked. "But you said you were broke."

"I am," Johnny nodded. "I let Broadway go to my head, I guess. I haven't got a dime. But that squid, Marco Walter, will give us money to build the *Wind* again—if I fight for him."

"Johnny, that won't do," said the old man.

"He owes it to me. Do you know where he's staying?"

HE FOUND his man at the bar of the Fisherman's Inn. Marco Walter wasn't easily missed in a crowd. He was big and florid, in a pale gray suit and blue silk shirt and hand-painted tie.

"I've been looking for you, Baby. I was hoping you'd be around."

"I can imagine," Johnny said. "I've been to sea."

"Pleasure cruise?"

"Not quite." said Johnny. He accepted an ale in a tall, narrow glass.

"You're going to take this Revere kid tonight, aren't you?"

"I'll take him."

Walter said musingly: "It's funny, a guy like you spending your time here. It's a long way from Broadway.

"Why not come home to the guys and gals where you belong? To Broadway and the bright lights, Baby."

"I do need some dough," Johnny said.

Marco Walter smiled. "That sounds more like you."

"I need a couple of thousand," said Johnny. "Not for me. For a friend of mine."

"The one you're visiting here? That Arch Taylor? I heard about his accident."

"It was no accident," Johnny said. "A guy got killed."

"What about signing with me again?"

"I'll sign for four fights," said Johnny. "That's all."

Marco Walter dipped into his pockets. "I've got a contract, Johnny. Let's find a table and look it over. You'll like it, Baby. I'm with you."

Johnny said: "You're a cheap crook, Marco. I almost killed you once. Don't forget that. No iced deals."

Johnny moved his head slightly toward a group of men in the corner. "Those friends of yours—will they lay a bet?"

"All you got, Johnny?"

"Then put those two gees on my nose tonight, will you?"

YOU never know, Johnny thought. You string along with a smooth lug like Marco Walter for three years, and your life turns upside down. Broadway Baby, Johnny Royal, middleweight champ, on top of the heap . . . climbing over all the suckers. The lights and sweet music, and all the girls in the world; swell apartments, a kaleidoscope of arenas, red gloves, sweat, the sting of ammonia, the smell of resin; the clang of bells marking off the rounds, the months and the years. Like a guy with puppets, Johnny thought; that was Marco Walter. Staging everything, waiting. And building him up for the kill.

Then the fight with Tommy Gass. Johnny knew nothing about it, until afterward. Tommy Gass was a clean kid. He might have licked Johnny three ways this side of Broadway, and if Tommy was the better man, he deserved the crown. He didn't deserve what Marco Walter gave him—that spiked bottle and the sellout with Tommy's crooked manager taking a payoff from Marco.

Johnny didn't want to win that way. When he found out about it, he slugged Marco Walter all over his office and down into the street, and that was the end of the ring for Broadway Johnny Royal. He couldn't prove anything, but there was talk, up and down the street and even in the commissioner's office, and Johnny got out of town.

It seemed as if all of Easterly's draggermen had gathered in the Mariner's Club to watch their prodigal son return to the ring. Johnny was embarrassed by their ovation.

Marco Walter and two of his smooth-faced friends were in the shabby little dressing room when Johnny came in Marco was looking at Johnny with a curious eye. He put down his cigar and crossed the room, staring at Johnny's forehead.

Marco was concerned. "This Eddie Revere's got a right like a bomb. He'll work on that eye until you can't see, Johnny."

"He won't touch me," said Johnny.

HIS face was a blank mask as he came down the aisle and slid under the ropes into the ring.

Eddie Revere was a squat, flat-faced boy with calm, dangerous eyes. The crowd liked him.

He had his hands full the moment the bell rang. Eddie Revere came out of his corner in a fast crouch, his gloves stabbing cautiously. He was fast, tricky, and confident. His teeth glistened in a

momentary grin as Johnny tried a long right that slid over his shoulder. He bored in with two quick lefts that pounded Johnny's middle and brought a roar from the crowd. Johnny backpedaled, his eyes wary.

There came a flurry of gloves, leather thudding on flesh. Johnny paid off with short, stabbing lefts. His thick tawny hair looped wetly across his forehead. His back grazed the ropes and he moved sidewise, as if shocked. Eddie Revere feinted, then suddenly stabbed at Johnny's eye. Lights exploded inside Johnny's head, as if a red-hot poker had slammed across his brow. The crowd roared. He grabbed desperately for the ropes, felt his body bounce against the referee, and fell into a clinch. He jabbed with his left, broke free, and swung with his right. Revere went inside the blow, taking it easily on his shoulder, and ripped a left to Johnny's middle, then a stabbing right to Johnny's eye again. The crowd howled as the bell rang.

The second round went worse than the first. You can't stay out of the ring for six months, with no training, and expect to take a kid like this Revere boy, no matter how much ring savvy you have. Eddie Revere was good, he was anxious to win. His gloves were a swift blur before Johnny's cautious defense. He caught Johnny's eye again within a matter of seconds, but he was also aware of Johnny's battered ribs now. Johnny covered up, watching and waiting for his chance.

He managed to land a lucky punch that bounced off Revere's jaw, and the stocky boy staggered for a moment. Johnny thought, *It's now or never,* and wound up with a long right. He took too much time; the punch was telegraphed. When it was halfway gone he knew he was still underestimating the Revere fighter. Johnny never saw the bomb-shell right that caught him on the side of the head. It exploded hard and sure, and Johnny's knees gave way.

He lay face down, hearing the crowd bellow beyond the ropes. The referee counted over him.

"Three—four—five—"

He got to his feet at eight. The referee wiped his gloves and ducked away, and Eddie Revere danced in, just as the bell rang, ending the round.

Fighting wasn't the same any more. He remembered Hurd, and the dead man on the *Zephyr,* and Archie's brother lost at sea. He thought of the *South Wind,* and Jessie—and abruptly his thinking ended in a wave of anger at himself.

Marco's voice came up from the ringside, soft and anxious.

"Baby, listen—don't disappoint me."

"To hell with you, Marco."

"You said you could take this Revere kid, Johnny."

"I'll take him," Johnny said. "But not for you."

He was on his feet and moving fast when the bell rang for the third round. It was the Broadway Baby in the ring suddenly, and the crowd somehow sensed it. So did Eddie Revere. The squat boy's confident jabs were knocked down as Johnny danced and feinted and drove him back to the ropes. Revere looked puzzled. Johnny landed a left to the jaw and Revere sagged into a clinch. Johnny slid aside. He connected with a hard right and Revere dropped to one knee, came up clawing the air. Johnny's ring savvy, suddenly awakened, had turned him into a lethal fighter.

The end came just before the bell. Revere tried a last-chance hook that Johnny rolled aside on his shoulder; and Johnny came up under the other's guard. His right crossed swiftly, made a cracking sound of leather on bone. Revere dropped to the deck and didn't move. The referee shoved Johnny to a neutral corner, then waved his arms. Johnny lifted a glove to the crowd and ducked under the ropes, moving swiftly back to his dressing room.

Marco Walter was jubilant.

"I knew you could do it, Baby. You're better than ever. You'll go right to the top again."

"Just collect my dough for me," Johnny said shortly.

"Sure thing. I'll have it first thing tomorrow."

"Now," said Johnny. "Go get it. I'll wait."

Bay Point was dark and silent as Johnny climbed the cobbled street to the Taylor house.

Commodore Taylor was in the library.

"Heard you won tonight, lad," he said.

"I almost lost," Johnny admitted. "I was careless."

"Thinking of other things?"

"Something like that," he nodded. Over the fireplace was a huge marine painting of the *South Wind*, sailing under topsails. She looked beautiful. It was almost a duplicate of the painting he had seen in Hurd's office. The commodore followed his glance, and sighed:

"She won't sail under the Taylor flag again, I fear."

"What's Hurd doing with her painting in his office?"

The old man shrugged. "He wants to buy her."

"You wouldn't really sell her?"

"There's not much choice, lad. We can't fit her out. We can't even get a new drag for the *Zephyr*, the poor little lady."

Johnny said: "I made enough tonight for the *Zephyr*, anyway. I collected from Marco Walter. I'm fighting for him again."

"You're a good boy, Johnny. But it's an evil choice, going back to that life."

"I'm no fisherman," Johnny said stubbornly. "And don't tell me it's in my blood. I'm leaving for Boston tonight."

The Commodore nodded. "Then you'll want to see Jessie before you go. She's waiting for you out on the Catwalk."

JESSIE'S face was dim and lovely as she turned toward him. She had the sailorman's knack of speaking quietly through the tumult of the sea and surf.

"I'm sorry I missed your fight, Johnny. But I had a long talk with Arch. I know you haven't said anything—you wouldn't—but I know how you feel, and how I feel. Arch and I—everybody just assumed we'd marry, but we—neither of us really cares—"

"You and Arch would be all right if I went away. And I'm going. I've got the money to refit the *Zephyr*, and I'll send more for the *South Wind*. But I'm leaving tonight."

"To fight again?" she whispered. "You're running away?"

"I'm only going back where I belong."

"You're all mixed up inside, Johnny," she said. "You're not the Broadway Baby. You belong here."

Johnny cursed himself and the sea as he took a thick roll of bills from his pocket.

"This is for Arch. Give it to him when he comes back."

She took the money without question.

"You'll be back, Johnny," she said. "It's your schooner and your fight as well as ours." She reached up suddenly and kissed him.

He broke away roughly and left her standing there in the rocky niche over the sea. She didn't call after him or follow him when he went inside to pack his bags.

THE Boston Arena, then Providence and upstate New York. It was the old life, all over again, except that Marco Walter was careful to stay away from Broadway. There were endless hours of training, sparring in dingy gyms with worn-out bums, and crowds who turned out to see the Broadway Baby get his ears knocked off. The crowd was always disappointed.

He kayoed Matty Phillips in the second round, and the sports scribes began paying attention again. He worked hard, and his share of the gates went back to Arch Taylor in Easterly. Arch had sent him the deed of property to the *Wind*, making him co-owner. There was no letter from Jessie Stuart.

Marco Walters was troubled.

"This ain't like you, Baby. You used to know how to spend your scratch. You got to relax. Why don't you have fun like you used to? What are you doing with your money?"

"I'm building a ship," Johnny said.

"A ship?"

Johnny said "Lay off, Marco. You just get me more fights. Bigger and better ones."

"Sure thing, kid. New Year's in Philadelphia, you fight Rosetti. You know Rosetti? And then Kid Morgan, the champ."

"I'll take them," Johnny said.

New Year's Day in Philly, and he fought Rosetti for the right to challenge the champ. There were uproarious crowds around the ring. Johnny's reborn reputation as a smart and agile boxer had preceded him. The crowd wanted action, and the gate was the biggest yet. Marco Walter was jubilant.

"You take this Rosetti, then you're on top again. We can get the New York commissioner to rescind his ban. Maybe when you're champ you'll snap out of it."

"I'm all right," Johnny said.

Rosetti was a lean, dark kid, built for speed, with a dangerous left. His teeth flashed a grin as Johnny climbed into the ring. He was tricky, but a little cocky, too. In the second round Johnny dropped him for a five-count, and the dark-faced kid stopped grinning. Johnny returned to his corner when the bell rang and Wosloski, the handler, reached up to talk to him. Marco wasn't around.

"There's a guy in your dressing room to see you. Walter ain't around, so I let him stay. Said he was from Easterly, but wouldn't give a name. You watch that Rosetti's left now, you hear?"

He went into the third round thinking of Easterly and anxious to end this fight. He measured Rosetti with a long right and pounded lethal jabs to the dark lad's middle. Rosetti came back with a hook that jarred Johnny to his toes. He moved backward, waiting for the lights to stop spinning. Rosetti piled in eagerly. Johnny let a murderous left slide past his head, then closed with a short right to the jaw, a left to the stomach, and another right, long and deadly, that cracked sharply on Rosetti's chin. Rosetti went down as if his legs were suddenly rubber. The referee pushed Johnny aside and began to count. The roar of the crowd beat into Johnny's ears like the thunder of surf in Easterly. The fight was over. He headed for his dressing room.

Newfie Joe was there, waiting for him, grinning through his beard, looking enormous and awkward in his Sunday clothes.

"Ahoy, Johnny Royal!"

"You're a long way from port," Johnny said. "What's wrong?"

"No cause for alarm, lad, though I traveled all day to see you. It's for the Taylors that I've come, and for Easterly."

"Is it Hurd again?" Johnny asked bitterly.

"Aye, Pete Hurd. Bad times have already come to the fishermen who joined Hurd's fleet. Men are no longer free to fish as they please. They turn to the Taylors for help, and great trouble comes to the Taylors now. You remember we had a traitor aboard the *Zephyr?*"

"How could I forget," Johnny muttered.

"Well, I fear the same hyena is aboard the *South Wind.* She was launched yesterday, and she sailed tonight. All trustworthy men, but—I heard a thing or two in the inns of Easterly. I heard some of Peter Hurd's men talking. Nothing definite, but enough to know that there's danger for the *Wind* from someone aboard her. I don't know who, but someone."

"But wasn't Arch careful—"

"Arch has a trusting nature, yet I know one of the men he trusts is Hurd's man. You must go back to Easterly, Johnny."

"But it's too late," Johnny said. "It will take ten hours to get there. And you say the *Wind* has sailed already."

"You could use the *Zephyr* to warn them," said the bearded giant. "Jessie knows where the *Wind* will fish. They're going for cod again. She says she will take the *Zephyr* with you or without you, to warn the *Wind*."

"Can't she warn Arch by radio?"

"They had no time to install one in the *Wind*. Only the *Zephyr* can reach her now."

Johnny recoiled within himself. He thought, *I'm no fisherman, not any longer. I can't take a ship to sea.*

The bearded man read his eyes in the momentary silence. He turned away, pulling on yellow mittens.

"Wait," said Johnny. "I'll go with you."

EASTERLY was asleep under a deep blanket of snow when the train pulled in. Below the wind-swept platform beyond the rooftops, the harbor glistened under sheets of ice vapor. A gill-netter moved slowly out to sea beyond the headland. A small schooner moved under power across the inner harbor. Newfie Joe pointed to it.

"It's the *Zephyr*," he said. Johnny watched the little vessel swing out from the finger-piers and head toward the ice house. He took a deep breath of relief. "She's just loading ice. We've still got time."

"I'd best tell you, Johnny," the big man said, "it was not Jessie who sent me for you. She is a woman, as vague as the wind; she will not speak of you. She thinks of you as a—a deserter."

Johnny was shocked. "But why? I sent money to Arch for the *Wind*. If it's because Arch gave me half-interest in her—"

"No, no. But best let her explain. Tell her nothing of me. She'd skin me for bait if she knew I talked of it to you."

Avoiding the harbor, the draggerman drove to the Taylor house instead.

"She's here?" Johnny asked.

"Aye. It's up to you, now. She's a wild bit of winter sea, since I told her of my fears for the *Wind*. She'll do nought but take the *Zephyr* out herself to rescue her from Hurd's man."

The big center hallway was still dark inside. There was no sound anywhere. Then a noise came from across the hall, from Arch's study, and he flung the door open.

"Jessie," he said.

She stood at the window, her arms bundled with rolls of navigation charts.

"So you've come back after all," she said quietly. Her lips curled. "Did your friends send you to protect their investment?"

"I don't understand," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Don't think me a fool, Johnny Royal. I know you hate—and fear—the sea."

"It's not fear," he said.

"Isn't it? Then perhaps it's fear of Hurd's fists and Hurd's men that made you throw in with them!"

Johnny swallowed quick, astonished anger. "I haven't thrown in with them. You know me better than that, Jessie. What makes you say all this?"

"You work for Marco Walter, don't you?"

"He's my manager. But he's got nothing to do with this."

"Hasn't he? Has he nothing to do with Pete Hurd? If not, why did he come by plane last night, to sit as thick as fleas with Hurd and his gang?"

"Walter?" Johnny was white with anger. "With Hurd? He wouldn't dare pull any funny stuff on me again."

"But he has!" She flung the words at him. "Everybody knows Hurd has a new partner in his scheme to control the fisheries. And the new partner is Marco Walter! Oh, it's plain enough to me, Johnny Royal, though Arch wouldn't believe it. Everybody knows Hurd's ambition to own the *Wind*. She's the finest schooner on the coast. And you now tricked Arch into owning half of it—as a dummy for Hurd."

"That's not so," Johnny said. "If Walter's mixed up in this, then Hurd got to him. Walter would do anything for money. But I had nothing to do with it."

"Then why did Walter come here last night, before you, if not to see the *Wind* crippled and lost to us, so there'd be no more opposition to Hurd's plans? They're nothing but gangsters, and you help them, you're willing to see a fine vessel ruined and your friends killed—"

"Listen," he said finally. "I won't try to make you see it straight now, but—just wait for me. Don't sail without me."

He turned grimly on his heel and walked out.

NEWFIE JOE was in the car outside. Johnny slammed the door and waited while they drove downhill to the harbor.

"Where can I find Hurd now?" Johnny asked. "Do you know?"

"Aye, chum."

"Take me there."

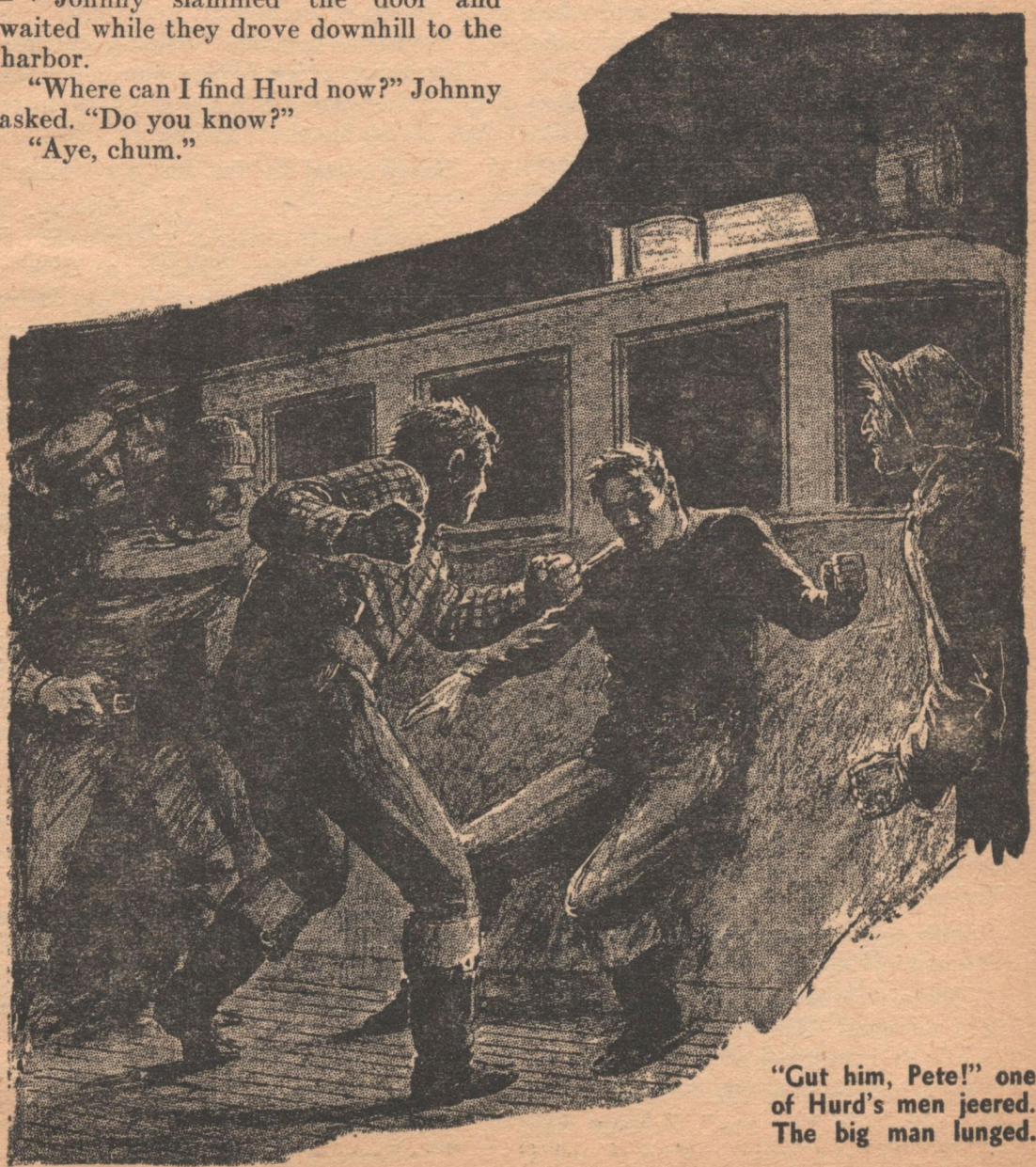
The waterfront was still asleep when they parked on Frisbee's Wharf.

Johnny got out of the car silently.

He moved carefully into the sail loft, and the muted murmur of men's voices came from beyond the gallery.

The voices came from Hurd's office. Johnny's face went grim as he recognized Marco Walter's fat-man's tones. He listened.

"But we can afford to wait. We can attach her when she makes port again."



"Gut him, Pete!" one of Hurd's men jeered. The big man lunged.

Hurd said crisply: "Too late now. She may be done for, especially if the weather turns bad."

Marco said angrily: "You were too hasty. Royal disappeared as soon as Newfie Joe spoke to him. No doubt he's in Easterly now. If he doesn't come to heel, if he breaks contract with me, I can attach his property—which is fifty per cent of the *Wind*. When you came to me with this proposition, though, I didn't count on violence. I didn't know Johnny Royal was opposed to you. If you had only waited, or told me—"

"I'm tired of the Taylors and their fight against me," Hurd cut in. "It's a fat fare we glean from these fishermen, but they bellow when I squeeze 'em. Fishermen are born free and hard to tame, like prize fighters. I've got to make it plain to them that the Taylors court death when they fight me, or else we'll lose control over the lot of them. As long as they fish where and when I tell them, I control the prices and your profits grow along with mine."

"But if Johnny Royal finds out—" Marco Walter quavered. "What have you done to the *Wind*?"

"Never mind. She's won't kill fish for the Taylors. And if Royal finds out, we'll fix him, too," came Hurd's confident voice.

JOHNNY turned the knob and stepped quickly into the office. The two men were taken completely by surprise. Marco Walter sat frozen in his chair, his face flaccid and pale; his little snake eyes swung to Johnny, then Hurd.

He stammered: "Listen, Johnny, he came to me with a business proposition. He heard you were part owner of the *Wind*—"

"Shut up," Johnny said, "and start fixing me. If you can."

"I have no quarrel with you, Johnny. It's business." His fat jaw quivered. "This is an investment."

"An investment in the lives of honest men who fish the sea," Johnny said bluntly. "That's your business, and if you're thinking of using me for your ends, I'll have none of it."

Marco said quickly "Look here, it's nothing to do with you, Baby. Your contract with me is still valid. You've got one more fight to go with me. I'm making you champ again, ain't I? You've got to fight where and when I say."

"You can tear up that contract. I warned you when I signed, Marco, about any funny business."

Hurd said: "Take a friendly warning, chum, and get back to your training camp like Marco says, or he'll sue you for breach of contract."

"Go ahead and sue," Johnny snapped. "But think twice before you touch the *Wind*, because I'm going out now to get her back—for the Taylors."

Marco stood up, fat and blustering.

"You're just a crazy kid, Johnny. If you break your contract and interfere in this, I'll attach the schooner as soon as she docks. You're co-owner, you know. I'm warning you, behave and stay out of this. It's none of your affair. I'll protect your interest in the *Wind* for you. A fat profit's in it for you, too. Play ball with us, and we'll—"

Johnny swung. His palm made a light, cracking sound against the fat man's jaw. He didn't use his fist. Marco staggered back, his face blanched with fear. Blood was bright on his split lip.

Hurd got to his feet, big and menacing, his hand hooked on the knife at his belt. Johnny whirled to face him. For a moment, neither man moved. Then Johnny said:

"Perhaps I'll see you at sea."

Hurd said softly "Yes. I'll drag you up in the cod-end of my net, Johnny Royal."

Johnny backed slowly through the door. Neither man tried to stop him. He clattered down the steps and through the echoing sail loft and out on the dock once more.

"You all right, Johnny?" Newfie Joe asked anxiously.

"Just fine."

The bearded fisherman pointed across

the water.

"The *Zephyr's* got her ice. She'll be shoving off to seek the *Wind* in ten more minutes."

"Then let's get aboard," Johnny said.

MILE by mile, the mainland dropped astern as the *Zephyr* plowed through an easy swell toward Georges Bank. She rode high, with empty fish pens, her masts bare under a bright sky.

One of the draggermen passed him, carrying a winch crowbar, shaking his head.

"Herring, Johnny! Now what would the old man be wanting with herring?"

"What's that you say?" Johnny asked.

"Why, the Commodore's got a pen-full of herring bait in Number Two hold. Had us up half the night, loading it!"

"Bait?"

"Yes. Has the old man gone looney? Bait for a dragger?"

The man moved off, falling to on the winch cables. Johnny's frown deepened as he turned aft. Jessie stepped from the pilot house, her face stern.

"I want a word with you, Jessie."

"Have it, then," she said.

Johnny gestured toward the crew. "I don't know these men. There's not a young draggerman among the lot."

"They're dorymen, Johnny Royal," she said proudly. "They're the fishermen your father was, the fishermen who manned the *Wind* and the *Royal Blue* under sail. They have no fear in their hearts, either of the sea or of other men. They were all we could get to sail a Taylor ship against Hurd's orders."

"They sailed under you—a woman?"

She shook her head and waited as a thundering sea broke over the *Zephyr's* bows. "I'm not skipper here. The Commodore himself is at the wheel. He still favors you, though I don't know why." Then she turned and walked away abruptly.

THE Commodore turned from the wheel with a twinkle in his aged blue eyes. Somehow, he looked younger and stronger, as his gnarled old hands guided the schooner lovingly on her course. His hail was cheery.

"She handles like a pig, lad. With sail on her, you'd see her come to life! But stinkin' Diesels—pah!"

"How far is the *Wind* ahead of us?" Johnny asked.

"She left her berth more than a day ago, but we'll find her."

Johnny said: "I noticed your extra dories."

"Aye. I had 'em put aboard."

"And the men say you've a load of trawl bait."

"That, too," the old man nodded.

"Draggers need no bait," Johnny said "It makes no sense."

The old man grinned. "You fished with hook and trawl when you were a boy, Johnny, aboard the *Royal Blue* and the *South Wind*. The *Wind* goes under power now, and Carl Macklin is her engineer. The old twins are aboard her, too. Somewhere there lies the danger. Now put two and two together, boy, and you might see what I'm thinking."

Before Johnny could answer, a hail came from the watch. It was Clee Duggan, pointing astern, cupping his hands.

"Dragger comin' up, Cap'n Taylor!"

Johnny took the glasses and scanned the horizon southward. The bare sticks and gallows of a big trawler showed two miles astern. There was no mistaking her blunt, powerful bow, or the bright green of her hull and the white of her pilot house. He closed the telescope with a snap of sudden anger.

"It's Hurd on the *Lazy Lady*," he said.

The Commodore was unperturbed.

"He won't try anything now. Let him follow—we can't outrun her twelve knots, anyway. We'll make a set on Georges Bank and show him how real fishermen can kill fish."

"He'll foul your drag," Johnny said angrily. "He'll cripple us again."

The old man shook his head.

" 'Tis the *Wind* he's after, and he thinks we'll lead him to her. We'll play a game with your Mr. Hurd and his fine

Boston dragger, Johnny."

With light enough to spare for one set, the Commodore gave orders for a drag to be made. Johnny helped stream the mark-buoy, a bright red half-keg painted with the *Zephyr's* name in bold letters. When she bobbed in the wake, the huge bag was swung outboard, the linen net dipped into the scudding water, and settled to the forty-fathom bottom where the ground-fish fed. The wire tow-lines sang as they tightened, the boom creaked with strain. Far below the surface, the mouth of the conical net opened as the cork lines lifted the wooden doors and the rollers slid along the sandy bottom.

"Let go on the gallows!" the old man thundered.

The lines were taken around the study quarter bitts, the strain lifted from the booms, and the *Zephyr* plunged and settled. A sea raced boisterously over her rail. At three knots, steadied by her foresail, the schooner pounded slowly forward at her task. The sweating crew relaxed. There was nothing more to do while the set was being made.

THE *LAZY LADY*, now off the port quarter at a distance of a mile, wasn't fishing.

"Let her watch," the Commodore chuckled. "We'll kill fish to dark, then make for the *Wind* during the night. It will be no difficult trick."

They ended the set with sundown. Dugan ran under the streaming cod-end, pulled the slip-knot, and the catch burst in a silvery, roaring cascade to the deck. The crew turned lustily to, their knives flashing, icing and trimming the kill and hosing down the bloody deck.

"Don't forget Hurd," Johnny said. "He's watching us now."

"Never fear, lad, never fear. Just let it grow dark, and we'll be off."

The *Lazy Lady's* riding lights already winked red and green against the darkening horizon. At a nod from the Commodore, Jessie ordered the *Zephyr's* lamps lit as well as the deck lights that bathed the working crew. Darkness spread swiftly over the Atlantic. The other dragger drifted nearer, jogging restlessly as the sea gave way to the flood of night.

There was no moon. Low storm clouds scudded over the sea. In an hour the floodlight was doused, then the Commodore ordered the riding lights out as well.

"'Tis risky, but we can't outrun Hurd," he said. "She could follow us as long as she could see our lights."

A horn sounded angrily from the darkness as the *Zephyr* abruptly vanished in the night. The *Lazy Lady's* lights moved more quickly, nosing toward them in alarm. The Commodore took the wheel, changed course and the lights of Hurd's vessel vanished soon to leeward, circling in helpless fury as the *Zephyr* was swallowed by the squally night.

There was no dawn that day. At ten o'clock the sun was hidden behind thick snow squalls that raced southward in endless succession, bearing with each flurry the icy breath of the Labrador current. Ice formed on the winches, and the old dorymen on the *Zephyr* fell to with axes to lighten the vessel's burden. In the pilot house, the Commodore and Jessie pored over charts as Johnny came in for warmth. Clee Duggan, the gray winch-man, followed, bearing the lead.

"Here you are, Cap'n. Bottom came up at sixty fathom."

The white-haired skipper turned eagerly from the charts.

"Now we'll have it." He stared at the black gravel stuck in the tallow of the cup, tasted a particle on his fingertip, and nodded. "We're here. Keep a sharp lookout. And keep the horn going steady."

Murky, yellow light streamed through the clouds. Engine off, the *Zephyr* jogged easily into the wind, steadied by her riding sail. Snow smothered her bow.

Johnny clung to the mainmast rigging, listening. He made out nothing. Jessie stood beside him, her face pale in the eerie half-light.

"I hear nothing," the girl said. "If anything's happened to the *Wind* already—"

"They may not know our horn. If

Arch thinks we're one of Hurd's ships, he'll lay low." Johnny's face was sober. "Jessie, you can't still believe that I willingly gave over to Hurd, do you?"

"I—*listen!*" she said fiercely.

Through the dancing curtains of snow came a rattling of blocks and the bellow of a man's voice, carried clearly across the water All hands lined the *Zephyr's* weather rail, peering into the mists. Jessie saw her first.

"There she is!" she cried.

All eyes followed her pointing hand. As if parting a curtain, the dainty forefoot of the *South Wind* came through the wall of snow that whirled off the *Zephyr's* quarter. First the jarring bowsprit, then the swift rake of her blue bows and masts, then the length of her sleek racing hull. But there was no speed or life in her. She rolled like a log in the trough of the sea, and boarding seas washed her decks from end to end. Her foresail snapped and cracked helplessly in the vague winds.

The shout that went up from the *Zephyr's* crew turned to a groan.

"What's the matter with her?" Jessie whispered.

Johnny suppressed an exclamation.

"She's still got her main boom! And her topmasts! How could she be sent to sea to drag, with a rig like that?"

THE lovely old schooner, indeed, had a queer rig, like nothing Johnny had ever seen before. Topmasts and mainsail! Things of the past, these were, fit for old-fashioned dory-trawling, but not dragging. Yet there were gallows, too, and nets, in the queer layout of her lines.

Jessie marked his puzzlement.

"That's Arch's design. It was the best he could do. There's wasn't enough money to properly convert her to a dragger. Arch swore it would work."

Johnny's eyes had spotted something else.

"There's a dory going over. One man in her. What in—"

The Commodore, standing beside them, bellowed through his megaphone at the vessel across the water.

"Ahoy, the *Wind!*"

An answering shout came from the shapeless men on the schooner's deck.

"Where's your captain?" the Commodore bellowed.

The answer came faintly, indistinguishable in the hiss and rush of the sea.

"I'm going aboard there," Johnny said. "Something is wrong."

THE *Zephyr's* men wrestled a dory from atop the pilot house and slid it over the side, held by a painter to the *Zephyr's* hull. Johnny nodded to the Commodore and dropped over the rail into the pitching boat alongside. He didn't stop to wonder at the return of his boyhood agility with wind and wave. A wall of gray-white mist swallowed the *Zephyr*. The *Wind* faded into it, too. He saw nothing ahead but yellow light laced with ribbons of swirling snow. He was alone, cut off from either ship, by the sudden squall.

The explosion was thunderous over the tumult of the sea.

It boomed hollowly, a clap of sound that for a moment filled all the universe. Johnny half stood up in the dory, his face drained white, his eyes aching to pierce the gloom. The burst of sound had come from ahead, where the *Wind* lay. Through the mists came a sudden blossoming of red light, a devilish glare that leaped and danced and cut through the snow and mist like a glimpse of the doors of hell.

Johnny groaned in helpless fury as the mist parted and the *Wind* veered into view once more. From the invisible *Zephyr* came a sudden volley of shouts. Johnny had no time to look around—the *Wind* was almost on top of him, her bow plunging up over the frothy seas, looking enormously above. Even as he bent to his oars with last-minute desperation, he was aware of a smell of smoke and a crackling of flames from the *Wind*. The dory leaped ahead as the *Wind's* bow bore down again, smothered in white water. A thunderous sea all but swamped

the crazily bobbing dory—and then the sleek hull slid safely past.

Faces lined the rail overhead, and a line hissed and wriggled down toward Johnny's upstretched hand. He caught it, made the dory fast, and then hauled himself hand over hand up the raking side of the *Wind*.

Acrid, gray smoke curled over the schooner's broad deck. A red glare danced dizzily astern. Johnny shook off the anxious hands that helped him over the rail.

"What happened?" he shouted, pitching his words above the sullen roar in the air.

"Engine blew up!" one man bellowed. "Carl Macklin did it!"

Johnny cursed. "Where is he?"

A man in a yellow slicker pointed to the dory shoving off from the stern. The dory he had seen from the *Zephyr*. There was a man in it, rowing desperately away from the burning *Wind*.

Clear of the schooner, the man in the dory didn't make for the *Zephyr* nearby. Instead, he pulled steadily to northward, a squat little figure lost on the rough, squall-swept sea.

"He'll freeze in an hour," one of the men muttered. "That dory'll never live—"

"Save the ship!" Johnny rasped. "Let the traitor find his own grave!"

"That he does," the man muttered.

THE CREW had already formed a bucket line, passing water down the engine-room hatch. The pumps weren't working. Flames spouted upward around the combing, in a devil's dance. Johnny bellowed swift orders to wet down the deck and swifters nearby. The dorymen worked with swift, anxious efficiency. Johnny searched the deck, then stopped the nearest sweating man.

"Where's Captain Arch?"

"Below, in his cabin. Leg's broke!"

Johnny stifled a curse and pushed aft through the choking smoke. The deck jarred underfoot as the *Zephyr* came clumsily alongside, splintering the rail for fifteen feet as heavy seas smashed the two vessels together. But in a moment a wide, powerful stream of water came from the *Zephyr's* deck pump, hosed the *Wind's* deck, and settled on the flaming hatch.

Arch lay in the nearest bunk, his face white, contorted with pain, his boots torn off and his woolen shirt tattered. His leg looked queer, bent partially under him. His smoke-rimmed eyes went wide, ringed with white, as Johnny bent over him.

"The *Zephyr's* alongside," Johnny said quietly. "It's all right now. They've got a hose into the engine-room."

"Jessie was right—she thought it was Carl Macklin. He sabotaged the engine—started the fire—"

Johnny said: "Don't talk now. Take it easy."

He found the medicine cabinet and gave him a prepared hypodermic of morphine.

Footsteps sounded on the ladder. The slide was knocked aside and the Commodore entered, followed by Jessie. The old man looked ghastly, his thin frame wracked by coughs.

"Arch?" he gasped.

"He'll be all right," Johnny said. "It' only shock now."

"The fire's out," said Jessie. "But Newfie Joe says the engine is a total loss. The *Wind* is helpless." The girl sank down on Arch's bunk. "Not a draggerman will sail for the Taylors now. They won't dare disobey Hurd again. We're licked."

The Commodore groaned. Johnny looked at him with sudden apprehension. The old man's figure was bowed with defeat and exhaustion.

"I'm an old man, Johnny," he smiled.

Johnny said suddenly: "But it wasn't for nothing that you let Arch take the *Wind* with this jury rig, with boom and mainsail. And why did you load the *Zephyr* with herring bait and extra dories?" His voice sharpened. "*Where are the tubs of trawl hidden?*"

His words shocked Jessie to her feet.

"Trawl?" she whispered. "Hand line?"

"Tell her, sir," Johnny urged. "Tell her what you had in mind."

THE old man's glance touched fondly on the cabin fittings.

"It was an old man's wild fancy," he whispered. "Jessie figured the Morales twins wouldn't be traitors; not those two old ones. But Carl Macklin held the engineer's site here, and Jessie reckoned the damage would be to the engine. Without the engine, the *Wind* cannot be a dragger. But with sail and dory, she could bring home a fare of cod to show the Easterly men we can still feed their families, if only they'll fight Hurd and his syndicate."

Jessie's face was pale. "But nobody's fished like that for twenty years. The *Royal Blue* was the last of the dory trawlers."

"The necessity was father to the thought, lass. The *Zephyr* has the bait. The tubs of hook-and-line are in her holds, too. There's enough canvas in the lockers here to give the *Wind* a fair new suit; and we have the dorymen to do it—the only men in Easterly who could do such a thing. But it was mad, only an old man's fireside dream. It was Arch who could skipper the *Wind* under sail. We have no captain now."

Then Jessie's glance met Johnny's and he read his future.

"You need a captain for the *South Wind,* sir?"

The old man nodded. "I know your mind, lad. You sailed her when you were just a minnow. You held a sailing master's license when you were nineteen. But it's not a task I'd ask of you, to haul and gaff cod from a dory. 'Tis work you've never done."

Johnny thought, *So this is what I came home for.* It was as if the whole pattern of the last six months pointed to this moment of inner conflict between his years of revolt and the queer restlessness he always felt when he lost sight of blue water. In his mind's eye he sat, a boy, in the high cross-trees of the *South Wind,* with Arch and Jessie and Tom Taylor. The schooner's empty pens seemed to boom an accompaniment to his thoughts in the smoke-blackened cabin. *Take command of the Wind?* he thought. *For dory-trawling?* It was a madman's dream, a last straw for a drowning man.

"Let me be captain of the *Wind,* sir—for good luck or bad. But on one condition. For me to bring her home will do us no good. I broke my contract with Walter, and he can foul the *Wind* in a net of litigation that would eat up a dozen high-line fares."

He fumbled in his shirt pocket, pulled out the deed of property Arch Taylor had sent him. The Commodore looked up, his hawk's face alert again. Jessie's breath whispered lightly in the silence of the cabin. A few coals still glowed behind the stove door. Johnny signed his share back to Arch.

"Let Hurd try the law now," he grinned. "The *Wind* is a Taylor ship, and has nothing to do with me, except in my duties as captain of her."

Arch Taylor whispered from his bunk. "Then shake a leg, Captain Royal! There's doryman's work to be done!"

THE snow ended. The clouds broke open to the west, where the sun inclined. The sea became a flat as the winds ceased their vagaries and steadied from the south. The *Zephyr* and her big sister jogged easily northward on their course.

The old hard-handed, bearded crew of the *South Wind* gathered at the break to listen to Johnny Royal. He stood by the mainmast, surveying their weather-bronzed faces, their grey shaggy hair.

"By order of the owner of the *South Wind,*" Johnny said, "I'm your captain. Arch is to go ashore on the *Zephyr.* The rest, if willing, sail to Middle Ground to kill fish."

A murmur broke from the startled men. Then Clee Duggan spoke up.

"How, Captain? The *Wind* has only sail!"

"And haven't you ever fished under sail before?"

A shout came from the surprised crew.

"Dory trawling? Man, are ye daft? We need lines!"

"Tubs! And dories! And bait!"

Johnny's voice drove them back to taut silence.

"We have the equipment, we have the men. In all Easterly, you're the only man who could do it. You've all fished from dories on the Banks in other years. The *Zephyr* carries the bait, gear, and dories we need. Let's show Pete Hurd and his gang that Easterly men are free to fish where and when and *how* they please!"

Clee Duggan bellowed "That's it, Johnny! I sailed for your father, and I'll sail for you, too, against Hurd!"

Newfie Joe added: "It's an engineer I am, but I'd be a squid if I failed the *Wind* now. Just tell us the work to do!"

In an hour a forge was set on the *Wind's* deck; the dories from the *Zephyr* were griped down in the *Wind's* nests; and the *Zephyr's* boom worked overtime, transferring herring bait and trawl tubs, canvas and coils of line. Chandler's needles flashed in the sun. The day waned fair, and the sea was calm.

IT WAS well after dark when the last of the drag equipment was stowed aboard the *Zephyr* and Arch Taylor transferred to the smaller schooner.

Jessie gripped the rail tight as she watched the *Zephyr* swing astern.

Johnny ached in every muscle of his body. His face was dark with sweat and strain from the past hours. His blistered hands rested for a moment on Jessie's cold fingers.

The girl turned serious eyes toward him.

"The Commodore should have gone, too, Johnny. He's taken to his bunk. I have a queer feeling that if the *Wind* lives, and makes Easterly, so will he. Otherwise—"

"The *Wind* will live," Johnny said. "She's got to."

She didn't take her fingers from his.

"Johnny, I've been wrong and cruel, to think you were with Hurd and Walter. I can only ask you to forgive. I was so wild with fear for Arch and the *Wind*—"

"Forget it," he said bruskly.

"No, listen." Her eyes were unafraid and unashamed. "I told Arch I loved you, when you left Easterly two months ago. Arch and I were never in love, though we are fond of each other, and always will be. But to be husband and wife—neither of us wanted that. Arch wants to quit the sea and be a marine architect; it is the only thought he has. As for you, Johnny—I know what it means, to take command here, feeling the way you do. After this, when we get ashore, I'll be happy and proud to follow whatever path you choose." They stood there hand in hand.

JOHNNY came awake with a start, sprawling in his bunk.

"Captain Johnny!"

It was Newfie Joe. The bearded man leaned over the bunk, his eyes red-rimmed and anxious. Johnny slid into his boots.

"The *Lazy Lady's* found us, Captain Johnny."

"Hurd?"

"Aye." The gaunt man cursed. "He's coming up for a hail. Duggan sent me to call you."

Johnny shrugged into his jacket, pushed at the companionway slide, and came out on deck. The crew had worked with ready will, all through the night. The *Wind* looked like a new vessel, her deck trim, her dories neatly griped down in their nests.

"To windward," Newfie Joe said.

"Ahoy, the *Wind!*" The hail came bellowing over the water. "Let me speak to the Captain! Who is captain there?"

The *Wind's* crew muttered at the big dragger that dogged them. Johnny moved to the weather rail. The schooner's motion was easy as she rode under foresail alone.

"Captain John Royal, of the *South*

Wind!" he shouted back.

There was sudden silence from the dragger. Johnny shaded his eyes to make out the dark figures on her deck. Pete Hurd bulked large in the pilot house door. But there was another man there, whose fat face brought quick anger to Johnny's eyes. It was Marco Walter, in landsman's clothes, clinging uncomfortably to the *Lazy Lady's* rail.

"Johnny?" came Hurd's voice. "So you're captain now, Johnny Royal? Captain of a wreck?"

"Captain of the *Wind!*" Johnny answered. "And no wreck!"

"And how do you plan to get her home, Johnny Royal? In two weeks, under foresail? Or can we give you a salvage line?"

Hurd's laughter bellowed the taunt. Johnny's crew looked at him and grinned. Evidently Hurd had taken no notice of the changes made in the *Wind's* rig. With only her foresail bellying, she looked much the same as she had when she left Easterly.

Hurd's voice came again over the water.

"I'm boarding you, Johnny! I want to talk to you!"

"There's nothing to say! Keep your dories off!"

There was no answer from the dragger. Hurd moved aft, where two of his men swung a dory over the side. Marco Walter didn't follow. The *Lazy Lady* moved up closer, making a little smoke. Her drag nets looked untidy, snugged in her twin gallows. Her crew grinned and tossed draggerman's taunts at the schooner.

Johnny slapped Clee Duggan's shoulder.

"Stand by to make sail!" he ordered.

The crew broke, grinning, for their stations. The *Lazy Lady* was due for a surprise from the supposed derelict. The main-sheet gang hauled with a will. Slowly the great sail rose, the hoops creaking as the canvas unfolded to its tremendous height. The southerly wind caught the spread, snapped it taut. The *Wind* trembled and dipped her foot into the cross-tide.

From the dragger came a shout of surprise. Hurd was already in his dory, with his two men, climbing the seas between the two vessels. His roar of amazement came clearly to the delighted crew of the *Wind*.

The vessel splashed, took a sea, and righted herself as jib and topsails suddenly blossomed against the blue sky. The deck grew dark under the giant shadows. The giant mainsail hauled taut with a sharp, booming sound. The *Wind* heeled over. White water whispered about her bow. There came a liveliness to her planks that went through every man in her crew.

Johnny took the wheel from Duggan, glanced back at Hurd's dory. The draggermen had stopped rowing. Hurd shook an impotent fist as the schooner gathered way.

"You'll remember this, Johnny Royal!"

Johnny made no answer. The *Wind* was alive under his hand, the breeze steady. She heeled even more under the pressure of her canvas. Jessie came out, followed by the Commodore. The main-sheet gang and topmastmen worked smoothly, knowing their orders without being told, shouting and joking with their joy in the *Wind* as she took the breeze and burst rainbows over her bow.

The Commodore eyed the spread with a critical eye.

" 'Twill do, Captain Johnny. Make for the Middle Ground now. Cod and halibut for the taking, out there!"

The *Lazy Lady's* dory was aboard the dragger once more. The green trawler was putting on steam, already half a mile astern of the schooner. The *Wind* hurtled through the seas, no less alive with joy than the three who stood at her helm, or the dorymen who lived again the days of their youth. Knot by knot, the distance between the topmast schooner and the dragger widened. The sky grew cloudless, clear and cold. The Atlantic was a flat, rippled by the dark

tides. The running gear sang with the wind that drove the schooner on her swift passage. With topsails and staysail well trimmed, she leaned over and drank up the miles.

BREAKFAST the next day was enormous when they finally lay off Sable, on the Middle Ground. Out of the galley came steaks and butter, biscuits and eggs, jugs of hot coffee. Talk was boisterous of how the *Wind* had sunk the *Lazy Lady* down the horizon. To the northward, a Gloucester dragger moved slowly, fishing the bottom.

"Bait up! Bait up!"

The old hands turned with shouts to cut the herring brought up from the pens. Knives flashed rhythmically in the morning sun; deft fingers uncoiled the tubs of trawl and baited the hooks on their gangins. Gulls fed, screaming, on the bloody scraps. In an hour the tubs were full, the dories unlashed, and gear was stowed. Number One dory, bearing Newfie Joe, went over the gunwale.

"Dory away!"

The buoy pennant bobbed, marking the start of the dory's line. The *Wind* moved on, under reefed foresail. Dory after dory, two men to a crew, went over the side. Heaving sticks flashed, tossing out the baited hooks on the trawl line. At the helm, Johnny waited for the Commodore's criticism. The old man smiled, watching the dorymen at their long-lost art.

"Will it do?" Johnny asked.

"It will do. We'll soon learn what luck we have."

The first dory emptied her tubs and marked the end of her line with a second buoy. The little craft raised her red sail and beat back toward the schooner. One by one the other dories finished their sets and sailed back to the mother ship. Far below, forty fathoms deep, the baited hooks offered their feast to the hungry cod.

The Commodore's glance turned constantly to the south as they waited. Now and then he took the glasses to scan the horizon.

"We've lost Hurd," Johnny said, guessing at his concern.

"He'll be along," the old man said grimly. "He knows where we've gone. I'd feel easier to have him under an eye."

Slowly the *Wind* strolled down among the waiting dories. The men huddled low in them, for shelter from the icy wind. In an hour, Johnny ordered the horn blown; there had been enough time for the cod to feed. His face grew anxious as he waited for luck. Light splintered on a steel gaff as Newfie Joe hauled line. Occasionally a shout went up from the distant dorymen. Johnny didn't dare hope as he watched Number One haul up her buoy and run down toward the waiting schooner. Jessie watched from the rail as the craft bobbed under the lee.

"What luck?" she cried.

Newfie Joe stood up in the crowded dory, grinning through his black beard. Pitchforks were handed down over the gunwale.

"Tell cook to try this for size!" he exulted.

Up over the rail came a glittering fat cod, a full steaker, heaved by his expert tynes. Jessie made the dory's painter fast, then ran to the break as Number Two came in. From then on, the deck of the *South Wind* resembled bedlam; but an organized bedlam, as the catch was forked from dories.

By mid-afternoon the *Wind* had a welcome load of nineteen thousand pounds of cod in her pens. The trip was already rated a successful one.

The *Lazy Lady* didn't show up until sunset.

VAPOR moved across the water with the declining day. From the north it came, cold and gray, marching swiftly across the solitary dories, blanketing the Atlantic in foggy darkness. There were two more dories to go over when Johnny halted the set.

"No use taking risks," he said. He

turned to Jessie as the first chill streams of mist slid over the schooner's desk. "Give the horn a few winds; let them know where we are."

The hooting cries went out into the fog, to be absorbed like blows in soft cotton. Johnny eyed the restless sails. Alone at the helm, he felt again the audacity of his captaincy aboard the *Wind*. He had been a minnow, as the Commodore said, the last time men fished the banks with hook-and-line.

Newfie Joe's boat came out of the fog off the weather quarter and was snugged down. There were four more to be accounted for. Johnny went down to meet the bearded Newfoundlander, whose face was sober as he scanned the fog.

"Trouble out there," he said grimly. "Bad trouble, Johnny. There's a dragger nosing about. We lost our trawl to her."

"A dragger pulled your trawl?" Johnny met the gaunt man's gaze with sudden anger. "Was it Hurd?"

"I couldn't mistake the sound of his blasted engine."

Number Seven dory suddenly appeared off the bow. The *Wind* barely had way on, with the coming of the fog. The dory looked queerly lifeless, almost awash as it rode the greasy swells. No one was at the oars as it bumped alongside.

There was only one man in the dory, instead of two.

He sat there, bowed, exhausted. The tubs of trawl that should have filled the dory's bottom were gone. Johnny swallowed hard, then recognized the wide shoulders of the Irishman.

"Clee Duggan! Where's your mate?"

He lent a hand as the doryman came aboard. Duggan's face was covered with blood, streaming from a gash on his head.

"Lopez is gone," he muttered hoarsely. "It was Hurd and his cursed dragger did it. He's out there running us down, fouling the trawl lines. He run down on us and knocked us under. Lopez was thrown out. I hung on. The dory swamped."

Johnny turned the Irishman over to willing hands.

"Take him down and give him a mug-up. Fix that cut."

Bitter, cursing dorymen gathered around him. Through the thickening mist came a hooting, derisive horn. It was the *Lazy Lady*. Dimly muttering through the vapor came the sound of her engines, restlessly probing for more victims.

Jessie's face was pale in the gloom.

"He's fighting in the open now, Johnny. He won't let us get back to Easterly, if he can help it."

Johnny shook his head. "We can't run away from him in this wind. He'll finish the dories before he makes himself seen."

AN IDEA was born in Johnny's mind —an idea born of desperation and and wild fury. He struck the Newfoundlander on the shoulder, drew him aside and whispered rapid orders. The gaunt man protested, then nodded grimly. Johnny turned to Jessie.

"I'm taking a dory out," he told her. "To pick up Lopez. I'll let Hurd run me down, or pick me up. I've got to get aboard his ship somehow."

"But you're just one man!" she protested. "What can you do against his whole crew?"

Johnny shook her off. "It's our only chance. To hit them first, before he comes for the *Wind*. If Hurd's got our trawl or any of our men, then we'll have proof. And I've got to get Lopez back."

THERE were sounds on the water, all around him, pressing through the mist. He heard the *Wind's* horn wailing for her lost dories, and now and then the prowling mutter of the *Lazy Lady's* engine. There were only these sounds to guide him—and once, when he craned his neck to look, he glimpsed the enemy dragger, gliding like a ghost across an aisle in the fog channels. He changed course and rowed to intercept her, then blew a short, crying blast on the doryman's horn. The sound echoed over the hissing water.

The dragger's engine seemed to

quicken and grow alert. A hail came over the sea. The air grew dark as twilight faded.

For all his readiness, Johnny was taken by surprise when the green dragger appeared. He heard the growling of her engine, coming from all directions in the white mist—and then, with a sickening rush, her prow thrust from the surrounding fog, green and murderous. Water creamed as she smashed into a sea, headed for him. They were going to run down, if they could. Johnny bent to the oars with sudden desperation.

The dragger's bow reared high over a rushing comber. Icy water drenched Johnny as she struck. The port oar was wrenched from his hand, he stood up, felt the shock as the vessel's bow crunched into the dory, and then he dived headlong into the sea. A triumphant, taunting shout followed him.

"How do you like the salt, doryman?"

The shock of the winter sea was paralyzing. Johnny felt himself tumbled head over heels. The dory splintered over his head; the dragger pounded past. For a long moment he thought he was finished. His flailing arms failed to break the surface. Then the beat of the dragger's screw brought an extra spurt of strength from him. Cold air flooded his lungs as his head broke the surface.

Something slapped him with stunning force across the face. Blood trickled from a cut lip. He lashed out, choking, and his hand closed on a line. He held on, incredulous. Beyond him, the fantail of the dragger went under a boarding sea. He felt his arms almost jerked from their sockets, then he was moving, dragged across the same comber as he clung to the life-line.

Someone aboard the *Lazy Lady* had saved his life! He could see the man dimly, hidden by the winch behind the pilot-house, hauling Johnny in like a gaffed halibut. He felt his strength ebb in the paralyzing cold of the sea. Then an arm reached down, caught at him, and hauled him, gasping, to the dragger's deck.

A hard, calloused hand was clapped over his open mouth.

"Quiet, for the love of heaven!"

Johnny lay there, shivering. The engine pounded under the deck on which he sprawled. A mutter of voices came from up forward, but he couldn't see beyond the huge winch that shielded him from the dragger's crew. He nodded at last, plucked at the hand over his mouth, and the fingers yielded reluctantly.

Johnny turned to look at the man who had saved him, and it was Carl Macklin, the traitor!

The last time Johnny had seen him was when he was rowing away from the blazing *Wind*—rowing to almost certain lonely death on the winter Atlantic. Johnny stared in surprise. The squat, dark man grinned quickly, his voice a swift, harsh whisper.

"You surprised to see me, Johnny Royal?"

"Surprised you *rescued* me," Johnny said.

"I recognized it was you. Hurd and that fat man—" Macklin spat bitterly. "They've run down your dories. You wonder why they ride light? They don't fish, because they're not fishermen. The crew is Boston waterfront scum, and they're out to kill you and get the *South Wind*. If they can't have her, they'll destroy her."

Johnny's face was masked by caution. This unexpected turn opened a world of swift, chaotic thought. He said softly, "Why rescue me, Carl? You sabotaged the *Wind*, and you're Hurd's man. You were lucky he rescued you."

"It was no luck. They're going to kill me." The draggerman looked sick. "They promised me lots of money, Johnny. It was wrong of me, but I had debts, I—I gambled. But I didn't bargain for what they're planning to do! I know too much already about the things they've done. They're afraid I'll talk. I heard them plan to kill me. It will seem an accident. As for your dories—they use the fog as an excuse. They think to teach the others a lesson. But you

worry them, Johnny. You've got to get back to the *Wind,* and take me with you!"

Johnny studied the frightened man, then turned his attention forward. Dusk had fallen swiftly. The dragger's riding lights made ruby and emerald pools against the pilot house. Most of her crew were still forward. Macklin whispered urgently in his ear.

"We can take a dory, Johnny Royal. If we can't make the *Wind*—well, even to row ashore is better than staying here."

Johnny shrugged him off. Voices came from the pilot house: Hurd's booming laughter, Marco Walter's unctuous tones. Johnny straightened from behind the winch. The line from the dragger's whistle dangled just this side of the port windows. He had to reach it. Newfie Joe was listening for it—

Macklin whispered again "The dory? Johnny, the dory?"

"Shut up," Johnny said.

He moved with care, flattening swiftly against the pilothouse wall. The dragger smashed through a sea. Water swirled hungrily around his legs. He felt the icy stir of a rising breeze on his cheek, and it brought him quick hope for his plan. He reached tentatively for the whistle line from the pilot-house window.

THE DRAGGER lurched, took another sea that broke high over the weather rail. The impact hurled Johnny to his knees in the churning water. He heard a cry from Macklin, and reached desperately for the siren wire, clinging to it with all his strength as the sea pounded viciously around his hips.

The *Lazy Lady's* whistle shrieked as if in mortal agony, giving her position away to the *Wind.*

The sea subsided, leaving an uproar on the dragger's deck. Johnny let go of the line. The whistle died. But before he could move, the door to the pilot house was slammed open and he stood face to face with Pete Hurd.

"Welcome, Johnny Royal," he said softly. "So it was you in that last dory? Who helped you aboard?"

Johnny didn't move. He was aware of the dragger's crew running aft, toward them, and of Carl's frightened breathing.

He said: "I came for my dorymen, Hurd. For Lopez and any others you left alive."

The big man's teeth glistened between his lips.

"You're a smart lad, Johnny Royal."

Johnny said, "Smart enough to know you're facing murder and piracy charges, when the *Wind* gets back."

"You mean, *if* the *Wind* gets back," Hurd said hoarsely.

Marco Walter loomed timidly out of the pilot house, stifled a sharp exclamation. Hurd shut him up contemptuously, flicked a quick glance at his men, crowding into the green glare of the starboard riding light.

Pete Hurd's knife glittered in his wide belt. The darkness was complete now, the wind kicking up cross-rips in the tidal currents. The dragger rolled uneasily.

One of Hurd's men jeered: "Gut him, Pete!"

The dragger heaved, slid into a trough, and Johnny took an involuntary step forward. It was then, while he was off balance, that the big man lunged.

The shock slammed Johnny hard against the pilot house, the breath knocked out of him by Hurd's sledgehammer fists. He locked the big man's arms, waited until the vessel's motion added to his strength, and heaved himself clear. Hurd staggered back a step. Johnny tasted blood from his split lip again. He moved in fast, his fist driving hard on the big man's jaw. Hurd reeled, grinned, and shook his shaggy head.

JOHNNY moved carefully forward over the tilting deck. Hurd stood his ground, then abruptly swung with his murderous right. Johnny ducked, felt the blow whistle over his head. Hurd's knee came up at the same time, cracking

into Johnny's jaw. Johnny sprawled, almost senseless, against the rail.

Instantly Hurd was on him, bending his spine against the hard oak. The big man's fingers clawed at his throat, his weight crushed Johnny's chest. Johnny hooked a heel behind Hurd's boots and heaved. The big man stumbled, touched hand and knee on the deck, and came up like a big cat.

His knife glittered angrily in his hand.

Unarmed, Johnny backed up. One of Hurd's crew laughed and shoved him forward, hard. He stumbled, and in stumbling, saved his life as Hurd slashed down at him and missed. Johnny whirled, saw the blade glitter again in Hurd's fist—and from somewhere Macklin sprang, a crowbar in his hand. The steel flashed, cracked on the knife with a clang, and the weapon clattered to the deck.

Hurd glared at Carl Macklin's frightened face.

"I'll settle with you later, you——!"

But Carl strangely ignored the big man's threat. He was staring wide-eyed beyond the circle of men in the pool of green light. His lips moved, but no words came from him.

One of the men gave a sudden shrill yell.

"Hey! Out there! Look out there!"

Hurd turned warily to glance at the dark sea. Johnny looked, too. Something moved out there, in the ghostly darkness, bearing down on them. He recognized it with a gasp of relief. Newfie Joe was carrying out his orders.

"It's the *Wind*," Marco Walter whispered.

"She's going to ram!" a draggerman shrieked.

The circle of men burst wildly apart, the fight forgotten. Hurd and Marco ran to safety. Out of the darkness rose the schooner, her white cross-trees glistening in the night, her bow lunging on a comber. Her canvas glistened in the mist. Water hissed and broke high as she splashed, veered, and then, lifted on another sea, raced headlong down on the unprepared dragger.

There was no time to think or act. A wild yell burst from the *South Wind's* decks. A yell for vengeance, a streak of Portuguese and Nova Scotian oaths. The vessel swelled, filled the black horizon—and crashed into the dragger amidships.

Hell broke loose. Wood screamed, rigging snapped, and cables flew like deadly snakes in all directions. A roar came from the sea below. The shock hurled Johnny flat on the deck as the dragger groaned and heeled far over. A comber towered overhead and swept thunderously over the ship, with the speed of a locomotive. The *South Wind* groaned as her bow went up, sliding over the dragger's rail. Her sails flapped, cracked, roared. Her rigging tumbled, and from her holds came an angry rumble as the terrific impact of her giant keel was halted by the ship caught in her teeth.

THROUGH all the confusion, Johnny clung to the rail, fighting the seas that burst over him. The *Lazy Lady* muttered to herself and settled with a lurch. Johnny staggered forward, shouting orders to the *Wind's* crew. They were dropping to the deck as if from the dark sky. A man screamed, cursed. A gun cracked as the dragger's cut-throat crew fought back the hoard of hard-handed, bearded dorymen. But the *Wind's* men were not unarmed, either. In every big, salt-bitten hand was a gaff, the barbs flashing wickedly as they fought across the dragger's deck.

Macklin's hand struck Johnny's shoulder.

"Hurd!" he screamed. "Look out for Hurd!"

Johnny whirled just as the big man hurtled into him. Somehow Hurd had retrieved his knife. The blade bit deep into Johnny's arm. He felt his shoulder go numb with pain. He gasped, cursed, and grappled with a madman, wrestling him back. Marco Walter got in the way,

tripping them, and they both went sprawling. From somewhere Johnny heard Newfie Joe's bellow and Clee Duggan's wild, Irish oaths. He had no time to see how the dorymen were exacting their revenge. His hands were full of Pete Hurd.

The big man grinned crookedly, dashed blood from his mouth in a wild froth, and circled after Johnny, knife in hand.

"You've sunk us both, you bloody fool!" he cursed.

He lunged forward again. A tangle of torn netting tripped Johnny and he went down, the big man stumbling over him. Under his back, he felt the dragger tilt and groan, lifting under him at a crazy angle. He grabbed desperately for Hurd's knife and shoved upward. Hurd's weight pinned him to the canting deck. The knife inched closer to Johnny's throat. He heaved again, and this time got leverage with his foot braced against the winch. The big man went sailing toward the rail.

But there was no rail. The whole starboard side had been torn away by the *Wind's* raking bow. There was only the sea beyond, roaring hungrily at the harvest she had found. Hurd's face showed white for an instant—then he vanished completely into the mad froth, erased with stunning finality.

Johnny staggered to his feet. His left arm dangled, useless, against his side. He was surprised to see the *Wind* hauled off the crippled dragger. She backed away daintily from the ruthless ruin she had created.

Newfie Joe was suddenly before him, gaff pole glittering in one huge fist. His bearded face grinned at Johnny.

"How is she?" Johnny asked. "How's the *Wind?*"

"She's built of good oak," Newfie grinned. "That lady's taken hard knocks before—though it seems to have foundered *this* vessel for fair."

Another sea roared over the dragger's swamped deck. The bow was already under. Johnny reached out dizzily, aware of warm blood running down his fingers.

"Hurd's drowned," he whispered. "You got Walter? And no harm done their crew? We need them to prove our case."

"No harm a few months in a hospital won't cure," Newfie grunted.

The deck came up with a rush as Johnny fell. He heard Newfie Joe cry out in alarm, and then the dark night washed over him.

THE *South Wind* rolled easily for home. Under all her canvas, main and foresail, staysail and jib, she swept through the seas, her bow splitting rainbows as she raced for Easterly.

It was noon of the next day. An hour before they had spoke a Coast Guard cutter and learned that the *Zephyr* had made port unharmed, with Arch Taylor resting even now at home. A transfer of prisoners was postponed until port was reached, although the cutter, still skeptical, prowled as escort off the *Wind's* beam.

Johnny was at the wheel, with Jessie beside him. "Maybe with Arch's design, we can still keep some sail on her. It will be a saving. Wind costs us nothing. If she can drag, too—with a new engine—"

"Know what you're doing, Johnny?" the girl asked. "You talk as if you mean to stay captain of the *South Wind.*"

He was startled. It seemed to him, now that he had time to think, that he had completely forgotten his days in the ring. It was as if the sun and the sea had washed an old illness out of him. Once and for all. He looked at his hands —the magic hands of Broadway Johnny —and smiled.

"Why not?" he asked. "A captain's share is more than enough to—to—"

The Commodore spoke from his deck chair. His white mane blew in the wind.

"You needn't say it, lad. She knows."

Jessie laughed. Johnny moved closer and put his hand over hers.

The wind blew fair.

TIMBER LEAGUE CHAMP

by ARTHUR MANN

SHORTLY after the puck hit the ice for the face-off of the third period, the complexion of the game changed, and so did the complexion of the chilled spectators, huddled, some heavily-blanketed, in the unheated arena. From a funeral procession on skates, it developed into a maze of whirling figures, a dazzling array of parti-colored sweaters and flying bodies. It happened too fast for the excited St. Rouen partisans to identify the ringleader.

But he wasn't anonymous for long. You could tell him by the blur of red at center-ice, skating rings around the desperate Moosehead Bulls, ragging the puck, dodging the high sticks, poke-checking when he lost the black lozenge for an instant, and generally confusing the enraged Bulls as they never had been confused or enraged before.

Rober Lake was the only player in the Timber League who could make fools of the Bulls this way. You couldn't see the tight blond kinks of his hair, so fast did he move, but you could identify the loose, bent knees and the rhythmic flow

There was a crunching of bodies and clash of sticks. Rober saw the puck fly by and tore himself from the ice.

of his rangy body as he twisted and turned in the crazy pattern of progress, which wasn't progress at all but a legal stalling process designed to give the St. Rouen Padres time to get organized.

They were hounded by the tiring Bulls, bedeviled from behind, badgered and bothered as Rober Lake teased and hauled the puck through a zig-zag pattern mid-way in the rink of natural ice. Through the second minute and the third, he continued and was well into the fourth minute of the scramble before Minot and Coster, Padre forwards, shook free and joined him, in a dazzling sortie down the glistening surface. The puck shuttled back and forth among the three with bullet-like speed and perfection of precision. The Moosehead defense players back-tracked, trying to gauge the speed and outguess the final shot. When the range had been narrowed, they gambled and lunged. The attackers' passes quickened. There was a crunching of bodies and clash of sticks, and the defense won the gamble. The attack was broken at the blue line.

But the excited crowd roared happily because Rober Lake had emerged from the mix-up with the puck, and once again he was the target for attack. The out-distanced Moosehead forwards had caught up with the offense and were chasing the fleet-footed blond again.

Squeals of delight shook the wooden rafters of the St. Rouen enclosure, the ice of which was frozen by the simple and inexpensive expedient of opening the windows.

ROBER skated with matchless dexterity, waiting again for his two wings. They were fighting for freedom, and finally obtained it. Rober joined the two at mid-ice and once more they set sail for the stubborn Moosehead defenders. The passing seemed faster than before, and the Bulls' bewilderment deepened. You couldn't watch both puck and players. The Moosehead forwards couldn't catch up. The clash loomed once again, but the three continued the miracle stickwork, sometimes passing across the arena and sometimes only to Rober, whose dexterous stick made the decisions. He could let the puck go by or. . . .

The defense spread and Rober ducked in, fast and sure, but not fast enough to escape the left-defense, Darreaux, who whirled about. In whirling, the burly defense bumped him a glancing blow and nailed him with a slash of ash. Rober went down with the sickening thud, but the red light went on. The puck had gone through and the score was tied, 2—2.

The jolt was hard, but the sight of the red glow lifted Rober Lake and his spirits. Tight-lipped and with deep-set blue eyes narrowed, he skated to center ice. The referee dropped the puck, but Rober made no move to take it. Instead, he used the time to speed in the direction of his own goal. When the Moosehead attack began, Rober was all ready to back-check, and did when the center approached. The Padre defense players spread with speed and confidence, knowing that the forwards would be blocked by Rober through the middle.

TWO-WAY skating! It was the hallmark of young Rober Lake. He was as fast defending as he was attacking, and the results were as obvious as the temperature of the arctic-like hockey arena. Shuttling in and out as a constant annoyance to the attacker, Rober wasn't bothered in the least by the new chore at center. He was always a left wing, though he could shoot from either side, and the crowd had thought that some of his speed would be dulled by the uncertainty of the center spot. But no. . . .

He had stolen the puck with a hook-check and was off in the direction of center. There he encountered quick opposition, for the Bulls were in an ugly mood. They bumped him, but always glancing blows, because his sense of anticipation was acute, and he moved defensively before the strike. The slashing sticks sideswiped his padded legs and bruised his feet. But once again he was lightning on skates, elusive, effervescent and almost magical as he ragged the puck endlessly from one side of the center area to the other. He was calling for Minot and Coster, with one eye on the zig-zagging puck and the other on attackers and a dozen items that only an inspired player can watch simultaneously. The accelerating excitement of the St. Rouen partisans filled the place to overflowing with cries of encouragement, because the seconds were flying by with almost the speed of the dazzling center.

Once again Minot and Coster fought free and once again the forward line headed for the Moosehead blue line. The crescendo of voices rose in a wave of bedlam, for, if they did it once, they could do it a second time. Maybe this was the time. They stood and threw off blankets, stamped their chilled and aching feet.

The attack sped to the Bulls' blue line where another clash of humans and sticks sent bodies flying. This time Minot lost the puck. But Rober saw it fly by, tore himself from the ice and snagged it with a stick that acted like the tongue of a snake. He went into his dance again, skating in circles, feinting to deceive attackers and waiting for Minot and Coster to become a team. They were ready, but not free. The period was more than half over, and soon the Bulls would be play-

ing to hold it safe. Also, the Rink windows were being closed!

ROBER skated to the side. Feinted a pass and drew a protective thrust from a Moosehead forward. Then he whacked the puck against the sideboard and skated forward to pick up the carom. He shouted for Minot and Coster to be ready. They anticipated his path and got set. The Bulls moved to defend. Rober sped over, feinted and failed to pass. He skated past the goal-mouth and the goalie spread in all directions to stop the shot.

But there was no shot and the crowd groaned. Rober twisted back and the defenders rushed to cover, but he twisted again and circled behind the goal with the speed of a runaway star, which he was, and he caught the others flat-footed, moving in the direction of the spot he had left. Suddenly there was a spray of snow as he put on the brakes. He whirled like a dervish and dived for the goal-mouth. He waited till the very last instant. The goalie "broke" first and came out. Rober flipped his wrist, lifted the puck and lofted it just above the frantic goalie's shoulders. The light went on, and the roof shook from a torrent of vocal approval.

Ten minutes of the greatest action ever seen in the Timber League. No one had ever dreamed it could be done, especially against the powerful Moosehead Bulls. But there it was. Two red lights for Rober Lake, and the score at 3—2 with less than five minutes to play.

Rober skated to the sidelines. He was panting. He was soaked with perspiration. But he was full of fight. Armand Roubel, owner-manager of the St. Rouen Padres, threw a blanket about his padded shoulders. Rober threw it off with a sullen shrug. He climbed over the sideboard and into his bench-seat. A new line could hold the tiring Bulls. Besides, with the windows closed, the heat of the big crowd was affecting the ice. The surface became shimmery as the melting began. The wet surface held back the puck. Skate speed was reduced. It was that way always when you closed the windows of the old rinks of the Northwest before artificial ice was so common.

Sure enough, the Bulls couldn't skate fast enough to shake free, even with their own fresh spares. They fought and fought in vain and, after three minutes, Rober Lake led his own forward line out on the ice to hold everything for the final sixty seconds. It wasn't difficult. The Bulls were sore and disgusted and rough. They drew a penalty for high-checking Rober as he ragged the puck once more. But Rober didn't even try to score again. He knew that the game was on ice. Besides, this watery surface could tear your legs to pieces, if you fought it too hard.

THEN . . . the bell and the end of the game, more cheers, screams and hysteria. Tight-lipped, Rober followed the team down the runway and into the thin-walled dressing room. He dragged off the damp, clinging sweater for the last time. He looked at its brilliant hue, heaved a sigh and tossed it into the corner of his makeshift locker.

The rest of the Padres were chattering excitedly, but not Rober Lake. He untied his hand-cut rawhide laces in silence and put the shoes away in his bag with care. There was a shower, if you cared to risk pneumonia. Rober passed it up, and dried his white, muscular frame with an old towel. Then he got into his street clothes, woolens, heavy socks, high leather shoes, fur-collared mackinaw and otter-skin cap. He was headed for the door when bushy-haired Armand Roubel approached with a smile and an ostentatiously extended hand.

"Good luck, Rober," he said. "My wish."

Rober nodded. "I'll need it," he muttered. "Inasmuch as you got all the money. For two cents I'd—"

"But no, you wouldn't," Roubel broke in quickly, "because you have a contract. I did not sell you, my boy. I sold the contract. It is the law. You know it is the law."

Rober shrugged his wide shoulders. He slammed the clubhouse door behind him, trying not to think about it any more.

AT THE side entrance he was joined by a small figure completely encased in a wealth of blue fox. The skins extended full and long, and the coat was topped by an enormous monk's hood of fur, also blue fox. And each skin had come from Rober's personal trap line. He had taken out the very best of them for her, because nothing in the world was quite good enough for little Jeanne Leseur. He could feel the warmth of her arm through the heavy fur and his own mackinaw.

"You were marvelous." She whispered it, for stragglers were still near the rink, though the whole Northwest knew that Rober and little Jeanne, whose father had long since been killed by a timber wolf, were "that way" and had been since earliest childhood.

"I hated everybody," Rober muttered, still fighting back some queer desire to burst into tears. "I couldn't believe about Lucien . . . going to Boston. Then in the third period, I didn't care!"

"But there must've been a good reason," she said.

"Money," Rober whispered. "We made a pledge, Jeanne. Over and over Lucien and I made a pledge—never to sign big-league contracts unless both of us were in the same room. He broke that pledge, Jeanne. Why?"

She clutched his arm tighter, and hurried him along through the packed snow. She had no answer—not the one he wanted, anyway.

"Money!" he muttered again. "Armand Roubel sold the whole team for money. They've sold the whole league for money. Lucien and I were the best wings in the league, maybe in the whole Northwest. We knew each other so well. We knew every move the other made or intended to make. We promised *never* to sign——"

"I know, dear, I've heard you," she said, struggling to get it from his mind. "And when you were sure he had broken the promise, you signed before tonight's game to go to New York. You're not only going, but you'll be greater than anybody who ever played hockey. That I know."

HE HAD stopped, and was staring ahead. Suddenly he turned and looked into her pretty face. The best blue fox pelt was about her face. Her eyes almost matched the blue fox in color. Nothing was good enough. . . .

"Jeanne!" he whispered. "It won't mean anything, playing hockey without Lucien Hogan—

"But it will mean even less with you so far away!" He realized for the first time that long years of knowing her . . . of planning. . . .

"It's only for a few months, Rober," she exclaimed, and her face was suddenly cold and wet from the gush of tears. "You'll be back . . . with fame . . . and money!"

He kissed her damp cheek and held her close for an instant.

"Yes," he whispered. "I'll be back with money."

They walked in silence to her house. At the door he kissed her again. She would be at the station to see him off in the morning. She assured him once more that it would be a great adventure, big cities, bigger crowds, money!

But as he trudged to his own home, watching his breath turn white as he loosed it in the cold night air, he pondered the one big problem. How could he play against Lucien Hogan? How can you charge and check and bump a fellow who has been in every game you ever played, taking your bumps, helping you score. . . . How?

THE sudden growth of big-time hockey twenty years ago had placed a premium on good players. Stopping at nothing, the wealthy Inter-American League had bought up whatever they wished, and the prizes in the isolated Timber

League were victims of high bidding. Hogan and Lake, two of those "naturals" that appear unheralded, had been a particular prize. But the club owners got all the money.

The wings as a great pair existed no longer, Rober murmured to himself, as his train sped down from the wilderness of timber and fur into the smooth sheen of moneyed civilization; where the magnificent blue fox wrap that he had obtained in the woods for mere labor would have brought a king's ransom; where money was the answer to all things, and the more the merrier; where nature's bounty was held in lowest esteem, and where the cash accruing from the sale and trading of nature's bounty was the apex of man's dizzy flight, the law of his life and his thoughts.

It was a long and dreary trip into New York, and not even the tall and well-tailored figure of "Silvey" Madison at the station brightened Rober's personal outlook. The name of Norbert Madison was a human touchstone to all young hockey players, and had been, as long as Rober could remember. His shock of silver hair was an unfailing identification sign. The heavy-lidded brown eyes looked the same as they did in the popular volume, "Madison on Skates." He waved a big hand at Rober and extended it.

"Welcome to New York," Silvey greeted. " 'Course, it can't compare with St. Rouen, but it has its points."

"New York or any other place," Rober replied solemnly, taking the hand, "is no more than what the people make it."

"Said like a philosopher," Silvey declared, and led the way to the taxicabs. Seated in the back, he said, "I don't always rush down to meet new players, but—"

"I'm too valuable to risk losing," Rober finished with a grin. "I know all about the sale of the team and the league, Mr. Madison."

"By the way, I'm called, among other things, Silvey, especially by my players. You kids call me that, don't you?"

"Sure. . . ." the player murmured. "Silvey."

THAT was all right, since the man had to be called something. But considerable—almost all—had gone from the old, blind hero-worship. So, maybe he had carried a hockey stick around with him at all times, as Silvey had suggested in the little hockey "bible." And done dozens of other things as a ritual, because Silvey had said to do them.

It couldn't wipe away this business of tearing apart a whole hockey league, a team and even an indispensable pair of Timber League wings just because a lot of people wanted to make money out of hockey.

"Be quick to take full advantage of outdoor ice," Silvey Madison had written to thousands of kids in his book, "because it is on frozen ponds and rivers that all great hockey players have learned to skate."

A bitter smile flicked across Rober's tired features as he saw those words parade across his memory. They were always in the little booklet that came with "Silvey Madison Skates," accompanied by a picture of the hero himself. Rober stole a quick glance at the face now—it was older, maybe a little more lined.

"If you find skating work," the admonition in the booklet went on, "then I would suggest that you forget about hockey and go in and sit by the fire. But if to you skating becomes the most thrilling and exhilarating of all sports, worthy of your respect, ambition and dreams, then I won't have to urge you to practice!"

What a hollow mockery! Right now ice hockey had neither his respect, his ambition nor his dreams. Disgust? Sure, because money was considered above all else in this mad race for the best team in big-time hockey. Kids had been strung along with high-sounding phrases of idealism and hockey for sport's sake, only to be pushed around as human pawns in a sort of chess game on ice, or some-

thing.

Silvey was talking as they reached a side-street hotel just off Eighth Avenue.

". . . you'll find the room here comfortable and reasonable, I hope," he said. "Take a rest, see some of the town, eat good food and don't get lost. Be at the Arena in the morning at ten o'clock sharp for practice."

"Yes, sir," the player murmured, and reached into his pocket to pay the taxi bill as the driver handed over his bags.

"Never mind, I'm going on," the manager said and waved him away. "You'll meet the rest of the Nomads tomorrow. Ten o'clock. They're a nice crowd. All right, driver, over to the Arena, please."

THE room was satisfactory, high in the rear of the hotel, overlooking New York City to the South and reasonably priced. Both faucets worked in the bathroom and the bed was soft. Rober unpacked his bags, and placed Jeanne Leseur's photograph on the dresser. It was the one link to the wilderness he had left.

He was neither frightened nor perplexed by this new form of wilderness known as New York. He had been in big cities before—well, maybe not big ones, but they were cities, and, big or little, they held no terror for him. After you've outwitted an oversized lynx alone in a dense forest in order to get the prized pelt without hole or tear, there is little to be afraid of.

The next morning seemed tropical to Rober as he rose after a night of fitful sleeping. It was early December, but it seemed like June, partly because he had forgotten to turn off the steam radiator, and chiefly because he was more used to sub-zero temperature at this time of year in St. Rouen. But down in the street the city seemed steam-heated, too, and he tossed back the collar of his mackinaw and lifted the ear-laps of his fur cap. He didn't notice the stares of the curious, interested in this sight of something right out of the North woods. Clutching the bag and his precious skates, he was more concerned in making the correct turn into Eighth Avenue and finding the fabulous and celebrated New York Arena.

He was somewhat surprised at his own attitude, for this was the moment about which he and Lucien Hogan had talked ever since curing and cutting their first rawhide laces for the "Nestor Johnson's."

"The team will fly with us as wings," they had said and laughed, but they believed it. Separated, they agreed, and with only one of them on a team, that team would necessarily go in circles, due to the extra-great power of one wing.

But here he was, going to his first big league club, making the biggest jump possible, yet he was coldly indifferent. He wondered about Lucien in Boston, and he winced at the thought of Lucien breaking his part of the pledge not to sign unless the other was in the same room. He wondered if the big leagues meant as little to Lucien now.

CLEAN lockers, tile shower baths with steaming hot water, big and well-padded rub-down tables, ointments, panaceas, all the towels you wanted, soft drinks, skate-sharpening service, long and tough cotton laces, bigger and better body harness than he had ever been able to afford, and a nice new dark blue sweater with white stars all over it. His number was nine, because Silvey Madison numbered his forward lines in threes, and Rober would be center on the third trio.

Rober had seen artificial ice, of course, but it was still a novelty to one who had spent all his competitive skating hours on the frozen ponds and rivers so highly recommended by Madison's hockey bible. He fell to his knees and peered closely at the frozen surface. It looked about a half-inch thick, not an inch.

"It's five-eighths," said a voice.

Rober looked up. "Thanks," he muttered. "I'm Rober Lake. Just got in from the woods. I've never seen much of this."

"I'm Bunny Porter," the other said, and Rober nodded.

"I've seen your pictures and you

missed topping the league scorers last year by one goal. You spent forty-seven minutes in the penalty box and drew a major in Montreal for the black eye you gave Pete Cordel with a stick handle."

"It was an accident," Porter protested, and winked a small, shoe-button eye.

"They're all accidents," Rober sighed. He nodded at the ice. "Does this stuff melt when they turn off the juice—I mean, do they turn it off before the end of the game, like when we shut the windows?"

"Only when they've got to get the ice out for some other kind of show," Porter explained. "Come on, better start gettin' loose. Silvey likes us rubbery when he comes out for the practice."

Joe Banker, speedy left wing and team captain, sent the club of fifteen players through a period of brisk follow- the-leader. He led the chase and, being one of the fastest men on ice, he soon had them puffing all along the line. All, that is, except Rober Lake, who didn't puff easily. He was nearly the last when the circle started, but he edged up as he saw daylight stretching between skaters ahead when Banker quickened the pace.

The wing skated with loose, bent knees and with short strides. Rober knew of Banker's greatness and had read reams of stories about him, but somehow——

HE SKIPPED two others and moved into eleventh spot. The four defense players were behind him, and now he took a few quick strides and nestled ahead of the third-string wings, Cotton and Schlag. Banker kept on and chuckled as the stragglers began to drop back on the other side of the rink. The line was really stretching out.

"No towing with sticks!"

The order came from gray-thatched Silvey Madison, who grinned with delight at this demonstration against sheer fatigue. No one was holding another's stick, but Silvey wanted to announce his presence. He shouted for Passoway to stop stalling and keep up there, for Bruiser Kelvin, his star defense, to melt off that blubber.

With that, Rober jumped Berot and Smith, second-string forward liners. He was behind Bunny Porter, Hod Trom, third-string center, and the tiring Passoway. He jumped Passoway. Now the team captain really poured it on, and the skaters were leaning at a sharp angle as they made the turns behind the goals and streaked up the short straightaway.

How long it was supposed to go, Rober didn't know, but this kind of thing was duck soup, and he decided to do a little pouring in his own right. He whistled up the straightaway and pushed it shoulder to shoulder with Bunny Porter, who was startled by this display of audacity. Porter started to leave, but didn't make it, because Rober sensed the move and streaked out ahead. Now it was too late, and Rober decided to make it a day by fighting it out with Joe Banker. He breathed on the captain's neck. Banker turned his head slightly. Rober was ready.

Down the rinkside he sped with all he had. He slashed the ice at the corner, and took each turn at a dangerous angle. Somebody was yelling at him, but he heard only the welcome ring of steel against ice. He could bend over almost flat on his skates, because he knew those edges, and they had served him well. After a full turn of the rink at breakneck speed, he pulled up. He had expected the team captain to flash by him, but, when he turned his blond head Rober saw that he was all alone. Banker had either given up or had refused to battle it out. Rober came to a halt and joined the still-panting players.

"Wonderful demonstration," Silvey Madison said, smiling. "You showed more speed than anybody on the team, and the least brains, because you might've killed yourself. Any time you want to meet Joe in a race, I'll bet against you to the limit. Okay, get on with target practice!"

BURNING deep inside, Rober took his place with the third-string line, Billy

Cotton and Ernie Schlag, for a taste of Silvey Madison's coaching technique. His appetite, however, had dwindled to almost nothing, because somehow everything, everybody seemed hostile. Maybe it was his imagination, since he hadn't wanted to leave St. Rouen in the first place, but more than likely because of Silvey's studied hostility.

One boy's beating another on skates is the basis of all hockey. If it isn't, what is? What do you do the first time on ice? There are seldom enough players for a game of shinny. So what? So, you race each other. The puck and stick-handling is incidental. Speed is the thing. And he had shown them speed, plenty of it. Perhaps Joe Banker hadn't done his best. Yet, the captain was trying to tire them out. Suppose no one had tired. Impossible, because some skaters are bound to be slower than others. They'd have to drop back.

Well, what was wrong with being faster than others?

"Go ahead, kid!"

Rober emerged from his mental meandering to feel the puck whack the blade of his Howard stick. He darted up the ice along the dasher and cut in just over the blue line. He winged the lozenge with a quick fleck of the wrist and aimed for the center of the cage. The resounding whack startled him, and only then did he notice that the goal-frame was almost entirely blocked by a white board. He recovered the puck and skated back sheepishly.

"Take it up again," Silvey Madison ordered. "Shoot for those openings."

Rober remembered now. It was early in the Madison book. To improve your shooting, you cover the goal-mouth with some kind of board, leaving holes about eight inches in diameter at the corners, and at intervals around the edges. "Anybody capable of stumbling into a well can hit the center of the goal just as easily," the book had said. "The center of a hockey goal is invariably covered by a human body. With arms outstretched, the goalie limits area, but scoring areas are there. Practice shooting for those edges, because no puck has yet gone through the *entire* thickness of a live goalie."

Rober went up again, not so close to the side-board, crossed the blue line and sped in. Aiming from well in back of the crease, he flipped the puck at the left side of the cage, about halfway up. It swished through the hole and was trapped behind the board.

"Good shot!"

The call came from a half-dozen voices.

"I've got a dozen pucks here," Madison said, and flipped another to the ice. "We got a half-hour to get 'em in there. Make it snappy, and don't go within twenty feet of the crease!"

THE action speeded. The unsuccessful shooter remained at the net to relay the puck to the next in line, and trails were continuous. At the other end, the defense men, Ferd Aldo and Bruiser Kelvin, first stringers, and Francke and Winsten, the heavy spares, were peppering pucks against Marcel Doture, the league's crack goalie. Silvey Madison's trained eyes watched every move. Rober couldn't tell just how much attention he got, but it must have been plenty, because he sank his second puck on the third shot.

The pattern of preparation sizzled through the remainder of the half-hour, at the end of which Rober was pouring perspiration, but he wore a grin, because six of the dozen pucks in the net had been put there by him. Moreover, four had been bulls-eyed with a left-handed shot and two had gone in from the right. He had outscored and outskated the whole team.

The team was friendly enough now, he thought, for they told him what a good job he had done. Ferd Aldo and Bunny Porter were especially complimentary, and Rober began to guess that New York wasn't such a bad spot after all.

"You'll sure pour it on to that Hogan,"

Porter chuckled as they walked into the steaming shower.

Rober bit his lip.

"They say his head's as big as a watermelon since he got that contract," the wing went on.

"He—he's not so much," Rober lied, and with difficulty. "I played with him in the Timber League. He's blind on the outside, goin' up the right. You can hook-check him silly."

"So I heard," Bunny said. "They used him in the game against Philly the other night—that was the night before last. Friend of mine saw the game in Boston. He sure got a good press."

"You can't score goals on press notices." Rober muttered. "I'll skate him blue in the face any day he picks. I've done it all my life."

Rober had to use the cold water first to cool off his rising temper. He still couldn't get it out of his craw that a guy would place money above what they'd meant to each other on ice. But, as long as he'd done it, okay. Rober was getting his dough—not as much, not nearly as much, as they would have received by holding out. But it was more than he had ever made in three seasons of pro hockey in the Northwest, so he was satisfied. After a few seasons of big-time hockey and with a cushion of cash, he could go back to St. Rouen and live as he pleased. He could tell Jeanne Leseur all about the phony people and the phony buildings and the phony weather, and live happily ever after.

HE WENT to a nearby restaurant with Bunny and big Ferd Aldo. They talked hockey and began to tell him of assorted weaknesses that existed in the league, the right-handed shots, the left-handed specialists, the "either-side" shooters like himself, the one-way skaters, the lame and the halt, the old and the young.

They were pretty nice guys, but he took their flattering compliments with a grain of salt. He knew his own limitations.

"You kids missed a great opportunity out there in that outfit, though," Aldo sighed. "This league couldn't have spread out anywhere near like it has, unless all you players had given in. But why you all rushed to sign your names is more than I can see."

Rober winced. "Oh—we're just backwoods kids," he murmured.

"Not that you didn't cost dough," Bunny hastened to say. "Boy, some of the prices those owners got." He whistled. "Why, your own boss, Robot——"

"Roubel," Rober corrected.

"Yeah, Armand Roubel. Ferd, how much was that he held Silvey up for?"

"Thirty grand he wound up with," the defense replied.

"Wait a minute!" Rober exclaimed. "He didn't hold up Silvey for Hogan——"

"Sure!"

"But Hogan went to Boston," Rober protested.

"That's a separate deal," Bunny said. "Silvey bought the whole team. He sold Hogan to Boston, farmed out some of the others and kept you. Didn't you know that?"

Rober could feel the heat and color rushing into his face. He was glad that lunch was over, because he couldn't have pushed down another mouthful. His stomach was churning and his blood boiled. He wanted to race back and let Silvey Madison have one right in the mask that covered what people thought was his face. He had two faces, Madison did. One for the "youthful hopes of hockey," as he called them on page 21 of his book, and another face for the slick business of making money on the game.

ROBER had planned to travel a little around the city after eating, but he had lost all desire to see any more of the town. It might cost him his lunch. Dispirited again, he returned to the hotel and sought comfort in the solitude of his little room. The link to the Northwest, her picture, smiled assurance at

him from the hand-carved frame of polished apple wood.

He counted his money. He had plenty, and he could get a ticket now, any time he wanted to. The sight of the money reminded him once more of how much more he could have had by holding out. If only Lucien hadn't——

But why keep whipping himself with that cat-o'-nine-tails? Lucien had done it. Rober played with the idea of crossing all of them up by just packing his bag and returning home. But what would he return to? Jeanne, yes, but what else? The traps, sure. He could spend all his time on the lines and make far more than he would in hockey, if the weather——. But what was the use of just living to earn money? That's what these business sharps in hockey were doing. If he trapped all the time, and played no hockey, what would be the sense of living? What would be the reason?

"But if you consider skating the most thrilling and exhilarating of all sports, then I won't have to urge you to practice. . ."

No, sir, neither Madison nor anybody ever had to urge Rober Lake to practice. It was part of his living and breathing then; it was part of his life and breathing now. He would play hockey for nothing, and he had to admit the fact. A life without ice and skates was just a poor excuse for mere existence. He wondered if Silvey Madison knew that. And, by the way, just *how* cagey and smart was this New York manager?

Rober learned something of the fact when he left his room late in the afternoon following a heavy nap. He bought an evening newspaper, the *Globe,* and started out of the lobby. By chance he turned to the sports page to look at the hockey standing and the schedule, but never saw them. All he could see was a layout of himself, a big portrait, surrounded by action pictures——

AND Lucien Hogan! Grinning from another portrait, and in a Boston uniform!

Rober hurried to a vacant chair in the corner and his eyes were dazzled by the big type:

TIMBER LEAGUE FEUD
PROMISES EXCITEMENT
IN BIG TIME HOCKEY

Lake, Cocky Nomad Center, Vows Vengeance on Former Wing Partner for Breaking Up Childhood Romance.

He could scarcely keep his eyes clear enough to wade through the drivel—deliberate lies about Jeanne Leseur. Hogan had not only drawn the bigger contract, the story said, but had left St. Rouen with the plighted troth of his wingmate's old crush. The hockey vendetta, it continued, was percolating slowly but surely, and would boil over eventually, if not sooner, for there were signs that the hot-headed Rober Lake might jump the team and journey to Boston with the idea of finishing the job *off the ice!*

Rober crumpled the page with an exclamation of rage. He slapped it hard against the arm of the chair, and strode from the hotel in the highest dudgeon. Half-running, he beat the shortest possible path toward the Arena, raced up the stairs and into the office of Norbert Madison. A secretary halted him just outside the door to the inner office.

"He's not in there," she said.

"I'll decide that," Rober muttered, and opened the door.

But she was right.

"Something I can do?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm Rober Lake," he said, and whacked the newspaper against the desk. "This paper has a lot of lies about me. I want an explanation."

"Why don't you see Chick Markham?" the secretary suggested. "He's in charge—oh, there he is, just going out. You can catch him. Oh, Chick——"

MARKHAM, publicity director for the hockey team, had left by way of

the elevator. Rober dashed out, descended the steps three at a time, and was waiting on the ground floor when the smartly-dressed press agent emerged from the lift.

"You, Markham!"

"Hello, Lake," Markham greeted. His florid face lighted up with a glow of triumph. "Not bad, hah? Spread like that on your first day in town?"

"Full of lies!" Rober gasped. "You said here—"

"The feud, it's good stuff—"

"About Jeanne! You had no right to mention Jeanne Leseur—"

"Wait a minute, hothead!" Markham growled, pushing Rober away. "Don't give me that 'no right' routine. I got a right, an' I also got a left, an' none o' you Hans Brinkers are gonna push me around."

"But Jeanne Leseur never gave—"

"I don't care what she gave or kept," Markham shouted. "I got a job to do, an' I'm doin' it. I got my facts from the right sources—Boston an' your boss, Silvey Madison. If you don't like the way I run things, consult the management. But don't tell me what I can't do. I reserve that privilege *only* for sports editors, bless 'em, especially Charlie O'Toole on the *Globe*, which you are holding in your hand—"

Markham watched the enraged figure turn and leave the Arena hallway. Casper, the elevator operator, emitted a low whistle.

"Steel . . . with temper," he chuckled.

"Ah-h-h-h," Markham sighed, and lighted a cigarette. "The answer to a press agent's dream!"

WITH the expansion into big-time and bigger business twenty years ago, ice hockey was like an overgrown child, feeling its way around and learning by trial and error. To Rober Lake, or anybody who had made the game a part of his mind and heart for as long as he could remember, there could be no error. You played the game and devil take the spectator.

Promotion and publicity were unnecessary in St. Rouen and almost all such skating centers, because everybody was interested in the game, big or little. If you happened to miss one, it was usually because the doctor strapped you to the bed, with help, of course. St. Rouen people didn't wonder where to go or what to do. If there was a game within distance of walking, skiing or snowshoeing, you went; if there was no game, you remained home and did some chore like sharpening skates, waxing skis, stringing a snowshoe or mending hockey harness.

Rober Lake didn't know, couldn't know that the vast sums poured into big league franchises had made the expansion possible, and hence had hung an economic millstone on the neck of the game. Burdened by fixed operational costs, the game had a master: overhead. It had a duty: maintenance of solvency. All else, even the game itself, had become secondary.

Opening the windows to freeze a pool of water with free zero weather, had been replaced by costly networks of pipe and flowing brine. The big-city patrons had been cajoled with steam-heated arenas and parlor-like comfort . . . no foot-warmers, blankets, internal antifreeze or chilblains. Space was provided for infinitely greater attendance, and hence, greater salaries and profits, but the price of this prosperity was a minimum attendance, fostered by a maximum of interest. That was whetted by victories. If victories weren't forthcoming, then the whetting would have to be accomplished by suitable ballyhoo and gossip.

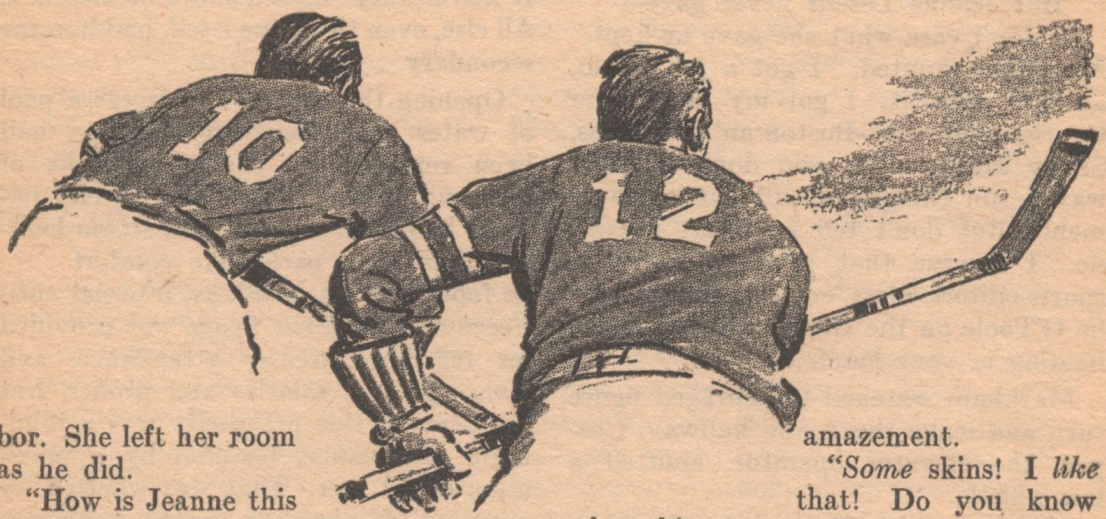
Rober Lake stormed over the phony ballyhoo in the solitude of his hotel room silently, at first. He paced the floor, slapping things with the now-frayed newspaper. He paused before Jeanne's photograph and asked her:

"Supposing you read a thing like that!"

He repeated it aloud. He asked the questions and answered them for her. Of course, she agreed with him. He

talked to her further, and then he cut loose with a tirade of abuse against people who could be responsible for such bold fraud. Talking to yourself wasn't wrong. People always did it in the woods. Often he had heard a voice echo through the forest in the winter, and found a solitary hunter or trapper or woodsman arguing a point in monologue with great vehemence and then settling it to his complete satisfaction. That was the best part: you never lost an argument.

BUT two days later, on the morning of his first game as a Nomad, he was startled, upon leaving his room, to realize that he had been disturbing his neighbor. She left her room as he did.



"How is Jeanne this morning?"

Rober's face blanched. He sort of stumbled against the door and pulled off his otter cap.

"Mornin'," he murmured. "You . . . I didn't realize anybody heard. . ."

She laughed. Her teeth were white and even and her lips were redder than a Mountie's coat.

"The walls are thin," she said. "I didn't hear much—except that Jeanne certainly agrees with what you say, and Silvey Madison, whoever he is, will come to a bad end. I gather he's a skunk of the first water. And as for a guy named Harkem—"

"Markham," Rober corrected. He walked down the hall with her to the elevator. "Chick Marham is the Arena press agent. He's written a crazy story about me. I—I'm Rober Lake, a hockey player."

"I'm Virginia Hyatt," she said, smiling again. "Ginny, they call me. I'm a singer." They entered the elevator.

Rober was studying the skins of her coat. It was long and it was mink, though some of the pelts—

"You like the coat?" she asked, as they left the lift.

He nodded. "A little—some pretty skins."

She gasped and stared at him in amazement.

"*Some* skins! I *like* that! Do you know what this coat cost?"

He shrugged. "No, but I know what it's worth," he said, and his eyes ran over the matched skins. "I'd sell the whole batch for about a hundred an' twenty dollars—that's about four-fifty a pelt, not countin' those three. They're not prime. I'd give you them free."

"A hundred and twenty — why, that's—!" She was quite breathless. "This coat cost eighteen hundred dollars—"

"Miss Hyatt," Rober broke in, "I don't care what you paid for it. I know what the skins are *worth*. I've trapped

Streaking for the blue line Rober plummeted at the two blockers, magicked the puck right between their skates

'em, hundreds of 'em. With muskrats at fifty cents, prime skins are bringin' four-fifty, Canadian mink. I like blue fox better—"

"Blue fox?" she exclaimed. "Do you catch blue fox?"

"Sure, I caught a batch an' had a honey of a coat an' monk's hood made of 'em for Jeanne. Lady, you should see *that!*"

Ginny swallowed back her amazement. "I—I'd certainly like to see a blue fox coat with a monk's hood," she whispered and watched him enter the dining room.

ROBER had scarcely seated himself at a side table when she appeared and asked if she could take the chair opposite. She draped the mink coat over the chair-back as Rober nodded. It was lined with silk that had a shimmering pattern.

"I'd like to hear more about furs," she said. "You don't know what furs mean to a woman."

"Yes I do," he said. "But they mean a living to a trapper, which is more important. Sometimes it means life—like with Jeanne Leseur's father. He stayed out to protect his trap lines, which were bein' robbed by timber wolves. This big shaggy gray fella got Mr. Leseur from behind. Sprang an' knocked him down. Started chewin'—"

"Really?" She shuddered.

"Did a job. Followed him a mile. Mr. Leseur bled to death at the cedar knoll. They found him late that afternoon. The wolves, though, had gone back over the trap-line, emptyin' the traps."

As the food arrived, the conversation took a more appetizing trend, and the two seemed to get on splendidly. Rober liked her well enough, even though she was too ignorant to recognize a spring pelt.

Ginny told him she wanted to go on the stage and chattered on at great length. Finally she daubed on powder and rouge before Rober's bulging eyes and left the table with a gay good-bye.

THE Chicago Falcons arrived in New York for their first appearance of the

season. New players, and a veteran goalie made them something of an unknown quantity, too hard to figure. Scores of that time were seldom high, but a Falcon game usually produced a score lower than average, due to this Al Pasama.

Silvey Madison's system of coaching and managing included a sure-fire method of preparing players for opposition. It consisted of a mimeographed sheet, setting forth the basic strength and weakness of individuals on the opposing team. Copies were on the bench before each player's locker.

Rober studied his facts carefully. He turned to Bunny Porter.

"Why aren't these given out earlier?" he asked. "I could have all this memorized."

"Most of us know about the regulars," Bunny replied. "There's only a few new ones with routine items. You'll get 'em down after a few minutes on the ice—"

"Everybody . . . attention!"

Silvey Madison's voice barked a command in an unmistakable tone of severity. Every player responded as a man.

"Over here . . .as you are!" Silvey ordered.

There followed a quick parade of half-dressed hockey players who presented a strange sight, for nothing looks more incongruous than a half-dressed hockey player, what with his leather harness, pieces of padding, suspenders, garters and bandages from the latest cut or scrape.

But they beheld an even stranger sight, that of big Marcel Doture, star goalie, standing next to Silvey Madison and shivering like a victim of chills. The manager's mouth was set in a grim line. His dark, heavy-lidded eyes had taken on a look of bitter cruelty. In one hand he held a white envelope. He tapped it nervously against his free hand, and his eyes ranged from one player to the other.

"Someone got into this locker room!" he exclaimed, struggling to control his feelings. He held up the envelope. He pulled out its contents and fanned three green bills. Two bore portraits of James Madison and one a head of McKinley. "This envelope containing this twenty-five hundred dollars was put on the shelf of Marcel's locker sometime today. A note inside said, 'You can have this much after tonight's game if the score is right, which it had better be.' "

A WAVE of murmured bewilderment broke the player's silence.

"I've been waiting for this," Silvey went on. "This is a tough town, a big-money town. We're all in big money. I was warned that the sure-thing big-shots would try to get at some of you. Maybe they have already—"

A chorus of protests halted his aspersion.

"Okay. Only you know that. But here's something more important. Whoever this is can afford five grand—five thousand dollars!—just to win a single game. And still more important, Marcel here brought the envelope to me. I expected that. What I didn't expect was to hear Marcel say he couldn't tend goal tonight."

"He's crazy!" The players stormed. "He'll tend goal—"

"No, no, boys!" Marcel protested. His swarthy face had become a mask of agony. "I . . . I couldn't. Look . . . my hands. I can't hold them. I couldn't grip a stick!"

"Did this ever happen before, Marcel?" Silvey demanded.

Marcel's head wagged from side to side. "No . . . no," he said. "But, if they do this, Silvey, what else will be next?"

"You'll play, Marcel!" The players took up the chorus.

"We'll score our heads off for you," Joe Banker promised.

"Not a Falcon'll fly by me!" said Bruiser Kelvin.

"No-no-no . . ." The goalie's agony seemed to increase.

He pleaded with them individually, and then turned to Silvey Madison, whose free right hand grabbed the goalie

by his leather shoulder-harness. The manager's face whitened.

"You'll play this game, if it's the last one you ever play!" he said, spitting the words through clenched teeth. "I didn't come into this town to be pushed around by the likes of sneaks who left this envelope. You'll play . . . do you hear?"

"But . . . but suppose I lose?" Marcel gasped. "They'll think—"

"You *won't* lose!" Bunny Porter shouted. "If they make fifty goals, we'll make fifty-one. Is that right?"

Another chorus of promises rattled the walls of the locker room. Rober Lake's face was a study in stark amazement. He looked at the money—more than he made for the entire season; more than he had ever seen at one time, and all big bills.

Silvey Madison pushed Doture away gently for emphasis.

"Get your stick!" he ordered. "You'll go out on that ice, if we have to carry you. You'll stand in that crease, if we have to tie you to the cage. And you star-spangled monkeys!" he roared savagely to the rest of the players. "Play your heads off, because they won't be any good if you lose this ball game!"

And, as they trooped away to finish dressing, Silvey was sick, because the hidden serpent of big-money hockey had finally struck, spattering its poison.

THERE had been much on Rober Lake's mind as he entered the New York Arena for his first big-time hockey game, things on his chest, too, that he had wanted to get off. There was the outrageous story by Chick Markham in the *Globe*, the fact that Silvey Madison had not only bought the St. Rouen team, but had undoubtedly signed Lucien Hogan on the sly—these and others added up to a lot.

But they seemed to disappear with amazing suddenness, as the import of the night's chore bathed Rober's intelligence. The game was the thing. Everything else seemed to shrink in significance. In fact, everything else seemed to be crowded from his mind as he took his place on the bench between the other third-stringers, Billy Cotton and Ernie Schlag.

Worried or not, Marcel Doture cleared everything, but the saves got harder as the opening period rolled along. The green-shirted Chicagoans, skating in well-ordered formations, kept the puck well in hand or on stick. Something seemed to have happened to the Nomads' defense, but just what it was Rober couldn't say. From the look of concern on Silvey Madison's face, Rober decided that the manager didn't know either.

Rober saw four minutes of action in that first period. It was past the 10-minute mark before Silvey gave the third-string spares the nod. They climbed over the boards and reported, and Rober should have had stage-fright, or something. But somehow he didn't see the 15,000 people. He saw only the puck and six green-sweatered opponents in his way.

The Chicago checkers bottled him nicely, though he got in a few brilliant passes. But the kid-line failed to get more than a few feet past the blue. Then Silvey called them off.

It was a scoreless period, but Silvey began to pace the floor as soon as the team had hit the locker room.

"They're getting back too fast," he said finally, as the sweating players relaxed before their lockers. "You—Kelvin and Aldo, spread out a bit, and converge as you back in from the attack."

The big fellows nodded with understanding.

"You centers, delay the counter," Silvey continued, still pacing. "Give the wings more chance to get back. Whoever has the chance, sweep- and hook-check more. Rag, if you want to, and even risk a penalty. Only, keep them from taking pot-shots at Marcel. He can't stop everything. Let the forwards get back. Give 'em time to get back. That's all."

THE Nomads talked it up. The whole list of instructions was clear to Rober. There was no other way to play the game. He was amazed that anybody had to be so instructed. The team left the locker room a few minutes later with more pep and bigger promises to Marcel Doture.

The New York forwards, Porter and Banker, took a loose puck shortly after the face-off and organized in a hurry. They skated wide, and Trom, the center, edging over to Porter on his right, spread the Chicago defense and made it look leaky. The banner crowd, sensing a sustained offensive, turned on a vocal barrage as the attack accelerated.

There was a brief skirmish in the Chicago half of the neutral zone, and then the organized attack was resumed, maintained by brilliant passing shots. Then, over the blue line.

Trom and Banker attacked suddenly. There was a mix-up before the goal-mouth, and, when the puck shot out, they knew that not only had Banker failed, but plenty had happened besides.

Porter failed to get the rebound. Or, rather, a Falcon got it first. Before you could count to one, all three Chicago forwards were on their way. Porter was giving chase. Trom and Banker were scraping up the ice in the rear.

Only the Falcons' lack of unity saved Marcel Doture from going haywire. He knew that they'd be messed up as Kelvin and Aldo back-skated before the attack. They were messed up, but not soon enough for the harassed goalie.

One of the Falcons got inside, swirled the disc around until the air seemed polka-dotted with pucks. He seemed to see a hundred spots, and didn't know which spot was the puck until he felt the impact against his stick.

Without aiming or even looking, Marcel lifted it up into the roar of the crowd. It landed in mid-rink. There was a pause as Porter and Banker attacked again. This time Trom stood back at center ice.

The shot was cleared, and back the Falcons came again. There was no puck-ragging, no poke-checking or sweep-checking as Madison had ordered. It was just a fast, uninterrupted attack, and the second of a period-long series. Somehow and somewhere the Nomads had tumbled from their high defensive estate. It didn't seem possible for any team to get a puck back so quickly. Yet, it was happening.

Marcel Doture could clear shots, one by one, until the cows came home. He could hold his stick motionless until a charging player was only a few feet away with the puck. He was a good goalie, and was paid well on that basis. But he was no super-man; he could clear only one shot at a time.

Through the second period it seemed to Marcel that the Falcons had *two* pucks instead of one, and shooting them at the same time. When the buzzer had halted action, Marcel had cleared all but two shots, and was close to tears.

ROBER knew how he felt, for Rober himself was next door to weeping. Not at the goals. They will happen to the best of tenders. It was because the players, first or second line, were not obeying Madison's instructions to time their counters and delay the opposition's. And Madison hadn't used him at all in the period!

The calm within the locker room was ominous. Silvey Madison wasn't pacing the floor, nor looking at anybody. Rober Lake looked at everybody, and especially at the first and second lines. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. He rose and strode over to the harassed manager.

"If you want a puck ragged," he said defiantly, "why don't you pick somebody who can rag a puck."

Silvey Madison only stared back.

"If you want goals," Rober continued, raising his voice, "why not let somebody get on the ice who can score?"

"Just wait," the manager said calmly. "I'll use you when I need you. We have a form—and a system."

"Which is to break up little hockey teams and bury the good players here as rookies!" Rober stormed. "I can outskate anybody on this so-called big-league team. I can outscore anybody on this team, yet you let me wait on the bench while a bunch of do-nothin's don't even carry out your instructions. Some system!"

"Get back to your locker!" Joe Banker ordered. "One more crack out of you, and you'll be torn to pieces!"

"That still won't win the hockey game," Rober countered, and stood up to the captain. "A fine bunch. Somebody's laughin' himself sick over buyin' out this whole club for a lot of money, an' not a single one except Marcel is doin' anything about it—"

Rober's speech was halted as he fell backwards into his locker, but Silvey Madison avoided trouble by stepping over to them quickly. He shushed Joe Banker and Bunny Porter who had jumped up from the next locker.

"Come on, snap out of it!" Silvey shouted. "Get out there and turn on that red light!"

The skate-shod Nomads were nervous and jumpy as they slumped over the rubber-matted runway to the Arena rink. The crowd greeted them with a smattering of catcalls, and that didn't help their nerves. The sudden realizaton of what the defeat would mean began to percolate through the bewilderment that had assailed them.

But they skated as though handcuffed, as though somebody had graphited their skates. Silvey stood it for three minutes of scoreless defensive play. Then he thumbed the third line, Cotton, Schlag and Rober Lake, to the ice during the pause for a face-off.

McMICHAEL, the Chicago center, had faced the best of big-league stick-handlers in the middle area, but he was confounded without warning by a stick that he couldn't see. Presently he couldn't even see the holder of the stick as Rober began his crazy pattern of operation. He became a blue streak, flying with the unpredictable direction of a bat, dodging dexterously as though some electric impulse was warning him of an opponent's nearness. The Chicago forwards abandoned their cover and set sail after Rober in an effort to corner him. That was what Rober expected and wanted. He passed to Schlag, who relayed to Cotton. Rober gave a yell, and got the puck before the sound of his voice had died.

He was off now, skating close to the dasher. He invited attack and got it, only to push the puck out and leap high. The Chicago forward dodged instinctively. They all do. You have to, or else risk having skates dug into your chest. Of course no sane player would ever do that, but they didn't know whether or not this flying center was sane. And took no chances.

He came down on the ice with the grace of a ballerina and whisked the puck along as he landed. Now he skated back against the wooden dasher-board. The Chicago defense circled cagily.

Rober went around the back of the goal. He was coming out the other side, but reversed himself with dramatic suddenness, bringing a roar from the crowd. But he failed to come out that side either, reversing again with even less warning and emerged from the original path, where he faced the goalie across ten feet of ice. He feinted, drew a counter, feinted again and again. His stick snake-tongued tantalizingly, until the goalie broke. With that, Rober punched the rubber through a patch of daylight not much larger than the puck itself, and the red light went on to make the score 2-1.

Chicago spares poured over the dasher to replace the panting Falcon forward line. But Silvey Madison stood pat as the puck returned to center ice for the face-off. The second-string Chicago center was determined to get the puck and do a bit of fancy frosting, but it required more quickness of stick than determination, and Rober had plenty of stick-hus-

tle. He simply heeled the rubber forward, ducked out and had his stick on the free puck before the center knew where it was. With his ears red and ringing from a sustained bedlam of fan-hysteria, he cut "juby" in center ice while he sized up the whirling pattern of green-shirted humans before him. He located Cotton and Schlag. He started for the side again, drew two attackers, and whipped the puck to Cotton. The wing began a race, but relayed it quickly to Schlag. The latter staged a desperate battle with a surprise attacker who was joined by two others, one of whom, however, was Rober. The mix-up was a free-for-all, with sticks high and slashing and a scowling referee ready to whistle.

But the crowd announced with a roar that Rober had emerged somehow with the puck. He streaked for the blue line, and plummeted at the two burleys who converged in his path.

But he never struck them. What happened they never knew, but their defensive force was wasted. They prepared for the flying center, and neglected to watch the puck. Rober had slipped it between two well-braced skates. Then he executed a seemingly magical body-twist that threw him around the defense. They would have believed that a ray of light could be bent easier.

When they turned, Rober was staging his battle with the enraged Pasama, and with better odds this time because the Chicago goalie was spreading to equalize Rober's "full angle." He was directly in front, feinting fast, teasing, threatening and finally—

He let go only when he was sure, and once again the goalie came out to block the inevitable. Rober timed the move and let it go waist-high and to the left. It passed a scant inch from the goalie's body and into the net to tie the score.

It also converted the Arena into a vocal boiler shop, because the New York fans, who knew hockey only through the legendary exploits of the late Hobey Baker, Princeton star who fell in the World War, had never seen it really poured on before. They threw programs and hats onto the ice and rallied to the newest cause of hero-worship.

The period was more than half over, yet Silvey Madison remained firm. If the kid could stand up under the speed and leg-torture, the manager wasn't one to stop him.

The Chicago spares poured over the side-board again, but this time it was the first line. McMichael muttered something about luck and solo-crazy, but while he was muttering the puck dropped and Rober was away with it. Once again the voices created a din, once again Rober began his amazing pattern of skating. Cotton and Schlag were quick to get set for passes, but they were covered and so Rober went down alone.

He was watching a spot on the dasher, edging to the side for a carom shot. He actually let go with the puck and darted through, but something hit him, and he hit something. Later he learned it was a stick butt and that he had hit the ice, but he didn't know it as they carried him from the rink, with thin red trickle coming from his mouth.

A hero was born!

THE LIGHTS were low and the soft music was the best that Rober Lake had ever heard.

"The little organ in St. Rouen Church was about all we had," he told Ginny Hyatt. Then he grinned. "Once in a while Perk Hulse played his harmonica and his brother whistled bass in an old blow-jug."

She returned his smile. "Everything here at the Golden Slipper is wonderful . . . and restful. And the well-known people come here later in the evening."

"I'm glad you have a pull with the owner," Rober sighed as he finished his steak. "I sure couldn't afford to pay this kind of money for a meal."

"It's nothing," she scoffed. "You're famous now. You should be seen in an exclusive club like this. You're part of the town. You belong to the town."

"They almost proved it," Rober

chuckled, "when I left the Arena last night. I was still woozy, but they just about tore me to pieces. All for just a coupla lucky goals."

"Lucky!" She laughed. "Such modesty. Why it was the whole game. You were even responsible for the winning goal."

Rober caressed his still-aching jaw tenderly. "I'd rather score the goals the easy way," he murmured. "Gettin' a cracked head for the sake of leaving them a man short is too much of a sacrifice. I'll take a battle at the blue line any day. I thought that Chicago defense had jammed his stick through my face."

"It was a major penalty," she reminded. "They were a man short for five minutes—almost the rest of the game. The Nomads just had to win. And you, if you don't mind my saying it again, were simply marvelous. I'm proud of you!"

Rober grinned and blushed. "It's nice to hear you say it," he murmured and studied the assortment of furs at the next table.

"See anything good?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "The silver fox looks padded," he said. "Full pelts lie flatter. There's a sable over there," he said, nodding to a distant chair. "But it's old. It was a beauty when it was new, though. Real sable is like—like a living thing. It has life, seems to vibrate. No other fur seems to have that."

"Would you catch enough blue fox to make a coat for me next summer?" she asked coyly. "Without the monk's hood, of course."

"I could catch 'em," he said, shrugging the wide shoulders again, "but you'd look a mess. You can't cure summer furs into anything. It has to be cold."

"And the heart warm," she added. "Perhaps you only catch blue fox for *special* people."

He blushed again. "Blue fox don't wait around to be caught, Ginny," he said, smiling.

"Not all girls do, either," she countered. Then she laughed. "I'm only fooling, Rober. I'd be jealous of anybody who had a blue fox coat, and the fact that you gave it to her makes it twice as bad. Do you want to try dancing again?"

He nodded and followed her to the miniature ballroom. They were a curious contrast, she with her short black hair and her low-cut evening dress, and he with tousled blond hair, gray woolen shirt, corduroy Norfolk jacket and heavy-soled shoes. But he was a well-known celebrity now, and other diners (as well as surreptitious drinkers) explained that he was slightly on the eccentric side.

"Odd chap," one observer whispered. "Been hit over the head with a hockey stick steadily since he was five years old!"

FAME preceded him to Philadelphia where the Nomads went the next afternoon for a game with the last-place Quakers. The advance notices for the game centered around his one-man gang tactics and how it had snatched a victory from defeat against one of the toughest teams in the newly expanded hockey league.

Pictures, quotations, silly legends and a myriad of idiosyncrasies credited to him filled the columns of the Philadel-

phia sports pages. It was all with the idea of filling the big Coliseum, home of the orange-and-black shirted Quakers. Rober glanced at some newspapers as the Nomads tossed them into his lap on the train. It interrupted his study of the Philadelphia player-analysis on the mimeographed sheet.

"You're becoming a famous person," Bunny Porter said with a slight but unmistakable sneer. "Keep up the good work."

"Keep up the bad work on ice," Rober shot back, "and it'll be a cinch."

It wasn't a retort Porter cared to hear. He bristled, but Ferd Aldo nudged him into another seat and took over.

"Don't bite the hook, Rober," the defense laughed. "The first time around the league every rookie's entitled to his minutes."

Rober said nothing. He didn't care particularly. The old disgust was returning. The drum-beaters in the publicity office were blowing him up as a player who could duplicate the Chicago trick against any team and at any time. Of course he couldn't; nor could anyone else. Yet the public would expect it. They'd be disappointed and turn against him, just as quickly as they had cheered for him.

Slowly and surely the game itself was becoming less important. How soon, he wondered, before it would become incidental, a sort of necessary evil? Such a fate was inevitable, because it happened to everything beautiful and natural that man poured through the mill of the city way of living.

Look at skins. No trapper could get rich. A lot of them were deep in debt to the district fur-buyer. A winter's trapping brought scarcely enough to feed a family six months. Yet city people who dealt in them for thousands of dollars often got rich. Somehow it didn't add up, because he couldn't figure it correctly.

These Nomads. He studied their faces. All of them had once been ice-crazy, as he still was. What had happened to them? Why hadn't they torn that Chicago team apart in a frenzy to win for Marcel Doture? Some person had defiled the clubhouse and the game. Look at Marcel. He was still trembling, still fearful of the consequences for "failing" to lose. Why weren't the rest of the players vowing to win every game or be killed trying? Because something precious in them had died, Rober thought.

What was the good of playing city hockey? What good could possibly come of the whole business? From the boss-man down the only concern was a big crowd, and bigger gate receipts. Win or lose, high score or low, good playing or bad.

Once again Rober had the urge to get back to St. Rouen.

The urge was growing deeper as he got into his trappings and uniform in the Coliseum dressing room. He scarcely heard Silvey Madison go over the mimeographed facts and vital statistics of the Philadelphia playing personnel. He had studied most of them on the train. "St. Ives, left-hand shot, still nursing bad left knee and may shoot from right—New defense of promise, Boydston, big, talkative and surly—Ardan, goalie, likes to catch pucks—pro ball player in summer—weaker on right side—etc."

IT WAS an easy game, so easy, that Rober wondered why Philadelphia stayed in the league. Silvey used him for four minutes in the first two periods and five full minutes in the last. He cracked in two goals, both through the right side of the ball-playing goalie. The final score was 6—4, the highest of the season.

"Don't know whether Marcel was taking it easy or still suffering the shakes," Silvey said to Rober as they sat in a drawing room of the parlor car on the return trip to New York. "That's a lot of pucks for him to let through."

"It'd be a lot for anybody," Rober added with a shrug. He smiled wryly. "Well, the crowd liked it. That's all that counts."

"I wouldn't say that, young man," Silvey remonstrated.

"It's true, isn't it?" the player countered. "We're just a lot of monkeys attracting people to a new kind of zoo."

"Lake, stop it!" the coach exclaimed. His eyes flashed and he whacked his big fist against the portable table that separated them. "We're still playing hockey, an' you're being paid to play it, not to —to—"

"Reason why," Rober finished. "Into the Valley of Death, rode the six hundred. If I'm wrong, why do you allow lies to be printed in the newspapers about me and—"

"Just a minute!" Madison interrupted. "I called you in here tonight for a reason. To talk where we wouldn't be overheard or interrupted. First, you're to stop going around with, or even seeing a girl named Hyatt. Virginia Hyatt."

"Was that in the newspapers, too?" Rober asked, surprised.

"No, and it better *not* get in the papers," Madison stormed. "You don't realize who she *is*."

"I don't care particularly," the player said with his shrug of indifference. "She's good lookin', an' she's pleasant. She's a singer."

"A singer my eye! You were in a speakeasy with her," the manager accused. "You've had other meals with her. You talk with her in the hotel lobby."

Rober wanted to add that they also had adjoining rooms and watch Silvey Madison explode into dozens of pieces, but he didn't. It would take more than mere commands to stop him from seeing a perfectly harmless girl.

"Well—anybody gets lonesome," Rober said.

"Not when he's engaged to a girl back home and is true to her," Madison corrected. "Not when he thinks about her, writes her a letter every day, sends her presents."

"I wouldn't be that foolish!" Rober laughed. "Not after she fell for Lucien Hogan, just because he got the big league contract first."

Madison scoffed. "That's the bunk," he muttered. "What's the matter with you? Your girl's not interested in Hogan."

Rober shrugged. "That's the way I read it in the paper," he said, and he was enjoying the coach's discomfiture. "I challenged Chick Markham the other day, and he said he got it from Boston and from you." He eyed the manager. "You saw Hogan last. You must know. I've got no engaged girl, so I've got a right to go out with Virginia Hyatt. She's pretty and she knows some swell people. She's got a pretty nice mink coat, too, except for three Spring pelts—"

"Don't you know who gave her that coat?" Madison stormed. "A gambler—a *big* gambler!"

"He must be a good gambler, too, because Ginny said the coat cost eighteen hundred dollars. The skins, though, would only be worth about a hundred an' a quarter right out of trap lines. Good Canadian wild mink—"

"Shut up your confounded yammering about furs!" the coach said. "Come down to earth. Get some sense. I'm trying to tell you you're wrong, seeing Virginia Hyatt or being seen with her. She is no singer. She's a gambler's sweetie. She's up to no good. Don't you understand?"

Rober Lake eyed his former hero. It wasn't the same face that he had cut from the frontispiece of the hockey bible, pasted on cardboard and tucked under his pillow nights. A light was missing from the eyes. Rober could talk to that picture, and it talked back to him. Now there was an enormous barrier between this older, seamier face and his own. Something precious had left this man too.

"Jeanne Leseur never did anything to you, Silvey Madison," Rober said soberly, "except worship you, because I told her to. You dragged her name into the headlines of a cheap newspaper for cheap publicity so's to fill up the Arena and get more money."

"Look, Rober," Madison exclaimed, struggling to contain his growing impa-

tience, "I can explain that."

"You don't have to," the player replied quickly, rising. "Your book has been my hockey bible—the bible of thousands of kids. Your word was law, your methods were perfection. You taught me everything I know about hockey, all I ever wanted to know, all I ever needed. You taught me how to rag a puck and do what I did the other night against Chicago. You taught me how to crack my skull wide open, and spill my blood on the ice. Because on page one-fifty, near the end of the book, you said, 'There is something about ice hockey that cannot be put into words; it can only be felt deep in the heart. It is an indestructible faith in the game itself. Play hard, and that faith will never let you down!' "

"Rober—will—will you let me explain.—Times have changed. You see I can't hold back time—"

"You've explained everything, Mr. Madison," Rober said. He opened the door. "Especially about how to play this new game. You haven't written the book yet, but I know all the rules, thanks to *you!*"

In closing the door behind him, Rober didn't see the gray head slump forward into a crooked arm that muffled the sudden outburst of sobs.

AFTER the victory in Philadelphia, the New York fans gave the forthcoming visit of the Boston Pilgrims all the respect and attention heaped upon a heavyweight championship fight. They stormed the Arena box office and emptied the racks of reserved seats, and then started pacing the sidewalks, hoping to be accosted and swindled by ticket speculators.

All of the papers now featured the Rober Lake—Lucien Hogan "feud," and the allegedly blighted romance back in the fur and timber country. Rober's disgust attained a new peak when Chick Markham, the publicist, telephoned for him to come over.

"Why?" Rober puzzled.

"You're to be guest of honor at a lunch at the Astoria," he panted. "Be sure and wear that coonskin cap. It's terrific!"

"It's not coonskin," Rober fumed. "It's otter. A very smart water animal—"

"Not very smart if he let himself be caught," Markham guffawed. "Hurry up. Photographers'll be there. The lunch is free!"

"Sorry, nothing doing," Rober muttered. "I never eat with my hat on!"

The telephone began to ring so frequently that Rober had to instruct the switchboard girl not to ring it at all. The place was like a lunatic asylum, and he wished for all the world that he had never left good old St. Rouen and the honest-to-goodness ice. It all added up to nonsense, no matter how you figured it.

"I'm sorry to hear about Jeanne," Miss Hyatt sympathized as they sat in the corner of the hotel dining room. "She must be quite fickle, according to the paper accounts."

"Lucien Hogan's good looking," Rober said, smiling. "He hasn't scored as many goals as I have, but that doesn't count so much with a girl as looks."

"Doesn't it?" She echoed, and then flashed a beautiful smile. "Does meeting him on the ice make you nervous?"

"Me?" Rober exclaimed, and then laughed softly. "Why, I can play rings around Lucien. I always could. I 'carried' him on the river team, on the high school team, on the midgets, juniors and I'd be carrying him here, if he was on the Nomads."

"Then . . . you expect to beat Boston?" the girl puzzled.

Rober shrugged. "Well, that's different," he said. "You're speaking of a whole team. I was only talking about Lucien and me. Naturally, when a couple of kids have played so long together—"

"Of course," she said. "Would you like to get away from this hotel mob for dinner tonight? Someone invited us."

Rober grinned. "Why not?" he asked.

"They'll drive me crazy if I don't, but I could skate just as well with or without a brain. All real hockey players can. Whose dinner is it?"

"A very good friend of mine. It's at the Golden Slipper," she said. "It's a small party. You'll have fun. There'll be plenty of fine fur wraps to study—in case the girls fail to interest you!"

Rober blushed. "Trouble in this town is both have been spoiled by manufacturing," he confided. "Whether it's skins or girls, you've got to trap 'em fresh in the woods, and at the right time—"

"I'll be ready at eight," she said coolly. Her face was pale and drawn. "You won't disappoint me, will you? I've already told them to expect you."

"Thanks," the player said. "I understand."

ROBER took the afternoon workout in stride. It was the first time he had seen Silvey Madison since the return from Philadelphia. The manager greeted him with studied indifference, and the hour-long practice session followed the familiar basic pattern. More attention was paid, however, to line-formations by the first, second and third. In hockey the classification is determined by the number of minutes each line spends on the ice during a game, and a good manager seldom jeopardizes the work of a trio by trying to make its components interchangeable. And the so-called Number 3 line becomes Number 1 by the simple process of keeping it out there longer than the others.

Rober was conscious of this fact, and guessed that henceforth he, with Cotton and Schlag, could be regarded as the Number 2, for Passoway, Berot and Smith had been shuffled back, in Philadelphia. But all you had to do to earn more playing time was show something, and it was strictly a free-for-all. The season was still young.

"Wellman and Stark are doing precision passing for Boston with Gallet at center," Madison announced. "I want those two covered and back-checked every time, all the time. Leave them only when you're in complete possession, and can afford to. Also, Purick may referee, and he doesn't like deliberate offsides. Watch your passing over the blue line to create phony time-outs."

The team listened carefully, as Madison recited a small encyclopedia of facts about the Boston team. It was his forte, that memory loaded to the hilt with items of inside information on bruises, injuries, streaks, changes and even trouble in players' families, which so often accounts for a bad night on the ice. A worrying wing can't play up to his true form, so you can put your secondaries against him and skate your power against the opponent's secondaries. To Silvey, no detail was unimportant.

Rober could have eaten his precious otter-skin cap by the time seven-thirty arrived he was so hungry. He listened for signs of Ginny getting ready in the next room, but she was mighty quiet about her preparations. The minutes passed, and his hunger increased. Finally at seven fifty-five he went into the hall and knocked on her door for the first time. There was no answer, nor did his second and much louder knock produce a response.

With a shrug, he re-entered his room, put on his mackinaw, and his hat, and went downstairs. In the street he called a taxi.

"Golden Slipper," he ordered.

The "club," as they were called in the days of national prohibition, was entered through an area-way beneath a brownstone stoop and by means of a push-button electric bell. That is, the bell summoned someone, who peered through an aperture to recognize the caller as friend or federal foe. In this case, a swarthy-faced fellow in a dinner jacket responded. His brows arched at the sight of the fur cap and the heavy mackinaw.

"I've been here before," Rober said. "I have a date tonight. . . Eight o'clock."

"With whom, please?"

"Ginny Hyatt. For dinner."

"Just a minute, please."

The guardian disappeared and returned with another swarthy face, who peered intently at the caller, and said:

"When did you see Miss Hyatt last?" he asked.

"This morning. Why?"

"I don't know him," the second observer muttered.

With that the aperture was closed. With that also Rober felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Get outa here," a growling voice muttered. "Silvey Madison wants you, an' right away. The cab's waiting."

Whoever the fellow was, he remained speechless until minutes later when Rober realized with panicking suddenness that the summons might be a trick.

"Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "How do I know Silvey wants me? How do I know you're not driving me there, but somewhere else?"

The stranger laughed. "You get smart late," he muttered. "Why didn't you ask that before you jumped into the cab like a dope?"

"Well—*are* you—I mean, *does* Silvey want me?"

The man leaned forward and handed the driver a bill.

"We're pullin' up to the Arena," he said, "so I guess you're lucky this time."

"How did you know where I was?" Rober puzzled.

"Simply by tailin' ya," the other replied with a sneer and followed him from the cab. "I been on your tail for two days!"

SILVEY MADISON was not alone in his office. He was pacing the carpeted floor, sort of surrounding a small, weasel-like fellow who looked as though he had just finished a night under the lamps at headquarters. He quavered as the two entered. Madison turned the bolt on the door, and, at the same time, the secretary entered from a side door, carrying pencils and her notebook. She was followed by Joe Banker, the Nomads' captain and left wing.

"Is this the player?" Silvey asked of the little guy.

The little guy nodded. "He's the one. Lake. That's him."

"That's right," Rober replied. "Rober Binshaw Lake."

"Rober," Silvey said with a sigh, "this man's name is Harry Lausch. He is the one who put the envelope of money in Marcel's locker last week."

"He has no business in the locker room in the first place," Rober said with rising indignation. "He ought to be barred from now on. He might've known that Marcel, or any other player—"

"Just a moment!" Madison thundered.

Absolute silence fell.

"We'll let details come out later," the manager continued. "Right now we're only interested in you and your answer. Be careful what you say."

"Why?" Rober puzzled.

"Because it's serious, that's why! Now, listen. This man put an envelope in your locker—on the shelf . . . before workout today. It contained one thousand dollars—ten one-hundred-dollar bills, and a note like the other one. What did you do with it?"

"Me?" Rober gasped.

"Yes, you! What happened to the envelope and the money?"

Rober said sharply, "I didn't see no envelope, nor any money."

"I put it there!" Lausch exclaimed. "What does he think I am, a liar?"

Silence cloaked the room again.

"Well, Rober," Madison said, "what do you have to say?"

"I said it," the player shouted. "I didn't see no envelope, nor any money."

"But we've cracked a terrible gambling group right down to the last detail," Madison insisted. "This Lausch is a soft-drink seller here in the Arena. He's confessed everything . . . about who pays whom. He's a foolish fellow and an accessory, but he's not a crook. He's trying to help us. He had helped us. He swears that he put the envelope containing a thousand dollars in your locker

just before you showed up for practice today—"

"An' I did!" Lausch exclaimed. "Right on the shelf in plain sight. An' I looked right after practice, an' it was gone."

"You see?" Silvey pleaded. "Rober, this is serious. I warned you about the Hyatt woman, that she was a gambler's sweetie and was collecting facts about the team from you and passing them on to Lew Franz. He's the big money-man behind this rotten Broadway gambling situation. I told you about not going to speakeasies. Why did you go over to the Golden Slipper tonight?"

"To meet Ginny Hyatt for dinner," Rober said simply. "We made the date this morning."

"She was going to introduce you to Franz?"

Rober shrugged. "She didn't say."

"When I got there," said the man who had been tailing Rober, "they gave him a brush-off. Wouldn't let him in."

"Rober, you're mixed up in a sickly mess," Madison declared solemnly. "I'm sorry, but if you know anything about the thousand dollars in the locker, for heaven's sake—"

"Look, Silvey," Rober said indignantly, "I'm not in any mess. *You're* in a mess. You're all mixed up. I'm not."

There was a knock on the door. All were silent. Finally Rober's apprehender opened the door a crack. He quickly admitted a uniformed policeman and a detective. The policeman pointed to Rober.

"Sorry, Silvey," the plain-clothes officer said, "but we have to take Lake downtown for questioning. A girl in the room next to his at the hotel was just found dead. Somebody said they saw him knockin' on her door about a half-hour ago. Come on, kid."

SILVEY MADISON and his team-captain, Joe Banker, sat in the same room the next afternoon, staring at each other during long intervals of silence between spoken speculations.

"Well, Silvey, what do you make of it?" Banker asked. "I mean, is it an act, or is it the real thing?"

The manager's lips became a thin line. He said, "The police couldn't go any deeper into Rober than we did. He has a tough shell."

"But they knew he had nothing to do with the girl's death."

"Of course," Silvey murmured. "Suicide was plain. The notes she left were genuine. They just wanted to know why he was pounding on the door of a corpse's bedroom."

"Funny . . . her writing that she wouldn't go through with it, even for Franz," Banker mused, "and that she'd lost the fight against a stone wall. What'd she mean, anyway?"

"I'm not sure," Silvey sighed. "I don't know what they talked about, Rober and that girl. And I sure didn't know she lived in the next room. She must've checked in the day he got here. That Lew Franz takes care of every angle."

"Do you think she was actually nuts about that kid, Silvey?"

"Oh, Joe, don't be silly," Madison barked. Then he mused, softly, "I don't know. You can't figure women. Rober once told me she had an eighteen-hundred dollar mink coat that'd be worth only a hundred and twenty-five in the traps,' except for three bad skins!"

"Well," Banker said, rising, "the papers are pouring it on today as a broken heart. That'll upset your little apple cart."

"I don't think so," Silvey replied quickly. "I'm right, except that I wish I knew what happened to the thousand bucks, *if* he didn't get it."

Rober Lake slept the slumber of the innocent after the grilling at police headquarters. Ginny's death was like a dream to him. He wondered if all the things they'd said about her were true.

Finally, he concluded, she had revealed her intentions in making the last date for the Golden Slipper, for who among her fine friends wanted to meet him? To get his opinion on skunks?

Yes, she had really meant to get him mixed up with Lew Franz the gambler. He sighed. How else could such a girl end up? It didn't really surprise him. The newspapers were foaming at the mouth about feuds, record crowds, gate receipts, a gambler's dead sweetie and how she was desperately in love with a star hockey player that she was supposed to compromise in some way.

"They'd write any kind of lie," Rober muttered bitterly, "so long as it would help put another dollar into the box office."

WHEN all the drivel had been read and digested, the game still had to be played, and somehow there wasn't room in his head for much else. The mental housing situation became more acute as the day wore on, and thoughts of the game churned increasingly. It was always that way, and had been since he could remember. Sometimes he got headaches, thinking so hard about a forthcoming game long before he had to. Today he didn't have a headache. He felt singularly free and easy and confident. He even felt sorry for Lucien Hogan, because Lucien had placed money above their pact and friendship.

Sorry for Lucien, he admitted, as he skated onto the glass-like Arena ice with the Nomads, because the money would let him down. He never saw it fail. He whipped a practice puck at Marcel Doture, and kept up with the circle. He was completely oblivious to the deafening cacaphony which his entrance had precipitated. The waving hands, the whistles, the shrieks of girls —it meant nothing, compared with the fact that he had been too casual with the practice puck. He *could* have aimed more for Marcel's side—

He recognized Lucien Hogan in the purple of the Pilgrim uniform. The way Lucien skated from the hips and used his stocky shoulders.

Despite the cries of the crowd for the well-publicized feud to begin, Silvey Madison started his older forward wall, and the puck began its dizzy journey over the frozen sheen with a roar of anticipation that seemed to pour from all corners of the mammoth structure. It would be a desperate battle. You could see that from the movements of every player on ice. The clashes started less than two minutes from the opening face-off when a Pilgrim and a Nomad were banished to the penalty box for a double foul.

Silvey responded with his second line, and the struggle was a Mexican stand-off for three more minutes. No sign of Lucien coming out, Rober murmured, and kept an eye out for the red thatch. At the six-minute mark, an offside brought Silvey's three fingers into view. Cotton, Schlag and Rober Lake were climbing over the dasher without the loss of an instant.

A gigantic roar spread the news that Boston's Number 12 was also coming out. The battle was on in earnest now. The redhead skated to center ice and stood in the circle as Rober glided up.

"He told me you had already signed up," Lucien murmured.

Rober nodded. "That's what I really thought, Lucien," he whispered.

THE puck went down and Rober had it. He could always get it from Lucien, even if he had to fool him by telling him his mother was on the riverbank with a birch-whip, which always made him look over. Of course, keeping it from Lucien was another matter, because he was fast in a different sort of way. His hips were deceptive. He seemed to be fighting some kind of paralysis, which he wasn't, of course. He just skated funny that way. People said it was from falling through the ice so often that the chilly water finally got him. He fell through so often after overskating, or not keeping track of where the springs were, that Rober said he'd just leave him in there the next time. Of course, he never did.

The crescendo of voices mounted

through the succeeding minutes as the puck zig-zagged over the ice with the Pilgrims in full chase. The anticipated battle, either with fists or sticks, was an unfailing lure. But down on the ice, there was no thought of personal battle. For a while Rober scarcely thought of Silvey Madison, and what a dirty trick it was to tell Lucien that his lifelong hockey partner had already signed up. That was a lie. But the idea of that lie soon began to burn his brain. It was such a terrible lie that . . . Rober made a few defensive moves with his stick, but it was too late, Boston's Wengren, a left wing, had the rubber and was off on a crazy journey in the other direction.

The forward flew, almost as fast as time itself, and soon had the puck at the Nomad's blue line where Ferd Aldo and Bruiser Kelvin back-tracked in a desperate effort to narrow the attacking range. Rober could hear Silvey shouting from the bench, "Get back there!" Joe Banker was shouting. But the sound of Silvey's voice—it was like a hot-iron. How could you even play for a man who lied as Silvey had to poor Lucien—?

Groans and then loud catcalls as the red lights flashed. The Boston spares poured over the dasher. Silvey slapped the boards, and summoned his third-string line. He thumbed Rober to the end of the bench, but Rober skated to where the manager sat.

"I might've known you'd tell Lucien that I'd signed up," he shouted into Silvey's paling face. "It took a lie to do it. I knew Lucien would *never* break our pledge unless—"

"Get to the end of the bench!" Silvey roared as the referee's whistle sounded. "We've got seven players on the ice!"

The inside of Rober's head was whirling now with dozens of scrambled thoughts and hatreds that added up to complete confusion. Players edged over so he could sit on the end of the bench, the place for the least useful player. Well, it wasn't his fault . . . not entirely. the 1—0 score—

"Rober—"

"Jeanne!" he gasped. "How did you get here? When?"

"This afternoon," she said. Her hand slipped into the top of his big bearskin glove and touched his. "Mr. Madison got word into St. Rouen a few days ago. I left right away—he's awfully worried."

"Silvey sent for—for *you?*" Rober gasped.

"Sent me money, too," she said, "and told me to hurry—"

The buzzer sounded, ending the opening period. The players rose as a man, and Rober accompanied them by instinct.

"Don't go way, Jeanne," he pleaded. "—I'll be back . . . *an' how!*"

HE ELBOWED past the Nomads, his skates clumping clumsily on the rubber matting. He couldn't get to the locker room fast enough. He rushed over to Silvey.

"I—I sort of made a mistake, Silvey," he said. "I got all mixed up. I . . . forgot about the puck. That's always bad—"

"Yes, that's bad," Silvey echoed, and struggled to grin. "What does it say on page fifty-two—"

"Take your eyes off the puck, but never your mind," Rober replied. "Bringin' *her* here—Silvey, you must've understood what was the matter all the time."

"Look, Silvey," the player pleaded. He gripped the other's arm savagely. "If you'll just let me out there—just once—"

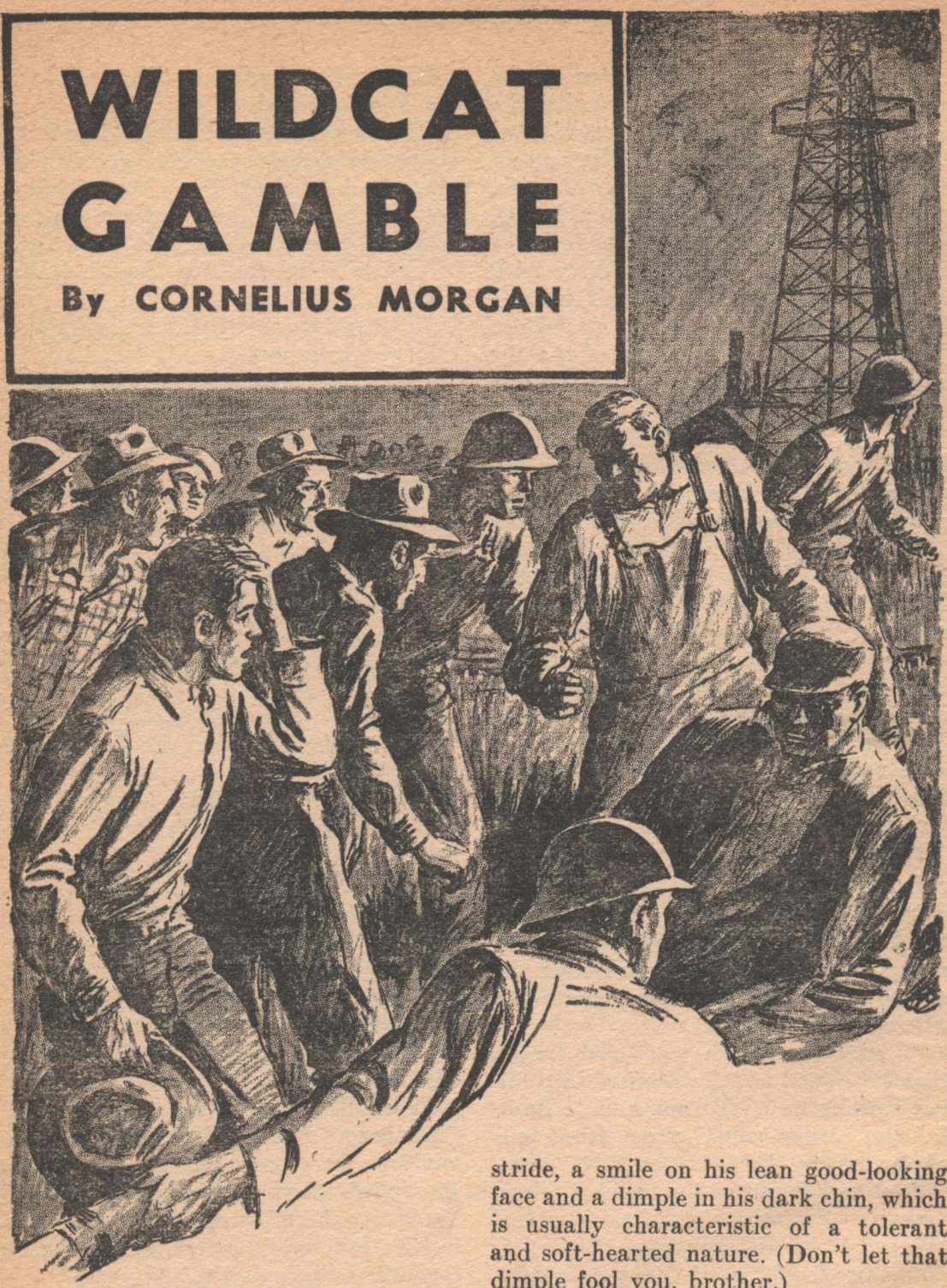
"First, Rober, I want to tell you about the money," Silvey said. "Somehow the envelope had been pushed way back. It tipped down behind the shelf. I found it there when I searched the locker thoroughly before you came in tonight. I was going to tell you—"

"Silvey, as far as I'm concerned, the money never existed an' still doesn't," Rober exclaimed. "More important is, can I play hockey?"

"Like nobody else!" Silvey sighed, and slumped to the bench. He thumbed toward the rink. "Turn on a few lights for me—please!"

WILDCAT GAMBLE

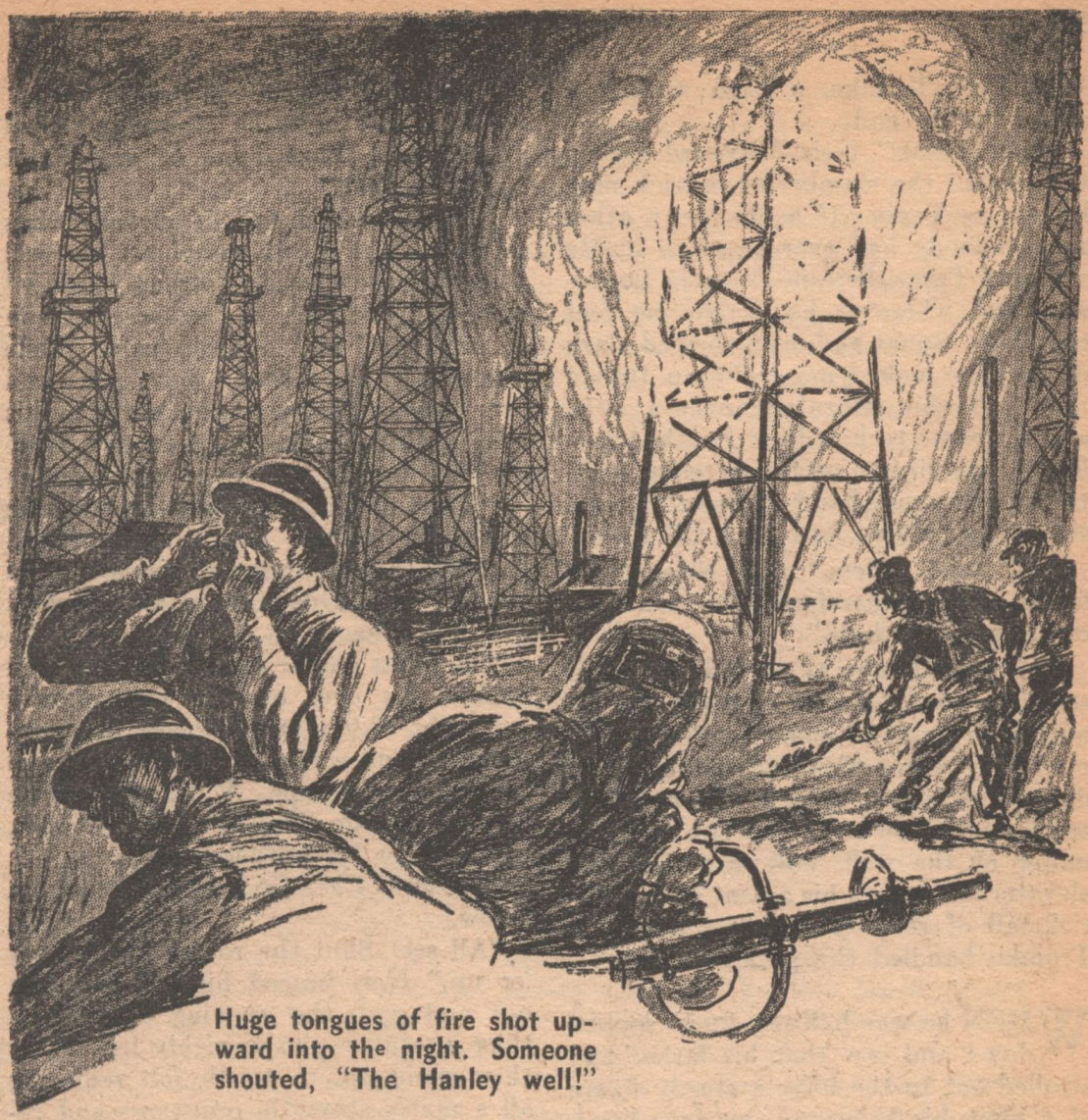
By CORNELIUS MORGAN



NELS MAYNARD walked from his trailer to the derrick. He wore rubber boots over his pants, gray turtleneck sweater, old battered hat yanked down over his left ear; a big loose-jointed chap, resolve in his stride, a smile on his lean good-looking face and a dimple in his dark chin, which is usually characteristic of a tolerant and soft-hearted nature. (Don't let that dimple fool you, brother.)

He had left his wife asleep in the trailer, had kissed her cheek without waking her. She looked a trifle wan, troubled even in her slumber, and he thought of Kingsley's lines:

Men must work
And women must weep.



Huge tongues of fire shot upward into the night. Someone shouted, "The Hanley well!"

It was the graveyard shift, midnight to 8 A.M. Before relieving the derrick man Nels went to the logbook and saw that the bit was fourteen hundred and sixteen feet down. He glanced at the Kelly-joint, and saw there was a length of about six feet to be sunk before he'd have to start pulling out of the hole to replace the worn bit with a sharpened one. The rotary was drilling the length of the Kelly joint and despite the rasping noise, the grinding and hissing, the derrick man, the pipe racker and the boll weavil were all prone on the derrick floor, sound asleep under the white glare of the arc light.

Charlie Figg came up behind him chawing his eternal quid of "terbacca," and following him, materializing out of the gloom, slouched Pete Tromko, the boll weavil, and Crane Farris and Chet Godwin. The latter sniffed the air hopefully.

"Smell any gas?" he asked Nels.

Nels broadened his perennial grin, showing strong white teeth. "No such luck, Chet. She's down fourteen-sixteen and we'll have to bring 'er up. How's tricks, Pete?" he asked the Russian.

"I wish I had some wodka."

"Vodka, eh? I could do with a shot of it myself."

"Wodka—wodka." Pete Tromko always pronounced his V's as W's and the roughnecks took pleasure in correcting him just to get his goat. He was a good

fella, Pete Tromko, a hard worker, a sticker to the end.

"Hey Texas!" Nels Maynard kicked the foot of the slumbering derrick man known as Texas. If he had any other name nobody had ever heard of it. He was just Texas, here in Utah, in Louisiana, and wherever his wandering feet took him. Squat and deep-chested, dark of jowl, he looked more like an Italian than a Texan. Regularly once a week a letter came to him from South America, the inscription on the envelope written by a feminine hand. It was addressed simply to "Texas, San Juan Oil Field."

"All right, fellers," said Nels, "we'll let 'er ride another four feet, then we'll come out of the hole."

This would take them four hours of solid work with, for all of them, the required alertness of men bringing a submarine up into action and the unknown dangers attendant upon it. Thomas Nelson Maynard, owner, prospector and promoter of the well, now straddled the elevator and began his ascent of the derrick, all of seventy feet upward. Pete Tromko handled the pulley rope.

WHEN he was halfway up he looked down and saw that his father had strolled out to the hole; a sturdy figure of a man, his hair gray, his face lined, his hands gnarled yet still—despite his sixty-odd years—mighty capable. Pop Maynard had the official title of Tool Pusher and was, by his own appointment, in charge of the three crews. An old and experienced hand, he had a fund of stories about the "oil game" as he rightly called it. They were both good and bad. He had been present when they brought in the famous Spindletop gusher in the "billion dollar pool" of North Central Texas. He could tell you other stories too, of failures breaking men's hearts when their long and dreary labors produced nothing more than a "duster."

"Hey Pop!" Nels shouted from his cradle, "we're coming out."

"What?"

"Putting a new bit on her."

"What the hell's so all-fired unusual about that? What d'you suppose I got out of bed for?"

Nels proceeded up the elevator. His father had been dubious about the well from the very start, had strongly advised against the drilling, had not wanted him to buy the lease to begin with. While respecting his father's judgment and ever ready to listen to and profit by his advice, Nels wanted to be an oilman on his own, having had some experience in Louisiana before swopping his working clothes for Uncle Sam's uniform and handling a machine-gun, instead of an oil driller, at Guadalcanal and Tarawa and Iwo Jima.

The lights on the derrick frame glared against his eyes and he momentarily lost sight of his landing place. He wondered if Pete would know when to stop hauling on the rope. At last the cradle stopped and he climbed on the catwalk, reaching for his leather harness.

"All set?" Chet Godwin hollered from below.

"All set. Shut the rotary off and rig 'er up." Nels braced himself to reach out and grab the swaying pipe, shuttling into place the unwieldy lengths as they came up. A tough job requiring all a man's strength, quickness and resolve.

"This, and waiting for a Jap banzai charge," he grinned reminiscently. "What's the difference?"

He adjusted the harness about his waist and shoulders. It was his only safety should he be jerked off the catwalk by the heavy pipe that would come up wobbling, attached to the claws of the crown-block many feet above him.

"Here we go," Charlie Figg shouted at him.

"Let 'er rip!"

The drum began winding, giving out with its mournful song of labor. Nels waited for the first length of pipe.

The new oil field of "San Juan" lay all around him. As far as he could see in the haze of night, rotaries, pumps and

boilers were working, drills rasping. Borne on a slight nor'western breeze was the pungent smell of petroleum.

The "San Juan" find was in a county of Utah where precious little oil had been tapped before. It had fired the imagination of people for hundreds of miles around. The major companies had flown in there by plane and with the money back of them had assembled blocks of land as far as adjacent counties, and even across the neighboring borders of the state into Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. But Nels had no time to look over the San Juan, nor sniff, with jealous nostrils, the whiff of riches that belonged to men more fortunate than he. The pipe was coming up.

Now the derrick began trembling and rattling. Crane Farris, working the drum, was a fast man coming out of the hole and Nels had all he could do to keep up with him, shuttling the pipe into place, then reaching for and wrestling with the next length. The cable that was hoisting the fourteen hundred feet of pipe was winding around the big drum so rapidly that, from the distance, it appeared to be stationary.

ROUGHLY four hundred feet had come up when the whole derrick lurched upward, seeming to tremble in midair, hanging unsupported there. In the same instant the catwalk shifted beneath Nels' feet so that if he had not grabbed a crossbeam he would have lost his balance.

There was a hoarse cry from Crane Farris who, in some way, had been hurled to the ground by the sudden cessation of the drum. He picked himself up, starkly gazing at the taut and slightly vibrating cable. Pete Tromko was peering upward at the catwalk. Pop ran across the derrick floor.

With the machinery jarred to a halt, there was a suspense of all sound except the ominous creak of the cable against the elevator pulley.

All of them knew what had happened and they also knew that hell could break loose any moment. By some freak or other, down in the hole at an unknown distance, the pipe had snagged. Though it seldom happened, occasionally a boulder, its outer rim ground off during the process of drilling, would shift its position, slightly closing the hole at that spot and causing pressure against the drill pipe as it was being pulled out. Sometimes the pressure was slight and would relent; sometimes it was "the works," the finish.

They were all looking at Pop as he walked back from the hole. Cupping his hands he shouted a warning upward. "Hold on to something up there, son. We're liable to shake you loose." He spoke to Farris. "Try 'er once more—easy."

The machinery ground its teeth in anguish, the cable straining and not giving an inch.

"Stop 'er," Pop ordered, "then reverse. Easy." His deeply lined face was white in the arc light.

The procedure was the accepted method of letting the pipe descend into the hole a few yards in order to get another upward start. But the weight of the drill pipe exerted a terrific pull on the reversed drum which whirled backward with such speed that the released cable began coiling and writhing against the derrick studs like some monstrous reptile. That in itself proved that the long string of pipe was solidly wedged against some obstruction in the wall of the well. Not even its own tremendous weight was sufficient to release it.

Charlie Figg and Pete Tromko ran for their lives to avoid the thrashing cable, Pop and the drum man staying their ground.

"Shut 'er off!" Pop roared.

Farris did so, but it was too late insofar as Nels Maynard was concerned. Holding to the crossbeam of the catwalk, the derrick swaying, he had just hollered, "Take it easy down there," when a loop of the maddened cable coming down from above the crown-block caught him around the middle like the tentacle

of an octopus.

It lifted him off the catwalk, seemed to toy with him in midair for a second or so, breaking the safety of his harness, then in a convulsive movement the cable slammed him against the derrick frame some twenty feet down. It almost wrenched his arm from its socket, slammed him again, and in a slow and satisfied coil slipped away from him, leaving him clinging there like a back-broken lizard.

Closing his eyes, Pop crossed himself. Charlie Figg had rushed to the elevator which he brought down. "Take me up there," he yelled at Tromko.

PETE hauled him up, the sweat breaking out on his homely face. The rest of the crew held their breaths, expecting every instant to see Nels come plunging down insensible to the ground. But he still clung on above.

His face bleeding profusely, his body aching as if it had been torn apart, he held on to the derrick frame by will power alone, teeth biting into his lips. Charlie Figg swung the cradle toward him, got an arm around his waist and by superhuman strength managed to hold him.

"Can you grab on to the elevator ropes, Nels?"

"I'll—I'll try, Charlie."

Charlie nearly dropped him in getting him to the cradle, but with Nels giving all he had in his own rescue they managed to reach the elevator where Nels promptly fainted.

"Lower away," Charlie Figg called. "Take it awful easy, Pete."

Pete took it easy. When the elevator reached the derrick floor, Nels lay there like a dead man, Pop bending over him. For a while not one of them spoke.

"Is he hurt bad, Pop?"

"Dunno. Pete, you run for a doctor. And look," he stopped him, "don't say anything to Janie. We'll take him over to my shack till we know how badly hurt he is."

Pete ran off on his bandy legs, jumping over obstacles in his path like a mountain goat, and Pop reached out for the tool racker's hand. "Thanks, Charlie," he said simply. He looked at the cable, the suspended pipe, the silent machinery. Slowly he twice shook his gray head. "Wrench off part of this boarding," he said. "We'll lay him on it and get him over to my place."

It was a dismal procession, all of them fearing it might be the end for Nels as an active oilman. They also realized that it would take weeks to resume work on the well if they could get the pipe out. If not, it would mean the abandonment of the whole shebang and ten weeks back-breaking labor.

There were two shacks in the camp, hurriedly shoved up by the roughnecks. One was occupied by Pop and the 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. shift, the other by Charlie Figg and the two other shifts. Nels lived in his trailer with his wife. They laid the unconscious man on Pop's bunk, waiting for the appearance of the doctor. As the roughnecks awoke, asking what had happened, a woman's voice could be heard calling.

"Nels? Nels? Is anything wrong?"

The trailer was about fifty feet away from the shack and Pop walked over to it. Janie Maynard stood in the open door, a dressing gown over her pyjamas. Not so long ago her husband had been a soldier, invalided home from the Pacific. There were many other men at the "San Juan" field who had been G.I.'s. But there wasn't a roughneck in the so-called Maynard Oil Company who didn't regard Janie as the best soldier of them all.

She was only twenty-five and, by rights, should have been living in a regular home of her own with room in which to move about and the inducements for bringing up a family. She was still pretty enough to make men blink and should have been wearing dainty silks and crazy hats to go with her prettiness, not denim overalls, stained leather jacket and waders.

One would have said she was pathe-

tically out of place here at "San Juan," that she couldn't stand the muck of it, the permeating stink of oil, for an hour, much less a day.

But that would mean that you didn't know Janie Maynard.

Her large clear-blue eyes focused on the sturdy figure of her father-in-law as he came into her view. "Something's happened to Nels," she said at once. "I was sound asleep and I awoke all of a sudden—a few minutes ago."

"Now Janie, don't get all het-up—"

"Nels is hurt! I know it!"

HE PUT his arms about her, pressing her to him. "He fell from the derrick. Now look, Janie, maybe he ain't hurt bad at all. We've sent for the doctor and he—"

"Where is he? Where have you taken him?"

"He's over to my place."

"I must go to him." Thrusting her bare feet into rubber boots, she went down the steps of the trailer, ran across to the shack where the roughnecks, in various sorts of sleeping attire, gazed at her in silence. For a moment she stood stone-still about ten feet from the bunk on which Nels lay. His face was masked with blood, one arm and hand suspended lifelessly to the gritty floor. Janie dropped on her knees beside him.

There were no tears in her eyes, though all the suffering of Christendom lay in her voice. "Oh, Nels," she said softly.

The doctor came in carrying a bag. "You his wife?" he asked Janie.

"Y-yes."

The doctor produced a stethoscope, put two long fingers about Nel's wrist. "Help me to undress him," he said to Janie.

"He's in pretty bad shape. Severe wrenching of the arm socket muscles and back injury." He looked around him. "No telephone here?"

Pop said, "There's one in the company hall across the way."

"Well I guess we can carry him to the hospital before the ambulance gets here. Some of you men lift the whole bunk up just as it is. Carefully. And keep him well covered with blankets. Let's move right away." The roughnecks lifted the bunk from the floor and carried Nels out of the shack.

Janie's face was drained of all color. "Is—is it serious, doctor?"

"I can't say without a further examination. He's bleeding internally."

With an arm about her waist, Pop took Janie back to the trailer, where she dropped on the bed, eyes staring and lifeless. "You better git some rest," he gently advised her. "I'll go on to the hospital. Soon as I find how things stand, I'll come back here and let you know."

"I'm coming with you," she said. "Let me get some other clothes on."

Life did indeed seem especially cruel for Nels Maynard. He had been a buoyant and gallant person since he was old enough to walk, ready to take the rough with the smooth along his boyhood and manhood trails, the good breaks with the bad, keeping up his likable smile no matter what happened. It seemed only right that life and fortune should smile on him in return. He had had no such luck.

He was born into a comfortable home, Pop Maynard having made a great deal of money out of oil in Louisiana and elsewhere. Less lucky ventures had eaten into it before Nels went to high school, the money further dwindling from the expenses of his mother's long illness before she died in their hometown of Truscott, Louisiana. Nels used to spend his vacations working in the local oil fields, though it was his ambition to be a lawyer some day. After a year and a half at college it became necessary for him to leave in order to help out with things at home. He began by running a gas station. Working hard he made a thriving business of it, and after buying the property on his own he began making plans to extend and build an auto-court on it. Then the

bugle called him into the service of his country.

ON ONE of his last liberties from camp he married Janie Benton who worked in a local store, and was by all odds the prettiest girl in Truscott. They had two days together, then he went away, a private in the Marines. Eventually he was promoted to corporal after Tarawa and company sergeant at Iwo Jima where a Jap mortar shell exploded right beside him.

They didn't give him a prayer to lick that one. It took more than plasma, sulfa drugs and penicillin to keep his heart gasping. It took the eternal grin within him, the old Nels Maynard moxy to finally thumb Death into the shadows. As Kipling has it:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

There was a long spell in the hospital at Pearl Harbor and at other hospitals along the way. Then, miraculously, Nels came marching home again to Truscott, sound as a brand new penny, to a hero's welcome, to Janie and Pop and a host of well-wishing friends.

These and other memories flitted hazily in Nels Maynard's sub-conscious mind as he lay on a cot in the hospital. The gas station he owned! It, too, had suffered injuries in the war, and when the distribution of gas continued to be held down he was forced to look around for something else to do. Like many another G.I., the work he hoped to find waiting for him just wasn't there, and he eventually took a job in a lumber yard nearby at $35 a week.

It was Pop who broke the news of the "San Juan" oil discovery in Utah, getting the news in some way or other even before it hit the telegraph wires. He reckoned he could smell oil hundreds of miles away. Nels was fired with the prospects of it from the very start, catching the fever in his father's eye. "Oil" was in both their bloodstreams. Pop was like an old beagle-hound straining at the leash, and Nels leaped at the possibilities in view. They sat up all night discussing the proposition.

Oil! Black magic liquid, filthy to the touch, reeking of its own peculiar odor. How long had enormous pools of it lain glistening and quiescent not so very far under the surface of the ground?

For ages. For eons.

Nels tossed deliriously on his hospital bed. His brain seemed to be an oil deposit in itself. Again he could hear his father's oft-told stories about oil . . . "billions of dollars lying loose right under men's feet. Ah! Them was the days, by Jookes! We'll never see their like again, not even if that "San Juan" equals The Ranger or Burkburnetts. Why Spindletop at one time come in three-hundred thousand barrels a day! Figure that out at $3.45 a barrel which was its price then. A million dollars! A day, I'm talking of! Not a week or a month. Three-hundred thousand barrels of the stuff every day!

"And it was the wildcatter who made the business, not these new-fangled geologists who have taken over now. I still ain't got much use for them fellers. If there's any oil around I can find it with a doodle-bug."

The doodle-bug! The wiggle-stick! That meant plain oil sense, the ability to find oil, an instinct peculiar to the old-time wildcatter. Pop had belonged to the league.

OH, POP could tell you about oil. He'd talk all night, by Jookes! And keep going all the next day without stopping to catch his breath. He'd tell you about anticlines and synclines down below there where the oil lay, and what shale was promising and what was not. He'd tell you about natural seepages which

was not always proof of oil after all. He reckoned that sometimes you could tell the presence of oil by a resemblance of topography to that occuring on some developed field.

"I often found it that way, son."

Truscott! $35 a week! No future in sight for himself and Janie! Aching with pain throughout his whole body; a thousand different memories were rushing pell-mell through his brain.

"You could put down a well for a few thousand bucks in my time, son. But not today."

Nels and his father had figured the initial costs to set up a derrick, plus the costs for going down three thousand feet. The sum total was pretty stiff. It took plenty of money to buy a lease in a discovered oil field, and more money to buy equipment and pay wages. At that it was a gamble, hazardous as betting on the turn of a card, the odds all in favor of a man losing everything he had.

Well, what of it? Better take that risk than stay on a $35 job all one's life. Why not take the chance, even if it required every dollar he possessed? Janie? What about her?

Before deciding, Nels put the contemplated venture up to her, telling her it was a pure gamble with just one hole card: his father's experience. She didn't have to come with them. She could remain in Truscott. Oh, no! Janie was more excited than any of them by the proposed adventure. She said she had been separated from Nels long enough. She was going with him and to heck with the hardships!

Hurry, hurry, hurry! Valuable time was going by. Others would get there ahead of them.

Nels sold his gas station property, took all his savings from the bank. Pop cashed in on everything he owned, and some things he didn't own. The money thus acquired still fell far short of what was necessary. One of Pop's old cronies invested in the proposition, and finally an additional two thousand dollars from an unexpected source started them off on the road to fortune.

Lying in a semi-coma in the hospital Nels' throbbing brain tortured him all the more as he was now reminded of that two thousand dollars. He had made a flying visit to see Pfc. Wally Evans, his war buddy in the army hospital at Baton Rouge. In some way Wally knew all about the proposed "fling at oil."

"Look," he said, "I've got two thousand dollars I've no use for. Take it."

Nels vigorously refused the offer. Wally Evans had lost both arms in the war, and while the Government compensated him for this handicap in life he might never again be able to earn two thousand dollars.

"No, Wally. I'm all set. I've got more than enough to sink three wells . . ."

That wasn't the way Wally Evans had heard it. "So you won't even give me a chance to invest my dough, eh?" he kidded. "I said I had no use for two thousand bucks, but maybe I could do something for myself if I doubled it, or tripled it. I'm not banking on you, pal. I'm banking on your old man and what he calls his doodle-bug. I can't write a check," he grinned, joking despite his handicap. "It so happens I lost my fountain pen. But I can give you power of attorney . . ."

AN OIL rush! An oil boom! Call it by any name it is a mad sight to see, and Nels Maynard and his wife saw it for the first time when they arrived at "San Juan," the name given to the new field because of its nearness to the San Juan river in lower Utah.

In man's frantic efforts to "get in on it" and take his gamble at the best spot available, the town had become filled with drillers, tool dressers, promoters, company men and sharpsters. A number of stores had been hastily set up to supply food and clothing. Pup tents and various shacks sprang up like toadstools in which were beds of straw and leaves and where men slept like huddled hogs. Oil-well machinery dominated every-

thing in this forest of derricks, drill-stem pipes, boilers, engines.

Day and night a harsh and continual pandemonium of sounds filled the air. Hissing steam, the gurgling and growling of gas and oil, the discordant shouting and yelling of roughnecks, the ringing of hammer and rasping of saw. Wagons and mud-splashed trucks lined the sidewalks, mostly comprised of wooden planks. The streets had been churned to quagmire in which cars often had to be abandoned and through which mules, caked with mud and blood, dragged their heavy loads through ooze, oil and water.

It was an everyone-for-himself situation although the major companies brought in construction men to build barracks for their crews, bunk houses, and one large eating hall. Each company operated its own camp. There had been no attempt to set up any form of municipal government, at least not yet. A sheriff's office constituted the only police power, which amounted to very little. It was up to the men to keep their own law and order.

In this mud-spattered scramble Nels made his first play for oil and made it impulsively and unluckily.

It was Texas, the derrick man, who dug up the next available lease. He met a driller who had been "cleaned out" by one of the camp gamblers and needed money to meet his payroll. As Texas told the story it looked genuine enough, so Nels and Pop went to see the man who was surly and disgusted with himself for betting on a pair of dice.

"Got no time to argue with you," he told Nels. "Ten thousand dollars down, and a half interest in what you get out of it. The property is on the outskirts of the field," he indicated it on the map he had, "and there's wells right alongside of you, one of 'em spouting three thousand barrels a day, another one averaging two thousand five hundred. That's all I got to say, mister."

The lease was sound, the driller having bought it when he arrived at the "San Juan," expecting to drill there as soon as his first well paid out, or didn't pay out. Plainly he was only selling a half interest in the lease because of his desperate need for ready money.

Pop and Nels went to examine the small bit of land they could purchase which, according to a geologist, they were lucky to get by taking advantage of the driller's situation. But Pop felt no great hopes in the place and promptly said so. That night a well came in right next door to the property, the drill striking it at two thousand seven hundred and ninety-five feet. That decided it for Nels. The terms were met, duly signed and witnessed.

Weeks and months went by with payrolls and expenses increasingly hard to meet. They had gone down one thousand four hundred and sixteen feet without a trace of gas, no little beads of oil breaking and casting rainbows over the slushpit, and now—a tightly wedged pipe!

All of them knew that if they couldn't bring up that drill pipe the assigned lease was worthless, in addition to the loss of almost a thousand feet of valuable pipe and casing.

THINKING of the two thousand dollars given him by Pfc. Wally Evans, Nels winced. Trying to thrust out the memory of it he opened his eyes and saw Pop and the white-garbed figure of the doctor by the bed. Slowly his bloodshot eyes also made out the anxious face and blue eyes of Janie.

He tried to smile at her. "Now see what your old man's gone and done," he grinned.

The doctor was talking to her. "He'll live through it. But we'll have to keep him here for some time until we see how his back mends."

"Aw shucks," Pop said. "After all he's been through in the war, and what happened to him on that derrick, he's plumb certain going to live to a ripe old age."

Conscious again, Nels found that his

immediate worry was the well. "Think we can get that drill pipe up?" he asked his father.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Look, son, you take it easy till you're on your feet again. There's lots of oil around here and when the time comes we'll find it, by Jookes! I was against sinking that well from the start. Told you so. Told everybody so. There's all kinds of wells. Good, bad, and indifferent. They're like human beings. All of 'em temperamental. This one's the ornery kind. She's been fighting us like an old harridan from the first. She had you up there a while ago, grabbed you with her bare hands and come near killing you against her goldarn ribs."

Nels listened to him. But he was thinking of the loss of his investment and time. He was thinking of Janie, of Wally Evans.

It was past three o'clock in the morning and the doctor now insisted that his patient must remain quiet. Pop took his daughter-in-law "home," back to the small and cheerless trailer, both of them slogging through ankle-deep mud to reach there.

"Now you git yourself some sleep, Janie, and don't fret about Nels. Ain't nothing going to keep him down for very long," he said with fatherly pride. "You got yourself a man when you married him."

He went over to the shack, reporting what news he had to the roughnecks. All the graveyard shift had stayed up, waiting for his return. They began discussing the situation at the well.

"How come you figure out these pipe squeezes?" Pete Tromko asked him. Pete, a good man, was a new hand in the oil game.

"Can't tell what will happen sometimes," Pop said. "By Jookes, when a thing like that slaps you in the face, it's the old doodle-bug telling you to git the hell outa there. Come to think of it there was plenty of rock in that slush-pit when we were down seven hundred."

"Fifteen feet thick of it," Crane Farris confirmed.

Pop took a chaw of tobacco. "This hole looks to me like maybe we're on the limb of an anticline," he mused. "The rock might be running at a forty-five degree slope to us. Now if there's an earth fracture down there, what you call a fault, we'll never get that pipe out till all hell freezes over."

"Ain't none of us going to be around then," Charlie Figg opined.

Chet Godwin glared at him. "The Day of Judgment is at hand." He spoke in the manner of a preacher, but spoiled the effect by spitting on the ground. Chet often quoted aptly on the subject, only to emphasize the lesson by words not found in the Good Book. "Put your trust in the Lord!" was one of his injunctions, then he would add, "And lemme tell you mugs there's a hell of a lot of wisdom in that there saying."

"Well," Pop got to his feet, "we ain't doing any good chewing the fat here. Let's go out there and try 'er once more. Charlie, you willing to go up on that catwalk?"

"That's what I'm here for."

They followed Pop out into the night, trudging silently to the derrick, their faces gloomy over the prospect of tough work; knowing that going down any deeper in that hole might mean wasted labor and lost time. Indeed it would seem that Pop had not spoken idly when he called the well an oil harridan. Under the cold electric lights on her skeleton frame, the derrick, she leered at their coming, daring men's hands to soothe her megrims, her tangle of cable loops ready to start writhing again.

POP looked at the drill pipe standing in the frame and spat on the derrick floor. "Ole she-devil," he growled.

"What we call in Russian—debrushka," Pete Tromko said.

"Debrushka. What's that mean?"

"In English—wicious old grandmother."

Chet Godwin said, "He means vi-

cious."

"No, wicious—wicious. I learn American language good in Moscow."

Taking charge of the men, Pop said, "All right, let's clean up here first. Start the engine for that drum," he told Farris, "but don't hook her up till we get the cable straightened out some. Charlie, you and Texas and Chet go up the elevator and pay the cable out off those derrick studs. We'll haul 'er down by hand to start with."

They set to work. It took the derrick men an hour's hard tugging and unwinding up there before the wire was stretched out on the ground. Farris then hooked the machinery to the drum and, revolving it slowly, rewound the cable until only a few feet of it were slack coming from the lower pulley, and it was tight in the crown block.

"How's she up there?" Pop shouted to Charlie Figg on the catwalk.

"O.K."

"All right, we'll try 'er coming out again. You got your harness on, Charlie?"

"Yep."

"The pipe may come up this time, something may have eased in the hole, so watch it and be ready for it."

"I'm all set."

Turning to Farris at the drum, Pop said, "Wind 'er in slow and steady."

The cable slack was carefully taken up until, when it was taut and quivering a little, the engine pull was gradually increased. Nothing moved. Nothing budged an inch. All was still—except the cable creaking ominously in the pulleys.

"She ain't gonna come." Pop's words seemed to be suspended in the silence as though they had weight and yet, they too refused to move one way or the other. "Charlie," he hollered upward, "come down from there."

"What?"

"We'll try reversing her sudden. Ain't nothing else we can do. Come on down, Charlie, afore we start."

Charlie Figg came down the elevator. He had reached the derrick floor, was just stepping clear, when a sound like a pistol shot rang out above the catwalk. The cable in the crown block had snapped and the crown block fell like a howitzer shell straight down the center of the derrick. It hit the cross timber beside the hole, catching the two-by-six plank in such a way as to send it flying up the derrick. It slammed into some obstruction, caromed off, and came—straight and deadly as a battering-ram—into the rotary, simultaneously knocking Crane Farris headlong and breaking his leg.

In the same instant, while men yelled and ducked out of the way, the uncontrolled pull of the drum whipped the cable from the broken crown block with such force that it cut through one of the derrick timbers like a circular saw. An iron coupling went straight as a piece of shrapnel and struck Mort Erickson, the extra swivel-neck who had come out to lend a hand, just above the temple. He pitched face-forward in the mud.

The rest of the wire wound violently about the drum, the loose cable screaming like a banshee through the air. With his life for sale Pete Tromko ran on his bandy legs to the engine, shut it off, and suddenly all was quiet again. Not a whimper came from Farris, and not a sound or slightest movement from the prone Erickson.

THE derrick stood gloating under its top arc light. Stacked in it were about four hundred feet of drill pipe, and in addition there was a length of seventy feet straight up the center, fixed and stable as a monolith. It was all the drill pipe they had left. The rest of it, around a thousand feet, they could kiss good-bye.

In the silence and the groaning that now came from Crane Farris, Pop let loose; and when he was good and sore, as he was now, he was renowned for swearing in twenty states of the Union. Even mule skinners took their hats off to Pop Maynard, claiming he could "swear by note."

He damned the well to perdition until the derrick seemed to flinch, cussed the drill pipe, the cable, the leased bit of ground on which they stood, and when they stood, and when he had exhausted himself of every swear word he could lay his tongue to he turned to Pete Tromko.

"What was that Russian word you used?"

"Dubrushka."

"That's it."

ERICKSON seemed to be in a bad way. He hadn't moved from the position in which he had fallen. Again, as for Nels earlier in the evening, they tore away part of the derrick floor, put the men on it and headed for the hospital.

In Pop's private opinion that was the end of it, the complete wind-up of their efforts on the lease, although for the time being he thought it best to keep the news from Nels. The truth was that it had all the earmarks of being the end of the Maynard Oil Company which, not so long ago, had sallied forth from Louisiana, banners waving, for the oil fields of Utah.

"Might jest as well face it," Pop told Janie after recounting what had happened. "It's one of two things, daughter. Start all over again, or go back to Truscott."

"Start all over again! But how? The money's all gone. You know that Nels has sunk practically the whole investment, his own money, and what he had borrowed."

"We can always find the dough, once we locate the oil."

It was one of his favorite sayings which to Janie made no sense at all. She had put half her own money into the "gamble"; part of a legacy left her by her uncle, and was not complaining of the loss. Nor did she mind the rough life she had to lead, the ceaseless cooking, not alone for her husband but often for as many as thirty men; the daily chores she was forced to do under the most trying difficulties, the lack of privacy, the impossibility of keeping her hair neat and preserving even a semblance of her looks. Now, however, something rebelled in her at Pop's casual indifference.

"You make me tired," she told him. "To hear you talk anybody would think you could take a stroll and find a lake of oil all ready to scoop into barrels. You've got to drill for it, haven't you?" she flung at him. "And that takes money. Where do you expect to get it?"

He remained imperturbable. "First off I'll find the oil. A lake of it. We'll wait till Nels gets on his dogs again, and if he wants to stick, we'll raise the money. Meanwhile I aim to take me a walk one of these fine days. If there's oil around here that ain't been spoke fer, I'll find it same as a hound-dog can smell a skunk."

THEY had taken Mort Erickson to the hospital where he eventually occupied a bed next to Nels. An emergency operation had been performed on his brain to remove a blood clot, yet he remained unconscious on the second day following the accident. Nels had been told about it, and now on the third day Pop and Janie visited the hospital, quietly breaking the full news of the disaster to him.

Thinking of Pfc. Wally Evans, Nels refused to concede defeat. "All right," he said, "we'll abandon the hole and the pipe. We'll start drilling another well alongside it."

"Son, take my word for it you'd only let yourself in for another headache. We've bought ourselves nothing but trouble in that piece of property. In my opinion there's no oil there if we go down and come out clear in Australia."

"We've got the derrick and machinery still there. We've got the lease."

"Maybe you can sell the lease to some other feller. Let him bust his bankroll on it. We'll pack the derrick some place else and start drilling there."

"Where?"

"Let me find it this time! You've had one go at it, and against my advice."

There was a long silence until Nels said, "Well Janie, what have you to say about things?"

"You can have the rest of my money, Nels."

He replied positively. "No, that's out. I didn't want to take what you invested to begin with." He turned to his father. "How much could I get for a sub-lease?"

"Depends on who bought it, son. Best way is to hit some new sucker coming in here, tell him you're flat on your back and will sell him cheap for five thousand dollars. If it was me," Pop said with characteristic candor, "I wouldn't give you a plugged nickel fer it. No sir, not the hair offen a dead gopher."

The crews had already broken up, getting jobs elsewhere, and at this moment Charlie Figg came lumbering into the ward, Texas and Chet Godwin behind him. They also had found work with another drilling outfit.

For a while they stood by the bed of Mort Erickson, gazing down at his motionless form, his head swathed in bandages. Charlie nudged Texas to remove his hat. Not much was known about Mort Erickson except that he had a wife and three children somewhere in Minnesota and that at one time he had wanted to be a pastor. For a long time the three roughnecks didn't speak, their hats in their hands, then Charlie Figg edged over to Nels' bed.

"S'long Nels," he said. "Don't you fret none about the little extra pay that's coming to us. We all figure you a right square guy, and when you strike it will be time enough fer a settlement."

"It's pretty swell of you, Charlie. I owe you a lot more than a bonus for what you did on that derrick."

"Aw, fergit it, Nels. You'd do the same for me." Chawing his "terbacca," Charlie Figg looked around for a place to spit and finally let go out of the open window regardless of people passing in the street. He was a big gangling man with a seamed and leathery face. He had a habit of looking into the distance, giving the impression he was looking to the future in deliberate avoidance of the past. A man of few words, Charlie Figg, mysterious to the point that it was an odds-on bet he had done something he wished to forget, and couldn't forget. Maybe he had served time. Maybe he should have been serving time. It would take a brave man to ask him.

THERE was no such mystery about Chet Godwin, who talked a blue streak about politics and the parliament of man.

"Well s'long, Nels," Charlie Figg said again. "Best of luck. Anytime you start drilling, jest let us know."

"I will, Charlie."

"S'long, Miz Maynard. S'long Pop. Come on, fellers. Let's mosey on outa here."

Pop went with them, leaving Janie alone with her husband, alone with the weight of their personal problems. For some little time they were silent, then Nels said very quietly, "I'm sorry, honey."

Her smile was a caress. "What do you figure is best for us to do now, Nels?"

He smiled back at her. "There isn't much we can do for a while until I get moving around again. It's tough on you being alone in that trailer, but I guess Pop will look after you. I'm afraid you kind of married a dud, honey."

"Now Nelson Maynard, I won't have you saying such things. I married the grandest man in the world. And I know everything is going to be all right. I just know it." There were tears on her lashes.

He said, "Best thing, maybe, is to go back to Truscott."

"Whatever you say, Nels."

"Pop can drive you back there in the car."

"And what would you do?"

"Stay here and get a job."

"You could get a job back home. Maybe a better one, or a more permanent one."

He shook his head. "I left there in such a swivet, whooping it up all over the place that I was off to make a mil-

lion bucks. I couldn't go back there busted, cap in hand, asking for my old job. I wouldn't do that if I was licked to a frazzle, and I'm not licked by a hell of a sight. But it's best for you to go back there, honey, and live with your folks until," he gave the smile that always filled her heart with gladness, "until I can send a private plane for you crammed with mink coats and diamond bracelets."

"Which means," she taxed him, "you intend to stay longer?"

He said grimly, "That's it, Janie."

"Then what are you trying to do, Nelson Maynard?" she asked him. "Get rid of me? You haven't a prayer. I'm staying right here with you. Sticking like that old pipe of yours is stuck in the ground."

He drew her toward him, kissed her cheek. Janie gave way to tears in admiration as he told her of his plans to work for someone else until he could get the beginnings of a new stake to start all over again. And yet, as she and all of them knew, it was by no means certain that he would ever be able to work again.

THE best medical care was being given him. Twice a day, in addition to the massage of his arm and shoulder muscles, the application of a newly-discovered ray was applied to his wrenched back, requiring his removal from the ward to the hospital laboratory. A nurse now began to prepare him for this treatment and Janie took her departure. She walked back through the slushy "streets" to the trailer where she and Pop kept guard on the equipment and rusting machinery of the Maynard Oil Company.

As the days went by the rancor of the "old harridan" continued even after its abandonment, for while Crane Farris' leg was mending and Nels was slowly pulling through, matters were far from good with the third injured man.

Around four o'clock one afternoon while Nels had lapsed into a fitful sleep, his back and shoulder strapped in bandages, the nurse gently called him. The look on her face plunged him into the dread fear that something had happened to Janie, and he tried to rise, only the pain forcing him to drop back on the bed.

"What is it, nurse?"

"Mort Erickson. He hasn't much longer to live, I'm afraid. I thought you'd want to know about him."

He looked across at the adjoining cot and found Erickson's pale-blue eyes trained beseechingly on him. The raw-boned swivel-neck, a Swede, had been a husky man of thirty-five or so, strong and powerful but a few days ago. A small piece of flying metal had accidentally struck him on the temple, and now his last minutes were ticking away. To Nels this was another responsibility adding to the weight on his shoulders. Another debt. One he would never be able to repay.

"Want see Chet Godwin," Erickson was saying.

"He's been asking for him since noon," the nurse revealed. "We've sent for him, but we don't know if the message ever reached him."

It had reached him, for in a moment or so Chet came through the ward, followed by Pete Tromko and Charlie Figg. The sight of them brought perceptible gladness to the dying man's eyes, though he was too far gone to express any emotion.

"Chet—you got some of my pay saved for me?"

"Sure have, Mort."

"You send my wife in Minnesota. You got her address?"

"Yes, I have it, Mort."

"All right. Now you say words from Bible for me, will you, Chet? Long time ago I study for ministry. Now I don't remember one word." The blue in his eyes had faded until they were bereft of color.

The roughnecks stood around his bed, their heads uncovered, while Godwin recited a prayer. In the silence that ensued the nurse drew the sheet over

Erickson, pulling it up over his bandaged head until nothing more was seen of him.

From his cot Nels beckoned Godwin over to him. "You know his family?"

"Only that he has a wife and kids. He drank pretty near all he earned, so I asked him to let me save some of it for him."

"How much did you save?"

"A hundred and seventy-five dollars."

"Well, look." Nels struggled with himself for a moment, knowing that what he intended to do would leave him, and Janie, with only a few dollars. "I'm adding five hundred to it. See me before you write to his wife."

"I will. I was thinking of passing the hat round anyway," Chet answered.

SO FAR, although the Maynard Oil Company lease was up for sale, Pop had no luck in disposing of it. Word of its drill pipe mishap had spread around. Nobody wanted to be associated with ill luck in the midst of plenty. "Not worth a plugged nickel."

After three weeks in the hospital Nels was taken back to his trailer where Janie could nurse and look after him, "Don't let him get out of that bed until I give the word," the doctor said, "He's been a stubborn patient, trying his darnedest to get up the minute we turn our heads. That sort of thing will only retard his recovery. To speak candidly, I'm not at all sure he'll be able to do any strenuous labor again. Certainly not stacking drill pipe as he was doing before the accident."

The "San Juan" boom continued, days and nights given over to the roaring pandemonium of oil activity, the air laden with the smell of crude petroleum. Nels smelt it too, he persisted in trying to get out of bed, though he didn't get very far when Janie was around.

One day when she returned from the store she was horrified to find him standing in the trailer painfully exercising his arms and back. Stifling a scream she roundly scolded him, and when her mind was set on something one look from her blue eyes was enough to settle the hash of any mere man.

"Nels," she ordered with authority, "you get right back into bed or I'll have you sent back to the hospital."

Hospital! He had had all he ever wanted of hospitals, army hospitals in particular, and he loathed the very sound of the word. So he partly obeyed her, sitting on the edge of the narrow bunk, looking up at her, grinning half-defiantly.

Shortly after Nels' return to the trailer, Pop had disappeared, saying he was going "fer a walk," but not saying where. He had now been gone for almost a week without a solitary word from him. Nobody appeared to know where he was, and Nels began to worry.

"Perhaps he's gone back home to raise more money," Janie said.

Nels clenched his hands as the echo of a hopeful voice came back to him. ". . . maybe I could do something for myself if I doubled the money—or tripled it." Nels looked up at his wife. "I'll earn money. A week from now I'll be working again."

"Not the work you've been doing. If we need money, I'll earn it. And don't forget I've still got over three thousand dollars of my own. It's yours, Nels, anytime you want it."

There was a knock on the door, Janie opened it. Pete Tromko was outside and Nels invited him in.

"How you feel, Nels?"

"Pretty good for an old man. How's things with you?"

"Prekrasnui rebyonok." Pete gave full utterance to the Russian words, booming them out like an actor, and Janie had to laugh, her first real laugh in many a day.

"What's that mean?" she asked.

"This, in Russian, mean I feel pretty good. Like newborn baby. Look, Nels, I got proposition I like make with you."

"Go right ahead, Pete."

"I save bit of money. Like for what you call rainy day. I meet feller in

saloon says he got lease and no derrick. Come to see where lease is, by golly right next three oil-bearing wells belong major company. So—I buy lease quick. Now I come see you. I pay deposit what you ask for use of derrick and machinery. What you say, Nels?"

"Getting into the business on your own, eh, Pete?"

"By golly! Why not? Make money like everybody else."

"Have you got that lease with you?"

"You bet."

"Let me see it, will you?"

Pete took the lease from the inside pocket of his windbreaker, and Nels ran his eyes over it.

"Two thousand five hundred. Um, um. Looks all right, Pete. In the Merritt pool acreage, eh? What I don't understand is how you were able to buy the lease for that amount of money."

Pete's enthusiasm shattered the thin walls of the trailer. "Like I tell you, she's a big bargain. How much deposit you want for the loan of your equipment, Nels? One thousand dollar, and ten percent cut on all the oil I bring in? How about that, Nels?"

"That's good enough for me, Pete, seeing I'm not going to be using the derrick for a while. You move it over to your lease any time you say. But if I were you I'd check up on this lease before starting operations."

Pete stuck the paper back in his pocket. "She's good as gold. Poor feller not got a cent on him, so he sell cheap. That's what he told me. Ya otchen rada!" he boomed, expressing his fervor. "Proshchai," he bowed to Janie, wishing her goodday.

When he had gone Nels said, "Something tells me that Pete has been taken in. Rooked."

"Then you shouldn't take his money for the use of your machinery."

"I haven't taken it yet, honey. We'll see about that part of it later. Of course, for all I know the lease may be all right, but the guy that sold it must have needed cash awful bad."

AS THE days passed he gradually increased the exercise of his back and shoulder muscles, doing so when Janie wasn't around and without the sanction of the doctor. He also took short walks whenever he could, and when next he was physically examined the doctor gave full credit for his amazing recovery to modern science, which indeed may have had something to do with it.

"I guess that new ray treatment we've been giving you is pretty good," he said. "Maybe I was wrong in saying you couldn't do heavy work again."

He most certainly was wrong. A job was already waiting for Nels with one of the companies as Tool Pusher, paying him thirty dollars a day and re-uniting him with Charlie Figg, Texas and Chet Godwin who worked for the same outfit.

He started slowly, though putting in his eight hour shift, working from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M., mostly supervising the work of others and gradually taking a more active hand in it. The company well was on the north side of the "San Juan" field, so Nels moved the trailer so Janie could be near to him. As long as his equipment had remained standing on his leased ground it had been necessary to keep watch over it. Pete Tromko having "hired" the stuff, Nels pulled out in final abandonment of his initial efforts to find oil. He didn't think it was going to be his last try.

Weeks had gone by without any word of Pop, and it was now feared that something serious might have happened to him, though Nels guessed he was on some wildcatting quest. Janie had written home to Truscott. Nothing had been seen of him there.

At the well on which Nels was employed the drill pipe was down deep. The Hanley Company, like other big money concerns, had steel derricks, and the play of the drum bringing up the pipe caused no such shaking and wobbling as was the case with wooden derricks.

Nels had gone up on the catwalk again, handling the awkward lengths

as they came up from the hole. In doing so he still felt severe twinges of pain in his back. He dug his teeth into his lips and kept going.

One afternoon, while the drill bit was being replaced, he noted with pride that he had thirty-two hundred seventy-five feet of pipe standing in the derrick as he swung down the elevator. He joined Texas and Chet Godwin who were putting on the new bit. Chet asked, "You heard anything from Pop?"

"No. If the old coot kept on walking he must be in California by this time."

With a sharpened bit on the drill, Charlie Figg went up on the catwalk to lower the pipe into the hole again, the rotary driving it another Kelly length. A considerable quantity of gas had been coming out, and there were oil slicks in the slush pit, everybody figuring the oil was due to come in.

A precautionary earth-banked reservoir having a capacity of five hundred thousand barrels had been constructed in case of an unexpected and unprovided for gusher. This was a Government order.

"Operator is expected to provide tankage and pipe line facilities in advance, and until such precautions are taken the shooting of the well is prohibited."

When the drilling was done and the high-pressure oil and gas sands were likely to be penetrated, a master gate was placed on the last string of casing, the "gate" being a high-pressure valve packed with fire-resisting protection. The master gate had an extension arm so that the well could be shut off quickly in case of fire. It was an inexpensive apparatus and might save the operator from heavy loss, also claims for damage to other people's property should the crude petroleum get out of control.

TEXAS had an uncanny knack of sensing trouble. He could look up at a clear sky and tell you within an hour when it was going to rain or, if it was raining, when the weather would clear. He figured "bad weather" was due at the Hanley well.

"Recollect one time," he said in his slow drawl, "a well coming in down in Arkansas. The plug was being drilled in expectation of oil, when she began to show. The gas pressure was so great and the flow so sudden, that first thing we knew the gate valves were torn clear from the casing head. Then the drill pipe was blown out, wrecking the derrick. We couldn't do a thing with 'er. Six thousand barrels a day—wasted in the air, carried away by the wind. Luckily she didn't catch on fire, and finally the rotary drill pipe made a crater into which the whole works fell and got sanded up."

As the other men listened to his story, a derrick man from the adjoining well came up to them. "Say! you fellers heard about the robbery last night?"

"No. Where?"

"The Burgess Company over at the other end of the field. About six o'clock just before supper time. A lone bandit walked in on them, a handkerchief over all his face but his eyes. Fourteen roughnecks were in the hall and had just been paid a week's wages. Any one of 'em could have killed him but for the rod in his hand. He lined 'em up against the wall of the dining hall, robbed each one of 'em and got clean away with it."

"Holy cat! How much money did he get?"

"Over $2000 they reckon."

"What sort of a guy was he?"

"Ordinary-looking guy. Nobody knew him. One of the men thought he had seen him one time in the bar of the Welkin Hotel, but he wasn't sure. They got the sheriff on the hunt for him, but he's miles away by this time. That mob he took would tear him in pieces if they ever laid hands on him."

The rotary was drilling steadily and Nels noted there was still around five feet of the Kelly joint to be sunk. He had a hunch that the oil was about to come in and wanted to be there to see it and participate in the triumph even though the well was not his own.

But it was four o'clock, the end of his shift, and he and the day crew checked off, Chet Godwin going over to the company canteen with him for a glass of beer before calling it a day.

"Did you send that money to Erickson's wife?" Nels asked.

"Yes. Had a letter from her only yesterday. Care to read it?" He took it from his hip pocket, a crumpled sheet of paper, the writing almost obliterated by dirt and thumbprints.

Dere Sir, beg to thank you for $714 which gladly rec'd. Mort never send me much money. He always claim marriage and children prevent him from being pastor in church which is not good thing to say. Now he is gone I forgive all.

Yours truly,
Mary Erickson.

Returning the letter Nels shook his head. "Guess there's a lot of heartbreak back of that," he said. "How about you, Chet? You married?"

"Lost my wife eight years ago."

"That's too bad. Sickness?"

For a long while Chet Godwin didn't reply, holding the glass of beer in his hand and studying it. "Yep, sickness," he admitted. "Only it happened to me, not to her. She left me for another man."

WHEN Nels reached home he found Janie busy as usual preparing the supper.

He seemed to have difficulty in straightening his back and she asked misgivingly, "How's that back of yours?"

"Doesn't bother me at all, honey. Boy! I'm hungry. How long before supper?"

"Just as soon as you get washed up."

When he had washed he came back to see Janie putting on the food. Considering the small space at her disposal, she set an attractive table. Both were scarcely seated at it when a voice outside said:

"Senor Maynard live here?"

"Who wants me?" Nels rose, opened the door. A Mexican stood beside a sad-looking burro.

"Was told to give you this letter. You sure you are Senor Maynard?"

"Nelson Maynard is the name."

"Buenos. Here is letter. Goodbye." Leading his burro the man went away. Breaking the envelope Nels instantly recognized his father's handwriting.

"It's from Pop!" he shouted. "Hey, Janie, listen to this." He read out the message. "Beg, borrow, steal all the mazume you can get. I've taken an option on a piece of acreage down here. Had $3000 sewed in the lining of my pants, but we'll need lots more. Can smell oil here same as you'd smell a skunk. Keep a tight lip about it, son, till I see you about a week from now. Pop."

Janie laughed. "Where is he? Does he say?"

Nels studied the letter. On the back, Pop had drawn a rough map. He was some eighty miles from here near a town called Bluff.

"So Pop had three thousand bucks tucked away all the time. Janie," he enthused, "I've an idea we're going to start drilling again."

"Don't forget you've loaned your machinery to Pete Tromko and," she added pointedly, "without pay." Janie sat down as though suddenly tired. "Anyway, it will be away from here somewhere. I'm glad of that. I hate this old San Juan place. I wish we were leaving here now this minute."

"Aw come, honey." He kissed her. "It's been a lot of fun, in a way."

"Fun! Sinking pretty nearly $35,000 in a hole in the ground!"

"Now just keep your chin up a little longer, and one of these days I'll be able to buy you a home all your own. Say! we'll never stop talking about our exciting adventures in San Juan. Why, you'll be saying, 'Gather around, children, and listen to Grandma's stories about the great oil boom in Utah—'" A knock on the trailer door interrupted him. It was Pete Tromko.

A CRESTFALLEN Pete Tromko, bereft of Russian-accented booming voice and aplomb. He had a roll of bills in his hand, mostly of small denomination by the look of them and looking as though they had been collected one by one from here and there.

"Here's your thousand dollars," he said, offering the money. "You tell me where you want machinery. I bring it back tomorrow."

"What's wrong, Pete?"

"I been rolled."

"Rolled? How come?"

"That feller sold me the lease is crook. Lease don't even belong to him in first place."

"I was afraid of something like that. Come in here, Pete, and let's have the whole story."

"No, you having supper. I tell you some other time maybe."

"Come in here," Nels repeated, seeing that the ebullient Russian was sunk pretty low. "Sit down wherever you can, Pete. Janie, pour him a cup of coffee. Now go ahead, Pete, what happened?"

"This morning round ten o'clock I am down about seven hundred feet in the well. She look pretty good," he said dismally. "Some guy I never see before come over to me, claim he is representative of Remco Company. 'What the hell you doing sinking a well on our property?' he ask me. I tell him to go away and not bother me. I show him the lease I buy for $2,500. He laugh at me. 'This piece of paper not worth ink that's written on it,' he say. 'It is fake. It is no good,' he say to me."

Janie put a cup of coffee in front of him, but he paid no heed to it.

"I get mad. I knock him head over heels into slush pit. But it's no use. What he say is true. I am drilling on property belong to Remco Company." Pete looked up, his eyes glazed with defeat. "Look Nels, it take me twenty years to save that money. Twenty years, working hard every day since I first come to America. Twenty years."

"What did this guy look like?" Nels asked him. "The guy who sold you the lease?"

"Kind of thin feller. Had a scar on the side of his chin like maybe a bullet wound."

"Where did you meet up with him in the first place?"

"In the San Juan hotel."

"Have you been trying to find him?"

"I been all over the town—every place—since ten o'clock this morning. I just like to meet up with that feller again, that's all."

Nels got to his feet. In the pretense of reaching for his hat, and without Janie's knowledge of what he was doing, he slipped a revolver into his pocket. "Drink that coffee, Pete, and let's go. I have a hunch." Noting the strain on his wife's face, he smiled at her. "I won't be long, honey. Nothing to worry about. Take care of that thousand bucks until we return."

As they slushed through the mud in the direction of the commercial part of the town, Nels said, "You hear about that hold-up at the Burgess Company hall last night?"

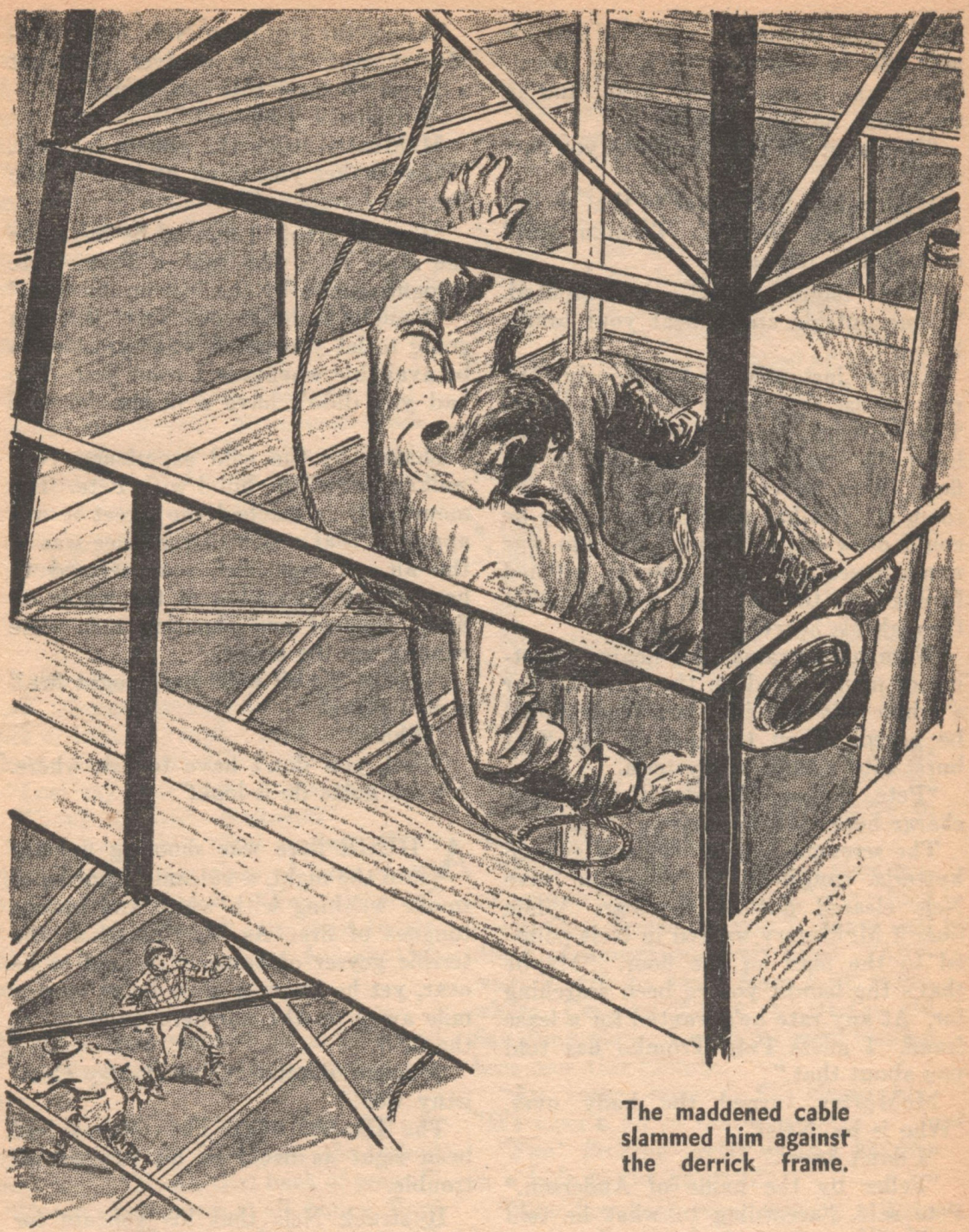
"No."

"Guy got away with quite a bunch of coin. Pete, as I said, this is just a hunch on my part and may lead to nothing. We're going to a flea-bag around here called the Welkin Hotel."

THE sound of juke-box music came from the ground floor as they neared the hotel. On the left of the entrance was a dance floor, some of the girls galumping around with roughnecks, their shrieks and strident laughter intermingled with the music. Nels looked around for someone in authority, intending to ask a few discreet questions. He was making inquiries when Pete gripped his arm.

"By golly, that's the feller over there!"

A bar led from the dance floor to the back of the hotel, and standing there with his foot on the rail was a man talking to a blonde, a drink in his hand. Of spare build, wiry, he suggested quick-



The maddened cable slammed him against the derrick frame.

ness of hand and foot, and even at the distance Nels could see the trace of a scar on his unshaven chin.

Pete had stiffened preparatory to making a headlong rush for the man. It was with difficulty that Nels restrained him.

"Hold it," he whispered. "Let me handle this."

He waited in the doorway until his and Pete's presence there attracted attention. It did. Suddenly they were looking into a pair of eyes as menacing as the twin barrels of a machine gun, and in that instant Nels knew he had

been highly optimistic when he told his wife she had nothing to worry about. There was a momentary hush, and in that hush he said calmly:

"Hey you! Want a word with you outside."

What might have come of that wasn't to be known, for Pete Tromko could no longer be restrained.

"You damn crook!" he shouted. "Come outside and I beat your brains to a—"

Acting instantly and viciously, the man thrust the blonde in front of him. The moment she saw the gun in his hand she screamed and dropped to the floor. Two bullets slammed across the room at Nels but missed him before he could draw his own gun. His aim was much truer and the gunman pitched forward in the sawdust with a bullet through his heart.

Women's screams, the hoarse shouting of men, ceased on the instant. For a while only the juke-box music could be heard. Then the girl on the floor burst into a flood of hysteria.

"Pete, go get the sheriff. I'll take charge here until he arrives."

The screaming, hollering, and general hysteria continued as everyone save Nels cleared out of the bar. When Sheriff McMurtry walked in Nels pointed to the man on the floor. "Maybe that's the bandit you've been searching for. At any rate he's wanted for a lease fraud. I guess Pete Tromko has told you about that."

McMurtry turned the body over. "Who is he, Nels?"

"I don't know."

"Feller by the name of Anderson," Pete said, "according to what he told me."

The sheriff found papers in the dead man's pocket giving the name of Harry Levins and an address in Oklahoma City. His wallet was packed with ten and twenty dollar bills. Nels told the circumstances leading up to the shooting, Pete and others testifying that Levins had shot first.

Taking the gun from Nels' hand, McMurtry said, "Army revolver. You got a license to carry this gun, Nels?"

"No, sheriff, I haven't."

McMurtry stuck the gun in his belt. "What makes you think he held up the Burgess Company?"

"I've no proof. I figured he might be the same man who robbed Pete. Pete recognized him by the scar on his chin."

"I ought to hold you, Nels. But I'm going to let you go on your promise to be available whenever I want you. Too bad you didn't have a license for this gun."

Shaken by the wild experience, Nels walked out of the hotel with Pete. The moment they reached the street it was apparent that a new disturbance was in the air. A vast dull roar seemed to have taken possession of the whole oil field. Excited and shouting men were running up the street.

"One of the oil wells has caught fire," a man yelled.

"Where?"

"Hell, you don't have to ask where. All you gotta do is look!"

A HUGE flare was shooting upward into the night, a volcanic eruption of smoke writhing with white and orange tongues of fire. As Nels gazed at the terrific geyser of flame it seemed to be near, yet he knew it must be at least a mile away on the northern outskirts of the field.

Someone shouted, "The Hanley Company well!"

The Hanley well! Then Texas had been right as usual in his forecast of trouble.

It struck Nels that his venture for oil was associated throughout with disaster, not only for himself and his own folks, but even those for whom he worked.

"Come on, Pete," he said heavily. "Let's go."

Scores of men were running in the same direction, automatically drawn to the scene as though sucked in by the

roaring draft of the conflagration. As they approached the place it was a frightful sight to behold. A nightmare of nightmares to every oilman. It threatened other wells in the vicinity, widespread loss of property and possible destruction of the town.

When Nels reached there the savagery of the fire kept everyone at a distance. Cass Bayly, boss of the company drilling gang, was in charge of operations, and already preparations were being made to fight the blaze. All the company roughnecks hurried to take part. Among them Nels saw Charlie Figg and Texas.

"How'd it happen, Charlie?" he asked.

"Electric spark—repairing a broken power line on the derrick floor."

"Gas?" You had to shout in order to be heard.

"Gas? I'll say it's gas. Twenty million cubic feet of it around five o'clock this evening just after we quit work. They were trying to bring it under control when it caught fire."

"Did they strike oil?"

"Yep. That come in, too, about the same time. They got the oil shut off while they were working on the gas. Don't know if the valves will hold. If they go, that'll make an inferno around here that'll be something to see."

In a bull voice Cass Bayly was calling for volunteers. "Want all the men we can get. Over to the company hall yonder where your names can be entered in the payroll."

With others, Nels and Pete Tromko put their names down as volunteers for any work they were called upon to do. A vast amount of labor had to be done in advance before any effort was made to tackle the fire itself. That would be the final and most hazardous job after all arrangements leading up to it were methodically completed.

Shouting so that he could be heard, Texas was saying, "An ordinary gas well fire ain't so hard to overcome, if the gas can be held to one stream."

"What about this one?"

"She's a whopper. She's two or three streams by the look of it. Cain't tell from this distance."

"Can you reduce it to one stream?"

"Figuring on it. Only way to extinguish it. See, it's like this." Texas drew with his finger on the ground. "This is your pipe casing. The gas is escaping here. One stream. Shut it off by blasting it with steam—and she's out. Same as you'd snuff out a candle by pinching it."

The huge fire was situated in the midst of two nearby oil-bearing wells and a big reservoir of crude petroleum, while beside them were a group of shacks, living quarters for the company roughnecks and their families. The work now in hand, employing scores of men, was the first precaution of removing all inflammable material from the vicinity. Simultaneously with this work all the available portable field boilers in "San Juan" were being brought to the scene where they were to be set up according to plan. A network of steam lines, four-inch and two-inch, would be laid out attached to the boilers, also a network of two-inch water lines. While this was being done, a circular levee, three feet high, would be thrown up around the well at a distance of fifty feet from it, an awkward job since the ground sloped down sharply to the north.

Roughnecks were now engaged on this labor, and Nels and a few other special volunteers, not wanted until the following morning, were told to go home and get rested up.

WALKING to his trailer, Nels found that it had been moved. By the light of the raging fire he followed the wheel ruts in the mud, tracing them south from the well. He heard Janie calling to him.

She was sitting in the open door of the trailer, her face paper white in the reddish glare all around them. "I've been worried about you, Nels. Men came and dragged the car and trailer here so as to be out of danger."

He nodded. The supper table was still set, and she went to the tiny kitchen

to get his uneaten supper which she had kept warm for him.

"I can't eat," he said.

She studied him in silence for a while. "You took your gun with you. I saw you take it." Her quick eyes roved over him. "You haven't got it now."

"I loaned it to Pete," he lied, not wishing to tell her what had happened. Nor did he say anything about having put down his name as volunteer for special work. "What have you done with that thousand dollars I left here?" he asked.

"I've got it safe." She touched the neck of her dress. "What do you want to do with it, Nels?"

"Give it back to Pete."

The fire, roaring and raging all night, prevented sleep. Nels got up early, hoping to steal out without disturbing Janie, but she was wide awake with his first move, and up and making breakfast for him.

"There's something you're planning to do," she said with a woman's intuition. "What is it, Nels? I want to know."

He smiled at her. "Can't do very much, I reckon. I'm just going out there to see what's going on."

At the well he viewed the conflagration with stark eyes. At least twenty-five portable boilers had been strategically set up. A great network of steam and water lines had been laid down. Nels looked around for Pete Tromko, but he couldn't find him. He saw Texas, however, and got the latest news.

"You're gonna see something interesting in a minute," Texas drawled. "Notice that shield over there."

It was like a blind employed by a duck hunter except that it was made of sheet iron and asbestos and could be moved on wheels.

"Cass Bayly is going out back of it armed with a high powered rifle."

"A rifle?"

"He's going to try to cut that casing away below the two top streams of flaming gas. Seems like the gas originally escaped from a gate valve in one of the strings of casing. Owing to the heat and weight of the valve, the gas then escaped sideways through three cracks. The flame is now so big it cain't be extinguished. So in order to bring it to one stream—like I told you last night—Cass aims to cut the casing beneath the gate valve."

With hundreds of others, Nels watched this operation being put into effect. Wearing asbestos covering, Cass Bayly went out there within the encirclement of the earth levee. Expert rifleman though he was, the smoke and heat prevented any great accuracy of aim, and in addition he was further hampered by several streams of water being poured on him from three sides. He put twenty shots into the casing, backed out for a breathing spell, returned, and fired again. The forty-first bullet from the rifle, that must have been like a red-hot poker in his hands, brought part of the casing down, cutting off two huge jets of burning gas.

The flame was now confined to one stream, that shot some distance above the top of the severed casing. It was a long flame due to the enormous gas pressure.

"Well," Texas drawled, "that's that. S'long, Nels. I guess this is where I come in. Like a chump, for five hundred bucks, I put my name down."

Nels grinned at him. "Let's go," he said. "My name is on the list, too."

THE assault crew's duty was to get as near the well as they could, protected by shields such as the one Cass Bayly had used, and similarly clothed in asbestos suits. Each man would carry with him a line of steam pipe to be trained on the fire column. If enough steam could be accurately and steadily directed to interrupt the ascending gas *even momentarily*, the fire would be extinguished. There was little danger of the blaze being rekindled, because no particles of burning fluid were dropping from the flames. However, as a further precaution the casing head was to be thoroughly sprayed

and the surrounding ground deluged with water. It was running down the slope, washing out part of the levee there.

All these preparations had taken time. It was now afternoon, nineteen hours having been used for preliminary work before the direct assault on the well. The quenching of the flame, if successful, should be accomplished in about nineteen minutes.

On the way to the company shed for his equipment and final instructions, Nels saw his wife on the edge of the crowd, her cheeks pale, her eyes feverish with anxiety. She came running toward him, impetuously grasping his arm.

"I just saw Texas—and he told me. Nels, you don't have to risk yourself. There's no need for it. Please, Nels—for my sake—don't—don't—"

"Look, Janie," he grinned at her. "Old Man Reaper has had so many swipes at me he's quit in disgust. From now on, kid, we're going to do better than all right."

The volunteers, there were six of them, received a last word from Cass Bayly. "Get in as close as you can. Work together and co-ordinate your steam on the top of the casing."

Inside the levee the men advanced behind their shields. What wind there was blew north-east, so the scorching heat was worse on the left side of the advance. Nels was second man on that side, while a roughneck by the name of Alston was on the outside of him about twelve feet away.

The steam pipes terminated in goosenecks having discharge ends so flattened as to throw a fan-shaped spray of steam against the gas column. At a given signal water was sprayed on each man from nozzles held outside the levee, and at another signal the steam was to be turned on from all twenty-five boilers together.

Before the attack it had been noticed that oil was discharging from the pipe about four feet above the derrick floor, through a two-inch opening in a tool joint which had given way under the gas pressure. This oil discharge was now running downhill from the well across the water-soaked ground. Despite all extra efforts to bank the levee at this point, the volume of protective water poured out was washing the soil away. Beyond, further down the slope, was a vast reservoir of oil owned by the Hanley Company.

The one mounting fear now was that the small river of escaping oil might catch fire. If it did so, and if the fiery stream of it reached the reservoir, a terrific conflagration would result. A million barrels of crude petroleum would become one big sea of flame. Frantic efforts were being made to plug the gap in the levee, with good chances of success provided the oil didn't catch fire in the meantime.

As Nels went forward behind his shield, the increasing heat became almost unbearable. He could feel his flesh cringe under his asbestos covering. All six men looked like creatures from another world.

Glancing at the line of their attack, Nels raised his arm in a signal, and the steam came on. The pipes wobbled in the men's hands. It required terrific strength to train them, in unison, on the flaming gas column. A tremendous gray-black cloud began mixing with the fire. The hiss of steam obliterated every other sound.

Something caused Nels to glance to his left. Alston had ceased directing his steam at the gas. Behind his shield he had moved still further to the left, was pointing his pipe at the ground.

The flow of oil had caught on fire, was running down the hill toward the gap!

At this moment Alston crumbled behind his shield, scorched by the fire, in spite of the streams of water played on him.

Nels saw at once that the burning oil must be extinguished before it could run down to the reservoir. Manipulating his shield he moved over to the left, going around the prostrate Alston. It seemed to Nels that his eyes were being burned out, and although he knew he was being saturated by streams of water he could feel no protection at all from the heat.

Grimly, determinedly, he kept his steam on one particular spot of the burning oil and saw that he had cut the fire in half. The lower half was soon extinguished by men working on the levee, leaving only the flow from the well.

And now the gas fire spurting high upward from the casing was suddenly put out. All the men concentrated their pipes on the blazing oil leakage, closing in on it, Nels joining them. In a few minutes that fire was also extinguished—and the devilish job was done!

THEY carried Alston from the scene and rushed him to the hospital in the ambulance that was standing by for just such an emergency. Then the crowds of people gathered about the well cheered the men as they climbed over the levee, Cass Bayly patting each one on the back and giving particular attention to Nels.

"Good work, Nels. That's going to earn you a nice bonus in addition to the five hundred."

In the company shed where he took off his fire-fighting clothes, Nels found to his vast surprise that he had come through the ordeal unharmed. He suddenly felt exhausted, more so than he could ever remember before. He thought he could sleep for a month.

He slept sure enough. In the trailer, with no refreshment other than a cup of coffee, he slept the rest of that afternoon, all that night and morning. Janie reluctantly awoke him at noon.

"The sheriff wants a word with you," she said.

He sat up, reaching for his clothes. The sheriff! McMurtry had taken his gun away with the words that held the power of the law back of them: "You got a license for this gun?"

But the sheriff wasn't outside the door when he opened it. Instead he was standing some little distance away in the forefront of about three hundred roughnecks, all of them grinning. And now, on the instant, shouting.

What was all this! It looked like a delegation of some sort! He saw Chet Godwin in the vanguard, and Pete Tromko, Texas, Charlie Figg, Cass Bayly and others.

"Go ahead, Cass," the sheriff said. "Speak your piece."

The boss driller, cleared his throat. "Nels, we all figure you've earned two citations for bravery. First, when you killed Harry Levins the other evening. Seems like he's a notorious gunman and the bandit we been looking for. He had $3721 in cash on him. Out of that we gave $2500 to Pete Tromko, reckoning it belonged to him. We reckon the extra $1221 is yours."

The roughnecks shouted their approval.

"On top of that, the Hanley Company has asked me to present you with a check for $10,000 for what you done in putting out that stream of oil fire yesterday. Here it is, Nels, with the $1221 in cash, right in this envelope."

With the roughnecks still cheering he walked across to the door of the trailer and put the envelope in Nels' hand. . . .

A $10,000 reward! That, in itself, is a tidy sum with which to take a needed vacation, or buy a house and lot, or maybe even to start the sinking of an oil well. Just before he had gone out to fight the Hanley Company fire, Nels had said something to his wife with all the assurance that was in him.

"From now on, Janie," he had grinned, "we're going to do better than all right."

Well, let's see about that.

FIVE days after the fire, the Maynards were more or less established in their trailer near Pop's new find. Here the San Juan river flowed east from the great Colorado, making a northern boundary of the Navajo Indian Reservation, and several smaller rivers ran into it from their sources in the Abajo Mountains. One of these rivers was called the Butler Wash. Close to its junction with the San Juan, some eighty miles from the oil field of that name, Pop had taken an option on a piece of acreage not far from the town of Bluff.

To complete the purchase of Pop's lease required an additional $5,500 which Nels put up, trusting to his father's judgment. There were no experimental wells in this flat and arid vicinity, the geologists, the so-called "smart oil men," having passed up the location as "unpromising."

With this opinion Nels was somewhat inclined to agree, as were Charlie Figg, Texas and Chet Godwin, all of whom had left the "San Juan" in order to tie up their fortunes with Nels. There might be luck in his third try, they figured.

"What makes you think there's oil here, Pop?" one of the roughnecks asked.

"Well sir, when a lot of guys are looking fer something all in the same place, I like to take a look-see for it where they figure it couldn't be a-tall. Texas," Pop drawled, "don't you believe this place looks something like The Kimbrough field in Southern Arkansas?"

Texas surveyed the sandy wastes. "Some," he allowed. "Maybe the way the ground slopes up to them hills yonder."

"And the bend of that river over there. Topography's the spitting image of The Kimbrough, by Jookes!"

The money began to melt mighty fast. Before they had started to put up the derrick, haulage from the "San Juan" had to be arranged for, additional pipe bought, shacks demolished and put up again, fuel stored, food purchased, a hundred and one things. All of them worked like Trojans, including Janie. Pleased with the prospect of moving from "San Juan" she had been dismayed by the bleakness and aridity of the countryside around the Butler Wash where only a few trees and shrubs relieved the monotony of the view.

They put the well down on a Sunday, "the better the day, the better the deed," encountering sandstone at a hundred feet. A hopeful sign, because from the reservoirs of sandstone or sand, petroleum is more readily extracted, shale being usually impervious to the passage of either oil or water. Next the slush pit revealed limestone in great quantity. Limestone as a rule occupied the intermediate position and was either impervious or not, forming a barrier to the movement of oil if it wasn't itself the reservoir.

The drilling costs on all wells are accumulative, going up in proportion to the depth you go down. For shallow wells the costs vary from one dollar fifty cents to fifteen dollars a foot. For deeper wells it may run from five dollars to sixty dollars a foot, since depth requires more powerful engines, heavier tools and casings. When you are down three thousand feet the cost is fifty per cent higher than for wells one thousand to two thousand feet.

After almost three months they were down to two thousand seven hundred and fifty feet, working three shifts of crews, and at this depth Nels was forced to have a private talk with his father.

"What now, Pop?" he grinned at him. "We need more pipe. I owe the men a week's wages—and this is how we stand." He took a fifty dollar bill and three tens from his pocket. "When that's gone, we're busted again."

"Oh no, we ain't." He thrust his hand into his shirt and brought out a roll of bills. "Happened to get hold of this little wad an hour ago. Three thousand five hundred."

"Good night! Where did that come from?"

"Pete Tromko."

"Pete!"

"He reckoned it was no good offering it to you because you wouldn't take it. So he gave it to me. I made him a one per cent offer on every barrel over and above the first quarter of a million, and double his original investment. That's a big profit," Pop said. "He's liable to clean up like everybody else who has invested in this here company since the beginning, including your Pfc. Wally Evans."

NELS couldn't share in his father's continued optimism. Another three thousand five hundred. He said dismally, "It's just as likely to go down the drain

as all the other investments."

"Knew a feller once," Pop began, but Nels refused to listen to him. He had begun to lose all hope in the well and was determined to take steps to protect the men working for him. It was imperative that he dispose of one of the crew shifts, if not two of them. As for Charlie Figg, Texas, Pete and the others, he must, as before at the old well, put the matter of a salary arrangement up to them.

Two thousand seven hundred and fifty feet.

There was no trace of gas. Not the slightest indication of oil. Most of Pete's investment had been used up. The reservoir they had dug in anticipation of oil mocked them in its dry emptiness. He decided the time had come to talk to the men.

". . . so that's how it is, fellers. I'm telling you just how the situation stands. Maybe we've enough money to go down three thousand feet. If we don't strike it then, the only thing we can do is sell the lease to pay wages and—and let someone else sink their hearts into it."

Three thousand one hundred and fifty feet.

"Nels," Janie said, throwing her arms about him as he sank exhaustedly and dispiritedly on the bed in the trailer, "you've simply got to quit working fifteen and sixteen hours a day. Your health will break down, and then what good will your old oil do you—even if you should find it?"

"I'm all right, honey," he said, scarcely able to talk from fatigue and anxiety. Like Janie he had lost weight. He looked haggard.

Three thousand three hundred and seventy-five feet.

There was only one crew on the job now, the last Kelly joint having been put down. First Nels then Charlie Figg stacked the drill pipe in the derrick when they "came up" to put on a sharpened bit. The drilling came to a standstill. No more pipe. No money to buy it with.

Pop Maynard came back from a three day visit to the "San Juan." He brought a teamster with him and a load of new pipe.

"Feller I know back there respects my judgment," he explained. "One per cent interest in the lease. Hell, that's like picking money offen a tree. Let's keep going down."

Three thousand six hundred and seventy-five feet.

All of them were discouraged now, their nerves and tempers frayed. Pete, Texas, Charlie—even Pop. Nothing in the slush pit except sand and rock and shale. You could look in vain for one bead of oil there casting its fickle rainbow.

Three thousand seven hundred and fifteen feet. Three thousand seven hundred and ninety feet.

No oil! There wasn't to be any oil no matter how far they went down.

AND FINALLY, a Sunday afternoon five months after they had commenced drilling, the coughing weary broken-down rotary painfully drove the last Kelly joint down to three thousand nine hundred and sixteen feet.

That was all! It was a question of food now, getting sufficient to eat so that they had the strength to carry on, even if they could have carried on. They couldn't. They were through. Chet Godwin quit that day. Only Pete, Texas and Charlie Figg remained. There was no point whatsoever in their remaining.

"You feller better go back to the 'San Juan'," Nels told them, trying to force the old grin on his lips. "I'll drive you over in the car in the morning. Tonight, if you say so."

They didn't say so. They didn't say a word. They lay around there hoping some sort of a miracle would happen. That maybe Pop or someone would come up with more pipe lengths, a new rotary. Maybe if they could go down only another fifty feet—maybe less—maybe only another Kelly joint—all their worries would be over.

The afternoon had grown excessively

warm, humid, and noticeably still. To the north, west of the Elk Ridge, clouds were gathering, threatening a rainstorm. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The storm seemed stationary there, hovering over the hills, as though debating with itself whether to come through the Little Bridge Gap or meander off elsewhere.

"Don't care for the look of them clouds," Texas allowed in his slow drawl. "Looks too much like a tornado."

Perhaps five minutes went by before the clouds massed themselves ominously, and Charlie Figg said, "It's a twister sure enough! Coming through that gap down the plain here. Nels, git that motor of yours started, hitch up your trailer, and git your wife outa the way."

In the extreme sultry air it was almost a physical strain for men to move. Not a blade of grass stirred. Nels had a broken coupling pin in his trailer and hadn't taken out the time to send for another or to replace it with a make-shift coupling. He also had a flat on his rear wheel.

As he studied the approaching storm a sense of futility took hold of him like an ague. Perhaps there wasn't time to drive Janie out of there, even if he got her into the car and took off with a lame wheel. And who was to say which way they should go? Perhaps they might drive right into the path of the twister —in an open car! Wouldn't it be better for them to huddle down back of the rotary or the derrick?

"Clear out!" Texas began yelling. "She's going to come down that river."

Janie called from the trailer and Nels ran to her, chills of fear seizing him.

"Quick, Janie, let's take shelter back of the rotary." No, he figured there was no time to run there, to run anywhere. He thought of lying under the trailer. What good would that do! Nels had known fear during the war in the Pacific. He knew it again now. Without knowing what he was doing he dragged his wife back into the trailer, casting a quick glance behind him as he did so.

Dark clouds had engulfed the whole plain. The seventy-foot derrick assumed the shape of some stricken tree in front of the sweeping black cloud.

HE CLOSED the door of the trailer, appalled by the insignificance of its protection. He made Janie lie full length on the bed and lay beside her, his arm around her shoulders.

The wind, increasing to cyclonic proportions, began howling and screeching until it reached the sustained note of an engine whistle at top pitch. It was as black as night. The trailer moved, ran backward, veered, toppled, righted itself and banged into something solid—where it stopped. Nels prayed.

Cutting a crazy path, the twister ran down the river bank, whipped across the plain and, in an instant, vortexed the men's shacks up into the blackness where wooden planks and tin roofs danced with a myriad other things. Completing a concentric whirl the funnel took possession of the wooden derrick and ripped it into toothpicks. It tore the valves away, the master gate, the pipe, casing, everything. It then sucked the rotary, the drum, the boiler into the air, tossed them around like a child's playthings. It now came straight for the trailer, wavered for a second as though in consideration of its objective, and shot off back in the direction of the water-course.

The wind, the darkness, continued. Now came a terrific downpour of rain. It was impossible to speak and be heard above the noise. Nels simply lay there beside his wife, his arm around her. When the wind began to abate he still remained in that position. Finally all was profoundly hushed in the continued darkness. Nels guessed that the twister would surely return from the opposite direction.

He rose, looked out of the window. The trailer had been blown up against the shack in which they kept their extra supplies, the fuel, their food. Of all the shacks it was the flimiest—and it hadn't been touched!

He saw that the derrick was gone, all the equipment. The place where they

had slaved for five months was as barren as the surrounding plain. The Maynard Oil Company had been literally wiped off the face of the earth.

He went back to the bed and briefly told his wife what he had seen and what was no longer to be seen.

"We're through," he said bitterly. "That's the end of it. The finish. Tomorrow, we'll head back for home."

She rose, went to him, put her arms about him.

"A guy can only try, give the best that's in him, and when that's done and he doesn't—doesn't—"

"I love you, Nels."

"—then it's time he tried something else. Nobody can blame a man for trying to better his conditions. We don't have to go home hanging our heads."

"I love you, Nels."

"We're both young. We can start again—"

THERE was a new roar, a different roar, coming—or so it seemed—from the same direction as before. But now it had come without the least warning of its approach. It had come suddenly, was right on top of them on the instant. Sheets of rain were falling not far away, and yet not falling on the trailer. There was the strange, yet unmistakable, smell of oil.

Nels went to the door, opened it, stood there galvanized.

With the passing of the cyclone the sky had cleared in the west showing the crimson hues and banners of the sunset. Against this background a great column of black petroleum poured upward to a tremendous height.

Oil! A huge gusher!

It was coming from the place where they had sunk their well. Shooting outward and upward with terriffic force driven by enormous gas pressure down below.

Nels had never seen anything like it. The roaring sound of it must surely be heard for hundreds of miles. You surely could see it a hundred miles away.

And now he saw puny little figures of men running toward it, and in the blood-red afterglow of the sunset he recognized Charlie Figg, Pete, Texas, and Pop. By their actions he knew they were yelling their heads off. They couldn't be heard through the roar of the gusher. But they were waving their arms, throwing hats into the air, hugging one another, acting like maniacs.

For a moment longer Nels stared incredibly at the gusher, then shouted.

"Janie! I don't know how it happened but it sure is our well!"

Pop came toward them. "Ten thousand barrels a day," he was hollering. "Say! It's God's mercy you and Janie are safe."

Charlie Figg came running. "That twister did some good after all," he shouted. "It deepened that reservoir we made and the oil is pouring right into it—s'help me!"

"Told you there was oil here, didn't I?" Pop said. "Smell it same as you'd smell a skunk. Did I say ten thousand barrels?" He revised the estimate. "By Jookes! I'll be a coyote's uncle if that gusher won't run to fifteen and maybe twenty thousand barrels a day!"

Pete Tromko came along. "Ya otchen rada!" he said, booming out the Russian expression of his happiness. His clothes had been saturated with the black petroleum. It was in his hair, on his face. Pete actually licked some of the crude oil from his lips. "Tastes better than wodka!" he roared.

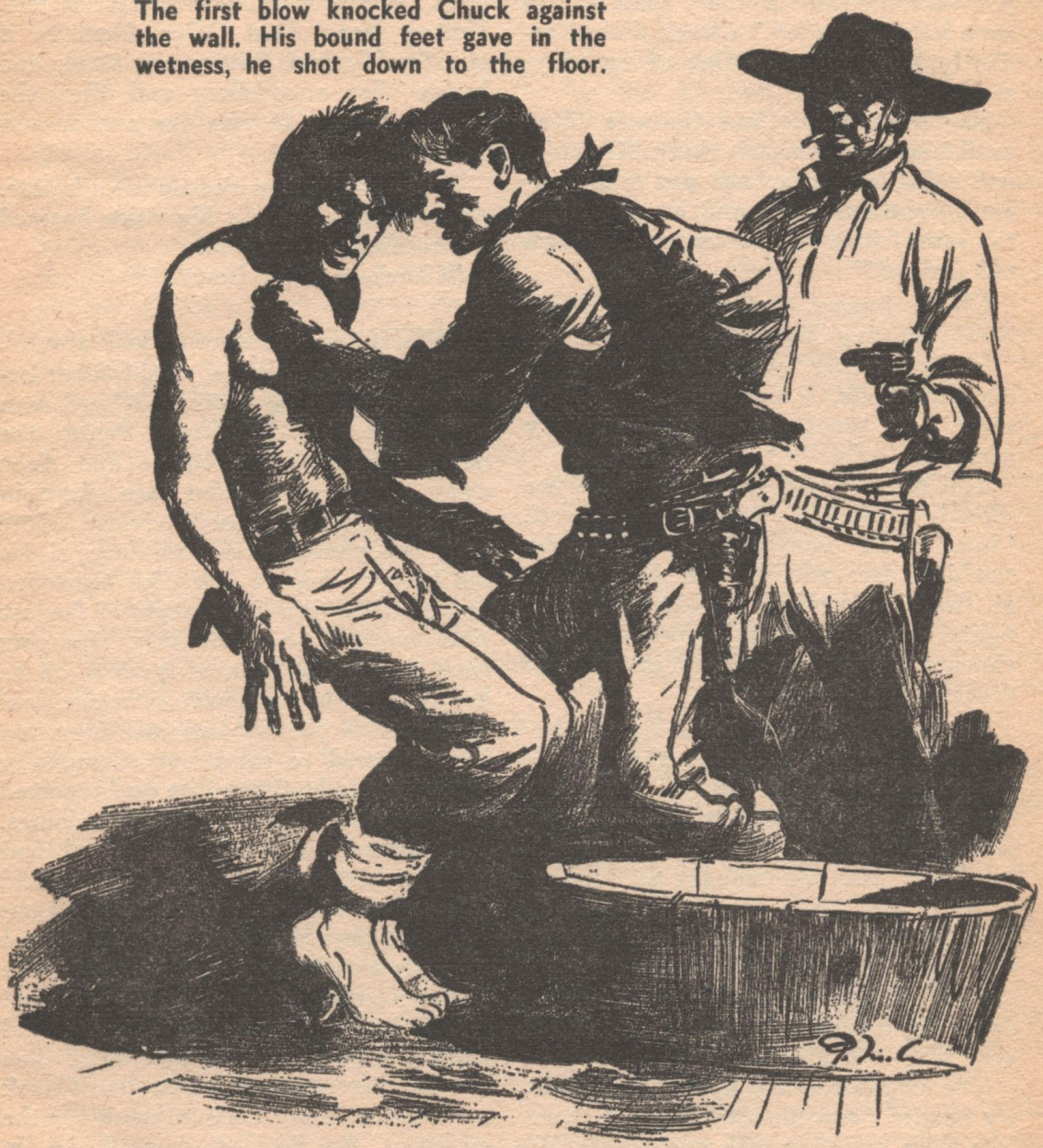
"Come on, Nels," Pop urged. "We got to set about capping that well. And that's going to be quite some job. Looks to me if we got a ten-ton lid over 'er, she's liable to blow that skyhigh, too."

Nels laughed boisterously. "We'll cap 'er!" he shouted. He lifted Janie off her feet, hugging her and kissing her. Not many minutes ago he had practically admitted to himself that he was beaten, licked. Now the old smile had returned to his face. Even the dimple in his chin seemed to be smiling—and don't ever let that dimple fool you, brother.

KICK A SLEEPING DOG

By John MacDougall Murray

The first blow knocked Chuck against the wall. His bound feet gave in the wetness, he shot down to the floor.



CHUCK LEVERITT sat his piebald stone-still, eyeing the carbine in the hands of the girl astride the trail. He ran the tip of a dry tongue over his lips, lifted his eyes slowly to the face above the blue barrel. It was a small, oval face, nut-brown with the weather, but still beautiful in

an elfish way, surrounded by a loose halo of curling hair the warm blood-color of coral.

"May I ask, ma'am," he murmured, "just what this is?"

"Swing back, stranger!"

"If that gun, ma'am, is supposed to enforce those words, set it down. I've got no more use for that than if you were holding a stick." Chuck wished ardently he meant it. "Out of my way, ma'am!"

She stood there, and the gun tilted until it was covering his chest. "If you're not a big spread owner you're a gunhand," she muttered, and her eyes held the same bitterness as her voice. "Turn tail and get!"

Chuck dragged on the lead line in his hand, drawing his packhorse up close. "I'm a carpenter by trade, and up yonder's Flintlock. I aim to set myself up there." He touched the piebald gently with his heels.

The stock of the gun snapped to her shoulder. She squinted along the barrel. Chuck half convinced himself she wouldn't dare and grinned deliberately at the eye peering at him over the sights, then the thing jumped with the violence of its own explosion and his hat flopped into the dust.

He passed her while she levered another shell into the breech, the back of his neck aflame with her eyes on it, and he had to force himself to stare straight ahead. He wanted to give the piebald his heels, but the thought of running from a girl made him ashamed. He thought: What in tarnation am I getting into. And the trail jogged sharply around an outcropping of shale to slash down off the rimrock into the sprawling grey shacks of Flintlock in the valley.

The shacks reached up in their stinking heat of a cow town to drag him down into their dry dust and wagon ruts. He dropped the piebald's reins on her neck, folding his hands on the saddlehorn. The buildings leaned tiredly against the weather, like a row of shabby old hags too worn out to stand much longer.

His knees guided the piebald into the tie-rail outside Flintlock House. He slid out of the saddle, looped the reins over the rail, drew the packhorse in and tied her beside it, then ducked under the rail to stand on the porch. His eyes examined the signs on the false fronts across the road, and it was there, Barton's General Store. Under that it said, United States Post Office. Next to it was the Flintlock Cattlemen's Bank, and beside that a saddlery and then the Flintlock Jail. It was like a thousand towns its size.

He could look up Barton after he ate. As he turned away a big voice boomed in the shade of the wall.

"Chuck—Chuck Leveritt!"

CHUCK didn't bother to look around. He knew that voice, would never forget it, nor the big, beefy, red-faced man that went with it. Monk Myers; the name echoed in his brain, and right away there was another face sharp in his memory. It appeared vividly before him, the young, immature face of his kid brother Johnny. His lips tightened and he stiffened as he thought of the last time he had seen the boy. Hanging from the gallows! Hanging for a job he had carried out as Monk's youngest paid gunhand. A job he had just been too inexperienced to carry out successfully and someone had seen him and reported to the sheriff—reported Monk's doings. "Let them hang him for it!" Monk had raged, it had been the only way he could save his own skin. "He wasn't much use to us anyway, he could just as easily get you, his own brother, into trouble. It's better to get rid of him." Then there had been the fight between Monk and Chuck. Chuck tried to kill Monk then but he was too well protected. Chuck now had no more taste to work for the monster. He decided, instead, to go straight. He had done a bit of roaming for a while, doing odd jobs as a carpenter. But he had not known any peace of mind. The memory of Johnny's death was still inside him, and a burning hate

that never left him.

But Monk Myers was in Flintlock and that could only mean that Flintlock was in for trouble!

Chuck spat into the dust and pushed into the bar. The place was deserted except for the bartender wiping off a table against the far wall. Chuck nodded.

"Where do you get a meal here?"

The man came around the bar to stand in front of him. "We'll be serving meals in an hour. Drink?"

"Whiskey."

He set a bottle and glass in front of him. "Stranger in town?"

Chuck slid the tip of his tongue over his lips. "Carpenter by trade. Got a carpenter here?"

"Not in Flintlock. We go over to Stovepipe for anything like that."

"Then I'll set here." Chuck gratefully poured the drink down his throat, bumped the glass on the bar and looked the man steadily in the eyes. "Who's the girl up on the rimrock?"

The bartender filled the glass again, wiped up the couple of drops he spilled, then stopped with the heels of both hands pressed hard against the inside edge of the bar. "You'd be talking about Kate O'Shea. Red haired, a little girl, about five foot three or so, with murder in her eyes?"

"She could fit that picture, yes."

He shook his head. "We don't bother her none, mister. She lives up there in a box canyon somewhere, alone." His finger tapped his temple. "She seemed to go queer, loco, when Myers pushed the homesteaders off the edges of the K Bar O."

"A homesteader?"

"Her father was. Myers' boys told him to get, and he fought back. Got himself killed for it."

Chuck nodded.

"She stop you?"

"Knocked my hat off with her carbine." Chuck grinned. "Prettiest little she-devil I ever saw."

"So you met her." Monk had come into the bar. He tapped a forefinger on the wood, staring at the bartender. "Give me a glass and then get out."

The man did as he was told, and Monk poured the drink carefully.

"You're either deaf or ignorant," he said, without looking at Chuck. "What are you doing in Flintlock?"

Chuck poured his drink down his throat, laid a coin on the bar. "If there wasn't sawdust on the floor I'd get on my knees and tell you."

MONK turned his drink slowly in his fingers, staring into its amber depths, and when he spoke his mouth scarcely moved. "You're not acting right, Leveritt. You've got a chip on your shoulder—a hell of a big one. You're not figuring you walked out on me permanent, are you? You've got a sight more sense than that."

"I'll give it to you straight, Monk. I'm done, through. I've been going straight for two years, and I'm staying that way. Mess with me and they're going to pick you up off the street. I've gone back to the trade I learned as a kid."

"A carpenter!" Monk snorted and drank. "Two bits an hour and what the hell have you got to show for it?"

Chuck started away, stopped and came back. "What's your deal?"

"I've gone into ranching. Bought the K Bar O spread. Wipe the grin off your ugly face. This is big stuff. I'm here a year, and I'm almost running this place. I will be when I get done. After that I'll spread out a little."

"What's the deal?"

"I need a foreman. I had Curly Crocket, you remember him, but they knocked him out of the saddle, when we were moving the homesteaders."

"You've got a spread run by gunhands and right now they haven't a leader—that's what you want, a smart gunhand to tell them what to do." Chuck reached past him and poured himself another drink. "Where does the girl come in?"

"She's a homesteader and there are about a dozen of them hiding out in the

hills up there. What do you know about the law?"

"You can't kick them off once they've filed, unless you want a Marshal down your neck."

"Then you know why I don't want them around." Monk dragged out a cigar, chopped the end off with his front teeth. "It's a deal?"

"No."

Monk nodded. "Listen to me, Leveritt—you deal with me or you get out."

"The day you think you're good enough to slap leather with me, Monk, let me know."

"I'm telling you now." Monk stuck his cigar in his mouth and walked out.

"That's Monk Myers," the bartender murmured.

Chuck came back into the present. He had been dreaming he was up on the trail, looking down from the back of the piebald at the girl astride his path. He nodded, finished his drink.

Chuck went over to Barton's General Store. There was a woman customer at the back, being waited on by a redheaded clerk in a black apron. He walked around, looking at the stock until she left, and then the redhead was standing in front of him, smiling.

"Yes, sir."

"Barton in?"

"He's gone over to Stovepipe and won't be back until tomorrow."

"Thanks." Chuck went out and stood on the porch looking across at Flintlock House. He went over and along to the main door letting into the lobby.

A WHITE-HAIRED man behind the desk in the corner nodded. Chuck nodded back. Two drummers were sitting in the leather chairs in front of the windows, their feet propped up on the sills. The rest of the lobby was empty. Chuck crossed over to the desk.

"I'd like to get a meal."

"Right in there." The man indicated the door beside him. "You're a few minutes early, but it won't make much difference."

The food was good, well prepared and served in man-sized helpings. Chuck paid the girl waiting on him, pinched a half dozen toothpicks between his fingers and walked out to the lobby. The white-haired man looked up from the register.

"Stranger in town?"

"I'm a carpenter." Chuck leaned against the desk. "I see you've got Monk Myers here."

For a moment the man studied him narrowly, then nodded. "You know him?"

"Known him for years." Chuck flipped his used toothpick at a spittoon, took a fresh one. "How much of the place does he own?"

"Well—" He spread his white hands out before him, looked at them. "He bought the K Bar O outfit, and he won the Silver Crown Saloon over on the corner. He has a half interest in the Cattlemen's Bank I think—I don't know what all."

"Sort of runs things."

"That's right." But there was no enthusiasm behind the man, only a deadness that was like a tolling bell. "He runs things."

Chuck moved out into the street. Maybe it was being damn silly, he figured, to go looking for a woman who'd knock your hat off with a carbine slug as soon as look at you—but, well, the more he thought of her the more she pulled him, and he couldn't stop thinking. He ducked under the tie rail beside the piebald, picked up the packhorse's lead-line and kneed the piebald into the street.

Monk was standing in front of the jail talking to the Sheriff, when he passed. He nodded and headed up for the rimrock. Monk, he knew, was watching him go, and he had two feelings smashing around inside of him. One was anger at the thought of him going, turning down the deal—and with Monk anger was something that turned into cold rage in the space of two breaths. It made his red face redder, almost purple, and left him trembling

all over. The other feeling would be a sort of relief, because at least he wasn't going to stick around. Monk was going to find he'd gone off half-cocked on both, and then he was going to blast a blood vessel or break a leg in his violence. Chuck grinned to himself and rode casually, rocking in the saddle.

She wasn't at the spot on the trail where she'd stopped him. He reined the piebald in, listening, smelling for woodsmoke. Her place would be somewhere near. Obviously she wasn't making a point of guarding the trail, trying to turn everyone back. He had surprised her crossing it. Right now she'd probably be up in her hole in the timber there somewhere.

Common sense dictated he search quietly, cautiously, unless he wanted to seriously stop lead. On that point she had left no doubt in his mind. If she suspected for a minute someone was out to find her, she'd own only one thought —and it would be a shooting one.

COMPLETE darkness caught him deep in a stand of jack pine. He took off the pack, the saddle, groundstaked the horses and rolled himself in his poncho, his carbine beside him. Something rustled over the pine needles, stopped, then rustled again and was gone. He lay staring up at the stars through the branches and heard a pair of hounds baying somewhere far off.

He wondered what kind of a house Barton wanted put up. He'd just said in his letter, a fancy one. After looking at Flintlock that could be anything. And Monk—Monk was always consciously running his own show. There were only two ways you left him of your own will—in a box, or by riding out of the country.

He had ridden out of the country once to break away and go straight. And he liked it. A man got damn tired of running most of the time. If it wasn't a posse after you, it was a Marshal or the Federal Judge up in the Indian Territory. He was here for one thing, to build a house. With the money, he'd set himself up and be the town's carpenter. If Monk interfered with that, he was going to get hurt.

And he knew suddenly and quietly that Monk was going to interfere and that he was going to kill him. He knew too much about him to be left alone to settle down in the same town Monk was struggling for control of—and in some way the girl was in it. He didn't know how, except that she was one of those Monk was hunting down.

He awoke to full daylight, a stabbing pain in his side. He rolled, opening his eyes, and found himself staring up into her face, the toe of her foot in his ribs, her carbine cradled in her arms. His hand dropped instinctively to the ground beside him. His own was gone, then he saw it lying about twenty feet away. He tried to grin and sat up.

"Good morning, or isn't it?"

"You were searching for me last night, stranger."

"Was I? I thought I was looking for a place to throw up a cabin. You live near here?"

"Where I live is my business. Pull up those stakes, saddle, and get out!"

"Now look, ma'am—" Chuck laced his arms around his knees, smiling up at her deliberately, "somehow you've got yourself a first rate hatred of men. That's your business. I'm not asking you about it. Where I throw up my cabin is my affair. Or don't you believe in that kind of law?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Put up a cabin within two miles of here, and I'll burn it down! Do you understand that better?" She turned on her heel and disappeared into the brush.

Chuck sat there for a long minute staring at the green wall that had shut her off, shrugged and stripped the poncho from him. Her place was close, that was certain. It had to be for her to have heard him moving in the darkness last night. He opened the pack and got out some things for breakfast.

He rolled a smoke over his coffee and

sat gazing into the embers of the fire. She was something like a particularly fine wild horse. He'd never tamed a woman, but he had a horse, and it was a challenge. Maybe he was a jackass, and maybe he'd know it in the end, but that's what it was. He flipped the butt of his cigarette into the ashes, got up. Barton would be back in town today, but Barton would have to keep another day. First thing was to find a spot for the cabin, now that he'd said he was aiming to put one up.

THE day melted in a swelter of sweat and exhaustion, of clawing a clearing out of the brush. Sprawled on the poncho, eating his supper, he had one satisfying thought: if she was near enough to have heard him moving around last night, she had spent the day listening to him getting ready to put the cabin up. It no doubt had annoyed her, to put it mildly, and right now he wanted to annoy her.

He could, he thought, ride into Flintlock tonight and see Barton. He rolled onto his side and there she was, on the edge of his new clearing, looking quietly at him. She didn't have the carbine with her. In faded levis and a calico shirt, she held her hands behind her.

"Well, hello, and welcome!" Chuck sat up. "Won't you come into my place?"

She brought her hands around into sight. The right held a curled horsewhip. She released it, let the knotted end touch the ground. Chuck rose slowly to his feet, watching her face.

"Now look, ma'am," he muttered, "I think I know what you've got in that head of yours."

"Good!" She took a quick step into the clearing. "Then I won't have to explain, will I—" And the whip whistled outwards, snapped, curling around his shoulders.

Chuck moved cyclonically in her direction, driving her backwards, her arms pinned down under his. She rocked forward, tried to bring her knee up, and he threw her onto the pine needles, straddling her, holding her arms down at the elbows.

"You crazy wild cat!"

Her lips quivered, and then she was crying in her rage and obviously hating herself for it. Chuck held her there a full minute, before he released her and sat down on the ground beside her.

"Now you can get up, if you like." He jerked the whip from her fingers, threw it into the brush. "Just remember it's a man you're fighting—if it's fighting you want."

She bounded up and off into the timber. He sat listening to her running through the brush, and then there was a scream and a crash and silence. It was all so complete, absolute, he sat there stunned for an instant, then he was up, crashing through the brush, feeling it dragging at him, slapping him. When it closed tightly enough to slow him he cursed it, lunging.

Face down across a patch of jack pine seedlings, she had one arm doubled under her, the other flung out. He knelt and turned her, feeling her arm. It wasn't broken. He tried the right foot and leg, then the left. She groaned, when he touched the ankle, and opened her eyes, then closed them, her mouth tight.

He lifted her, started back to the clearing, and she opened her eyes wide, staring at him.

"Put me down!"

"Where I can take care of that ankle, I will." Chuck kept his eyes on the brush ahead, striding.

"I said, put me down!" Her hands shot up, fingers hooked, raking his face.

In angry amazement, Chuck opened his arms and let her drop. She looked up poisonously. "I wish I had a gun!"

Chuck half bowed. "If it wasn't for that bad foot—"

"Don't mind my foot!"

"If only you were a man!" He passed her and went on towards the clearing.

WITH another cup of coffee, he rolled a smoke and spread himself on the

poncho. He'd asked for it. That annoyed him more than anything else about it. He'd walked right out with his chin jutting and asked for it. In another two hours it would be dark. He rose abruptly to his feet and strode back to where she had been lying. She couldn't go far on that foot. His lower lip between his teeth, he went slowly, watching for her tracks.

A dry, grey wash led down into the little box canyon. He stood at the top studying the layout. There was a wagon, beside it a fire, ringed with stones. Somewhere there would be a horse. A thin spiral of blue smoke curling up out of the fireplace was the only thing that moved.

He crouched in the brush, watching. When she came out, she let herself over the side of the wagon carefully, to stand on one foot, leaning against it, rubbing a hand over her face. At length she started towards the fire on both feet, stopped, the injured one lifted, then got down on all fours and crawled. Chuck rose quietly to his feet and moved down into the basin. She didn't hear him until he was almost directly behind her, then she turned, startled.

"So you found me!"

"It was find you or let you starve. You can't move on that ankle."

"That," she said, "is none of your business! Get out or I'll take a gun to you!"

"If you're able to get up and run for a gun, ma'am, I'll leave. But I'm not leaving you helpless, the way you are."

A scraping sound in the wagon brought Chuck's head snapping up, and made her turn too. A grey-haired man was hunkered down inside, just his head and shoulders showing over the top. He had a carbine in his hands, and he pulled the muzzle up now until it pointed at the trees. By the size of the neck and shoulders and arms on him, Chuck judged he'd been a massively built man, ox-like in his youth.

"You'd be the carpenter," he murmured. "Kate was telling me."

Chuck nodded. "You'd be O'Shea. My name's Leveritt, Chuck Leveritt."

O'Shea smiled one-sidedly. "You come mighty close to getting lead-channelled through the back of the head, Leveritt. Kate, let the man bind up that ankle."

"I'll bind it up myself, if he'll leave me alone long enough."

"You know Monk Myers, Leveritt?" O'Shea was watching his closely. "Sure you do, or you wouldn't know my name."

"I know Monk, yes."

"Working for him, are you?" O'Shea eased the carbine down again, until it was covering him. "I'm supposed to be dead. Monk tell you that? Shot me in the back and left me lying. Can't use my legs any more."

Chuck nodded.

"Get out, Leveritt, and stay out! Tell Monk if he wants me, I'm up here waiting!"

"Tell him yourself." Chuck swung on his heel.

"We know everything he does, every move he makes. We've still got friends down there. You can tell him that too."

Chuck moved, without answering, up the wash and back through the brush to his clearing. Inside things were bumping around, exploding, like cartridges thrown into a fire. He saddled the piebald, tied up the pack and, taking the lead-line, rode out to the trail. This wasn't the time to see Barton, he knew. He'd be better to just take a room in Flintlock House and wait until tomorrow, when he'd had time to cool off. He rode stiffly, angrily, taking every jar the length of his spine, so that his head shook.

A SHORT man in a knee-length black coat and a flat crowned, wide-brimmed black hat was talking to the white-haired man behind the desk in Flintlock House. Chuck closed the door behind him, thudded his warbag into one of the leather chairs. The white-haired one looked up.

"Say," he murmured, "didn't you say you were a carpenter? You must be the man Barton here is looking for."

Chuck nodded, looking at Barton. Under the black coat he had a pearl-grey vest, a heavy watch chain looped across it. His thin, big-boned face had the bloodless color of a man who worked out of the weather. He shoved out one immaculately white hand and Chuck took it.

"Glad to know you, Barton. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"I'd like to do just a little talking tonight, Leveritt. Monk Myers came in to see me." Barton slid his tongue along his lips, looked at the empty chairs in front of the windows.

"I'm staying here, so we'll talk in my room," said Chuck. He signed the register. The old man held out a key glancing at the room number on its tag.

"Fourteen. Show him where it is, Barton." The old man sat down in a chair he had behind the desk and took out a pipe.

Chuck followed Barton's black coat up the stairs, down the hall and waited while he opened a door at the end. He dropped his warbag on the floor inside, while Barton wiped a match into flame, lifted the chimney off the lamp on the table beside the iron bed and lit the wick. There was a commode with its slop pail, chipped jug of clean water and wash basin, a chest of drawers and a rocker. Chuck closed the door and sank into the rocker.

"You knew Monk Myers years ago, I understand." Barton was standing beside the bed, his hands behind him under his coat. He had his lips closed tight watching Chuck as he began to rock a little on the balls of his feet. "Myers, to be frank, doesn't want you in Flintlock."

"That's everything?" Chuck took out the makings of a smoke, then put them away when Barton offered him a cigar. "I saw Monk yesterday when I came in looking for you."

"He told me. Understand," Barton murmured, "this has nothing to do with what I might think."

"You wanted a house built?"

"I still do. I'm getting married to old man Pierce's daughter. That's Pierce behind the desk downstairs."

"Good enough. Then we'll build the house."

"That's just it—" Barton walked over to the door, opened it, looked out and closed it, standing with his back to it. "Myers has become Flintlock. I had no idea any of this would come up. I—"

Chuck untangled his legs, pushed himself up. "I have a personal thing to settle with Monk. He knows that. If you have any fears for me or yourself, throw them away. Could we look at the place you want to build?"

"What is this personal thing you—" Barton jumped as the door struck him in the back.

CHUCK stared at the man in the open doorway.

"This is Sheriff Kennedy's deputy, Clark," Barton murmured. "If you gentlemen will excuse me—"

"Stay where you are, Barton. I want you to hear what I tell this saddle-bum." Clark closed the door with one foot, his eyes never leaving Leveritt. "You were told to get out and not come back!"

"Monk sent you over to tell me that?" Chuck smiled measuredly. "You know why he did? Because he hasn't the guts to come and do it himself. You go back and ask him why? Go ahead!"

"Pick up your warbag!" Clark kicked it over to him. "I'm taking you as far as the pass—and if you come back—"

"You're figuring on doing that alone, of course." And Chuck moved in one long stride that pinned the man back against the door. He had a fist full of his shirt close to the collar, twisted it hard, then held it while Clark's face turned a deep crimson. His free hand lifted the six gun out of his belt, tossed it backwards onto the bed.

"Now get out of here," he breathed. "Get out and stay out, understand! Anything Monk has to say, tell him to come over personally!"

He dragged him away from the door.

"Open it, Barton!" In the hall he turned Clark around quickly, shoved him out ahead of him and drove his toe into the seat of his pants.

Inside Barton shook his head. "I marvel at the way you did that, Leveritt, but it still doesn't settle a thing."

"It settled the fact that I'm not leaving tonight." Chuck motioned to the bed. "Sit down, Barton. There's some things I'd like to know about Flintlock. Who is this Kennedy?"

"The Sheriff? He's Myers' man. They held an election."

"And he was voted in legally?" Chuck smiled. "Not if I know Monk. I saw him do it once before."

"Well, he owns the Silver Crown, you know, and he had the run of the bar here."

"And everyone who came in got a free drink and was marked down by Monk as a vote for his man. If you came in six times, that was six votes."

"Something like that, I guess."

"The people of Flintlock took that without a protest?" Chuck locked the door.

"Not exactly." Barton was running his fingers around inside his collar, squirming. "But the commissioners over in Stovepipe okayed the election and its results, so that made it legal. That's what we're up against."

"Nobody likes it?"

"I—" Barton wet his lips, looked over his shoulder at the window. "You don't mind, Leveritt—"

Chuck unlocked the door, opened it. "Get out, Barton, before you're puking all over everything here!"

He went quickly without a backward glance and Chuck closed the door on him, then blew out the lamp and stood in front of the window watching the street. Clark was across the way. There were two others with him. One of them, Chuck felt sure, was Monk. They had been watching the window, right now they started to drift towards the jail, then stopped. Barton was crossing to his store. They closed on him, backed him into his own doorway. Chuck raised the window gently, hunkered down beside the opening, listening.

"He's gettin' out, ain't he?" It wasn't Monk and it wasn't Clark so it had to be Kennedy, the Sheriff.

BARTON wasn't saying anything, probably running his finger around inside his collar. Clark moved in quickly and there was a grunt.

"Speak, damn you!" Clark roared.

"He's not leaving. He told you that." Barton's voice was high, close to cracking.

"He building that house for you?" Monk demanded.

"No."

"See that he doesn't or I'll burn every stick of lumber you buy—and if you get it up anyhow I'll tear it down!"

"Yes, sir."

"You're worrying too much, Monk. I'll get him out of town the first thing in the morning," Kennedy said. "Shucks, let's go over to the office or something."

They let Barton go and started up the street again towards the jail. Chuck got up, closed the window and locked it. Pierce got up out of his chair behind the desk when he came down. He knocked his cold pipe out in the palm of his hand and dropped the ashes into a spittoon.

"I'd like to speak to you, Leveritt."

Chuck stopped at the door, came back slowly.

"I know what went on upstairs with Clark. I liked it." He laid his pipe on top of the open register, folded his hands on the desk and looked steadily at Chuck. "I don't know what your stake is in this, but Luke—he's my swamper in the bar—Luke told me you'd met Kate O'Shea. Told me some things he noticed."

"Maybe he's got good eyes."

"First rate eyes, Leveritt, and ears too." Pierce nodded to emphasize the statement. "You've got something powerful personal against Monk. I know that. I'm not asking what. I don't

care. But I wanted to tell you—the homesteaders hold a meeting tomorrow night. Monk knows that and he's out to find it if he can."

"Thanks." Chuck turned back to the door.

"Step through that door tonight, Leveritt, and you're as good as dead. Of course you don't have to pay any mind to what I say. I know I'm old—but a carbine slug in the dark can make damn short work of a man's ambitions."

Chuck, finishing his breakfast, shoved his chair far enough away from the table to cock one foot up on the other knee and took out the makings of a smoke. He had gone back up to his room and to bed. In his way, Pierce knew gunhands, or he just knew Monk Myers. He flicked a match into flame with his thumb and saw a blonde girl coming towards him with a purposeful air.

She was tall, moving with the graceful ease of an antelope between the tables. Directly in front of him she beamed, her smile tucking in the edges of her round cheeks like dents in a pillow.

"You're Mr. Leveritt," she said, and sat down in the opposite chair. "I'm Barbara Pierce. You've met my father, behind the desk, and you've met the man I'm marrying, Frank Barton."

"Barton's a very lucky man." Chuck said it slowly, his eyes appraisingly on the rippling gold that fell to her shoulders.

"Thank you." Her head bobbed pleasantly. "I know the way you say that you mean it. But what about the house?"

Chuck looked once more at the hair, the eyes, the gleaming teeth, and then at the burning tip of his cigarette, and it was all gone, even the warm, sweet scent of her. "Then you don't know?" he murmured.

"But I do. You're going to build it."

"Am I? I don't want to, and Barton's afraid to have me anywhere near him."

"You have personal reasons, I know, but you're going to build that house. We have personal reasons too."

Chuck got up slowly. "Let's be honest, ma'am. I like it that way. You and your pa have personal reasons. Barton wants to stay out. I came to build a house, but I've changed my mind. Good day, ma'am."

"Wait!" She jumped up to block him, stood staring at him, her eyes blazing. "You're a coward! You're more afraid of Monk than Frank is!"

FOR a moment Chuck had the impulse to close her mouth with the back of his hand, then he bowed slightly. "If you were a man, ma'am, you'd be picking yourself off the floor right now. Get out of my way!"

Chuck stood on the porch, watching Flintlock come awake. A springwagon stood in front of the saddlery, the saddler fitting a new harness to the team. On the far corner, where the trail to the rimrock cut the main drag, a swamper was washing the porch of the Silver Crown Saloon with a bucket of water and a broom. Chuck sucked in enough of the cool morning air to strain his buttons, let it out and crossed to the barber shop beside the Silver Crown. So Barton was a coward to his woman. When you added it up that's what it came to. Then what in tarnation was she doing marrying him?

He had a haircut and shave, then decided on a bath. He was deep in it, almost dozing, when he heard Monk and someone else come into the front of the shop. Monk walked to the back, kicked the door open, looked down at Chuck, then turned to the barber.

"Get out!"

The man went and the door slammed behind him.

Monk seated himself on the stool beside the tin tub. "Leveritt, I don't like treating an old friend the way you're making me treat you. If you have ideas of helping those homesteaders with your trigger finger, don't!"

Chuck got out of the tub as a matter of precaution, dumped it, letting the soapy water foam across the floor and

out into the shop. "What's the deal you're offering Monk?" He reached for the towel.

"Two hundred a month and your keep."

"That's a lot of money."

"Sure it's a lot."

"Let me think a minute." Chuck finished towelling, reached for his clothes.

"What's there to think about so damn hard?"

Chuck pulled on his pants. "I'm trying to think of a new way to tell you to go to hell."

Monk came to his feet slowly, carefully, on the wet floor. With his toe he lifted the stool, kicked it into a corner. "That's what's worth the two hundred, Leveritt. You're tough, gun-happy. But if you won't sell it to me you won't be any good to anyone else!"

"As for instance?"

"The O'Shea girl you met up on the trail."

"That's what you're afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything!"

"Then go to hell!"

Monk lunged, and it was a mistake on the slippery floor. He went almost to his knees when Chuck caught the front of his coat, held him.

"You asked for it, Monk!" Chuck brought the flat of his hand down across his mouth with everything he could put into his right arm, then brought it back again in the other direction. "Now get out!"

MONK picked himself up off the floor, the veins in his temples great blue knots. His fists clenched at his sides, his face purple, he roared: "Clark!"

Clark came to the door.

"Hold that saddle-bum while I teach him something!"

"This'll be easier, Monk." Clark laid a gun on him. "Hold them up and together, Leveritt! Get that stool, Monk, and tie them with his shirt, then we'll sling him from one of the clothes pegs."

Monk grinned, wiped the back of one hand across his mouth and went for the stool. He made a double knot, gave it a jerk to test it, then ripped the roller towel off the wall and tied Chuck's ankles.

He stepped back, smiling. "I don't think I'll hang him up. He looks better that way."

Chuck saw the first one coming, tried to roll his head with it, but it crashed into the side of his mouth, ripped across his lips. He had the taste of blood on his tongue and the second one smashed into his face, slid off his cheekbone. It rocked him back against the wall, then his feet gave in the wetness, and he shot down to the floor, sitting there.

"Get up!" Monk moved in. "Get up, damn you!"

Chuck threw his bound legs sideways, catching Monk across the ankles. He went down with a crash that shook the shop.

"You—" He couldn't finish it. His mouth was wet, blood ran down onto his chin. He dragged himself up. "Get me a horsewhip, Clark!"

Clark went, running.

"You're so damn brave! So damn tough! I'm going to make you wish to hell you never heard of Flintlock, never heard of Monk Myers!" He drove his foot into Chuck, knocking him over on his side. "You're going to—"

"Please, Myers, my shop!" The barber was in the doorway, wringing his hands.

"How did you get in? Get out and stay out!"

"But my shop!"

"Get out and stay out!"

The man looked desperately around him, then went slowly, and Clark, coming in, slammed the door on his heels.

"Now!" Monk reached for the whip, let the coils out. He stepped back for swinging distance and brought it down.

It whistled, then snapped like a forty-five. Chuck closed his eyes, his teeth grinding together as it bit in. He counted the blows. For each one he was going

to give back two.

He counted thirty-two before he blacked out, then he felt a cold towel being washed over his face and opened his eyes to see Pierce bending down beside him. The barber was at his feet, rubbing his ankles. His mind was a crawling thing, squirming its way up out of a bloody fog of pain. They had him sitting up on the stool, his back to the wall, a wet sheet wrapped around him to cover the gashes the whip had left.

CHUCK pulled his feet away from the barber, stood up, swaying, his hands balled into fists, his eyes glassy. "Where's Monk?"

"Now wait a minute, lad!" Pierce pressed him back to the wall. "You can't go after him just yet."

With one arm Chuck brushed him aside.

"Get him, Pete!" Pierce muttered and closed on one arm. The barber grabbed the other, hugged it to him. "Now listen to me, lad," Pierce said quietly, soothingly, "you're going to get him—but in your own time, when you're ready. You have to make sure things are in your favor, see. Right now he'd finish killing you."

And while he was talking he was walking him out the door, across the street and into the Flintlock House. He was still talking when he pressed him down onto the bed and started washing the gashes, dressing them. Chuck closed his eyes, let the darkness pour over him, float him away again. The voice went on, quietly, smoothly, and the cool fingers touched and were gone, touched again.

Monk walked into the Sheriff's office, Clark at his heels. Kennedy was sitting paring a callus on his hand with his knife. He looked up, nodded, and went on with his work. Monk tossed the horsewhip into a corner.

"Get up out of the chair, Kennedy!"

Kennedy jumped up, sat on the edge of the table in the middle of the room, and Monk let himself down into the swivel chair before the desk, lifted his feet to it and felt for a cigar.

"Why the hell I've got you in here as Sheriff I don't know," he muttered. "You've messed up this thing from one end to the other."

"What do you want me to do?"

"You were going to see he left town first thing this morning."

"And then you wanted to make a deal with him."

"It fell through, just like the other. Get him out."

"All right." Kennedy snapped his knife shut, dropped it into his pocket. "If you're done, I'll get him out."

"How are you going to do it?"

"Where is he?"

Monk rolled his eyes, closed them. "Tell him, Clark. If I have to explain any more things to him, I'm going to bust him wide open!"

Clark grinned, swung a chair around and straddled it. "He's in the Barber Shop, unconscious."

"Then I'll take a buckboard and ride him out." Kennedy reached for his hat, slapped it on the back of his head. "Come on, Clark."

"You need help to even cart an unconscious man out?" Monk rumbled. "Get the hell out of here and do it on your own!"

Clark laughed mirthlessly, when the door banged shut, and got up to stand looking out the window.

"He's no damn good," Monk muttered. "Send him after Barton and he's got the guts of a mountain lion after a bawling calf."

"This Leveritt's good, Monk?"

"Good?" Monk chewed the word. "He's better'n good. That's the trouble, Kennedy knows it."

"He's going over to Flintlock House."

MONK got up, came over to the window. They stood watching in silence until Kennedy came out, alone, and turned over to the jail. Monk was back in the chair when he came in.

"You take him out of town?"

"You know damn well I didn't!" Ken-

nedy threw his hat on the table. "Barbara Pierce is sitting on the top of the stairs with a shotgun across her knees and she'll split the belly of the first one tries to go up. Go do it yourself!"

"Who's Sheriff here?"

"I don't know, I just quit." He took off his badge, threw it down with the hat. "Maybe Clark is."

"Clark?" Monk looked at him steadily.

"You want me to, I'll see what I can do." He got up off his chair, tilted his hat forward over his eyes and went out.

A drummer was sitting in the lobby, cleaning his nails. Clark crossed to the foot of the stairs, started up them, his head down. The drummer turned to look after him, stayed with his head twisted on his neck.

"Take one more step," Barbara murmured, "and I'll let go!"

Clark lifted his eyes and saw her. He tried to look surprised, then smiled. The muzzle of the shotgun was pointed at his belly and the tight look around her mouth showed she meant to use it. He pushed his hat back, leaned casually against the inside wall.

"Now you know a heap better than that, ma'am. This is the law and you can't just sit there and block it," he murmured. "Put that thing down before it goes getting you in trouble."

"If there's any law in Flintlock it's all Monk Myers' law—and that's not legal in any court. Just stay where you are, like I said, or come up another step and take a load of rusty nails through the middle."

"You know what would happen to you, ma'am, if you hauled off and killed a deputy in cold blood?"

"I'm not arguing with you, Clark." Barbara stood up, came down a step. "Go back and send Monk over now."

Clark stayed there until the gun was three feet from him, then backed down a step. Barton came in, stopped in the middle of the lobby, looking at both of them, running his tongue over his dry lips.

"Better tell her to stop this, Barton," Clark muttered. "She's going to get hurt."

"I don't understand." Barton had his brow furrowed deeply. "What is it about?"

"They've got Leveritt up there I guess."

"You guess!" Barbara took another step down. "You know we have, and you know what you and Monk did to him!"

"Now look, Barbara," Barton murmured, "if this Leveritt is there—"

"Stay out of it, Frank!" Her tone clinked with slivers of ice.

"I know, but—you can't stop the law, Barbara, and Clark is the law."

"Luke!" Barbara leaned over the rail. "Luke!"

Luke came in from the bar, wiping his hands on his apron. He saw Barton and stopped beside the desk, then looked up and saw Barbara with the shotgun.

"You call me, Miss Barbara?"

She motioned with the gun. "Take his weapons, Luke!"

"You mean the deputy, ma'am?" Luke scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Take them and stop shivering!"

"Yes, ma'am." Luke lifted them, took them over and laid them on the desk. "That's all?"

"I wouldn't ask either of you to throw him out, you'd be liable to drop him, you're shaking so. Move, Clark!" She walked down on him with slow deliberateness. "And keep those hands up!"

He backed up, watching her. The drummer stood up, smiling, touched his hat to Barbara. "Allow me," he murmured, and opened the door without getting in the way.

With Clark out, Barbara lowered the muzzle of the gun, turned, looking for the nearest chair, and sank into it, her face stiff. "Go up, Frank. Pa wanted to see you. He's in fourteen with Leveritt."

BARTON'S knock on the door awakened Chuck. He opened his eyes to see Pierce letting him in and swung his

feet over the side of the bed to the floor, sitting up. He looked around the room, remembering slowly, and it was shadowy with dusk. Pierce hadn't spoken a word to Barton, and he was standing now beside him, looking at Chuck.

"Feel kind of stiff, don't you, boy?" he murmured.

Chuck got up, reached for his warbag and the clothes in it. "I want to thank you, Pierce. Right now I've got something needs doing."

"Relax, lad, relax. Sit down there while I talk a minute." Pierce took out his pipe, a sack of tobacco and eased himself down into the rocker. "What you've got to do will be better done after you hear me."

Barton coughed. "You wanted to see me?"

Pierce looked up at him as if he were seeing him for the first time. "I haven't much to say, Frank, except this—who's side are you aiming to be on?"

"I'm not on any side, Pierce. That is—" Barton ran his tongue over his lips.

"We don't go that, Frank." Pierce took his eyes from his twitching face, studied the tobacco he was tamping into the bowl between his fingers. "A long time ago, I don't know as you ever heard it, but someone wrote in the Bible that Christ said something to the effect that there were those who were with Him and everyone else was against Him."

"You don't have to quote the Bible to me, Pierce." Barton turned to lay a hand on the doorknob. "I could tell you a thing or two about it."

"Don't go so hasty, man. You're giving Leveritt here the wrong impression. Maybe you can tell me something about the Bible, I don't get much chance to read. But there's the question I asked."

"I run a General Store, Pierce. Everyone's my customer—so I walk down the middle of the road."

"That's not good enough now." Pierce shook his head sadly. "I don't like seeing you be this way, Frank."

"Then you and the rest of them can do as you please. I'll sell out and go over to Stovepipe!" His voice lifted with each word. "Come to think of it," Pierce rumbled, "that'd be a heap easier and pleasanter than tossing in with the rest and maybe getting shot at. Goodbye, Frank."

Barton went, leaving the door ajar. Chuck got up off the edge of the bed and kicked it shut, then went over to stand in the window.

"He'll go over to Monk and sell out," Pierce murmured. "That's what you're looking for, isn't it."

Chuck turned, looked at him silently. What, he wondered, did this old man have against Monk Myers? Monk made enemies everywhere he went because he stepped on people, knocked them down and walked to and fro over them. But they usually just made a point of keeping out of his way from then on—and that's the way Monk wanted it.

"YOU know, Leveritt," Pierce sucked on his pipe and in the slowly gathering shadows the top of the bowl glowed red, died, glowed red again, "you been a prime target of Myers' since you first put foot in here. At first we didn't know but you might be a Marshal or something—so we just watched. But you're just a man with a god awful hate that's eating you from the belly out."

"Come to the point, old timer." Chuck buttoned his shirt, sat down and pulled on his boots.

"I'm coming to it, boy. We've all got a need here—a need for someone who knows Monk and his ways and can fight him. And you're the man."

"I'm not fighting a range war, Pierce. Anything I've got against Monk is personal."

"We're not asking you to fight a range war. We're not asking you to do a single thing you're not figuring on doing right now. All we're doing is telling you where we stand."

Chuck buckled on his irons, stood there with his fingers still on the buckles. "Who's this 'We'?"

"The town of Flintlock—not counting Barton. All the spreads from one end of the valley to the other, and up in the canyons. All the homesteaders Monk shoved into the timber and figures on hunting down tonight. That's 'We'."

"And they can't fight him? What's the matter with riding him out on a rail?"

"That's not legal, and what they do has to be legal or they lose their land, their homes. And legal, he has them hands down at every turn." Pierce rubbed his fingers through his white hair. "You come in here knowing all about Monk and his ways. You're a free-booter, a drifter, far as we know—but you've got this hate thing inside you. So we're backing you, understand?"

Barton opened the door of his store quietly, let himself in. At the back his red headed clerk was stacking a shipment of boots on the shelves. He stood watching him a moment, then moved down the store towards him.

"That the Philadelphia shipment?"

The boy started, gave an embarrassed laugh. "I didn't expect you, Mr. Barton. Kind of surprised me."

"That the Philadelphia shipment?" Barton asked again.

"Yes, sir. It came in on the stage this afternoon."

Barton nodded, went on into his little office at the side and sat down in the swivel chair in front of his desk. He took out a cigar, bit off the end of it and jabbed it between his teeth, but he didn't light it. "Steve!" He leaned back so he could shout out the door. "Come here!"

"Yes, sir." The red head stood in the doorway his long hands hanging limply.

"You know what fear is?" Barton studied him quietly. "Ever been so scared of something you wanted to run and never stop?"

"I've been scared, sir, but not like that."

"You haven't, huh? What kind of scared have you been then?"

"I've been scared, then I get mad at whatever it was scared me."

"You get mad? And I suppose if it's a man you go out and thrash him?" Barton couldn't hide the derision in his voice.

"Not if he's bigger than I am, or stronger. I plot, sir."

"Go out, Steve, go out!"

"Yes, sir."

"Take off your apron and call it a day."

"Thank you, sir."

WHEN he heard the front door close and knew he was alone, Barton lifted his feet to the edge of the desk, lit his cigar and blew the match out to sit in darkness. Just being like this he could think of a hundred things to do. He could picture himself walking up to Monk Myers, even, and telling him off, running him out of town. That's what everyone wanted.

But then when he went out, something always happened inside. His mouth got so dry his tongue clung to the roof of it, and his lips felt like they were cracking. Everything he had thought he'd do was gone. There was just a quaking that shamed him. Even in front of Barbara—and he hated that worse than anything else that happened.

He was a coward. That's what she'd said in front of Luke and the drummer. Of course she'd included Luke in it, but it was him she'd been looking directly at while she backed Clark down the stairs and across the lobby. He should have strode to the desk, picked up one of the guns and driven the man into the street—but he hadn't.

With abruptness, he dropped his feet to the floor, opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out a gun. He swung the chamber open, sucked hard on his cigar to have a little light and counted the loads. Six of them. He closed it, pushed it into his belt under his coat. A man could always recover his honor, he thought, and got up.

Monk Myers was still sitting in front

of Kennedy's desk in the Sheriff's office. The others were grouped around the walls, Kennedy, Clark—straddling a chair again, and a dark skinned hunchback with a two-day growth of beard and little snake's eyes Barton knew only as Earle, and that he worked for Myers out on the K Bar O. Monk looked up at him when he opened the door, one side of his face twisted in a snarl.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I wanted to see you, Monk."

"All right, take a good look, then get out!"

Barton balled his sweating hands into fists, struggled desperately to get a new hold on himself. "I want to see you alone!"

"Anything you've got to say to me you can say in front of them!" Monk waved the butt of a chewed cigar to include the room. "They know everything I know."

This was it, Barton told himself. This was everything, and his mouth was like cotton, his tongue clinging to its roof. He forced it out over his cracking lips and knew he was shaking too much to take the gun out of his belt. If he tried, he thought, it would slip, and because he'd tried to draw one, they'd drop him. He looked at Monk and turned and went out.

In his chair again in the darkness, he took the gun out of his belt, held it warmly in his hands. The three around the walls had been watching him, waiting, almost expecting he was going to do something. He turned the muzzle of the gun upwards and looked down. It was too dark to see, but it was there, a foot from his face, and his finger was pushing the trigger down gradually—ever so gradually.

MONK looked down at his coat, brushed some cigar ashes off it and got up. "Earle, you take the back door, Kennedy, you take the left side and front, I'll take the right side and front—and Clark, you're going up on that porch roof and in the window."

Kennedy moved towards the door. "I told you, Monk, I'm through with this. Get somebody else."

"Now wait a minute!" Monk blocked him. "Open that door to walk out on us and I'll have your brains beaten out!" He was breathing hard, noisily, his face growing crimson. "Anybody who works with me until he knows too much never quits! It's what Leveritt doesn't know—and it's why Clark's going through the window."

Kennedy stood there, staring at him sullenly.

"You with us or against us?"

"I told you, Monk. And I haven't changed my mind."

Monk's arm came up, shot out straight, and the fist smashed into the middle of Kennedy's face. He went down under it, his mouth split. Monk stood over him, spread-legged, his hands balled into fists, his mouth working so that his chin was wet.

"Get up!"

"You can clear out! Everyone in Flintlock is after you now!"

"You creeping, drunken—" Monk drove his heel into Kennedy's mouth, and he went backwards, his arms falling uselessly beside him.

For the moment only Monk's breathing filled the room, then he tore his eyes from the bloody face on the floor and looked from Clark to Earle. They looked past him, at the wall.

"You boys ready?"

Earle picked his hat up off the table, rubbed a hand over his stubble of beard. "Maybe we better wait," he muttered. "The rest of the boys will be in for the drag through the hills soon."

"So you want to stall too?"

"No, Monk, no. I just thought it might be smarter. Remember, this Leveritt's no old woman when it comes to fighting."

"You know. I've got an idea." Monk smiled, beamed. "You're going in the window!"

"Not me, boss!"

"You're going in or be blown wide

open from behind!"

"You know I never was a match for him!"

"You're going to be or get killed trying. You're getting ideas like Kennedy did—this Leveritt is so damn big and tough nobody can lick him!"

"Maybe we're just messing it up, Monk?" Clark murmured. "He wouldn't be able to hit a barrel if he was inside it, the way he's shaking."

"We're not messing it up. We're either getting rid of Leveritt or one more of these boys who shake their bones apart at the thought of facing him!"

CLARK shrugged and pushed Earle from behind towards the door. "All right, let's get it over with!"

"Stop shivering, damn you!" Monk opened the door and drove him through it on the toe of his boot. "Remember we're right behind you—just in case you have any ideas!"

Earle moved across the road in the half darkness to the Flintlock House. Monk and Clark drifted up the street to stand in front of Barton's General Store, watching him. They saw him take a horse from the tie rail, lead it to the far side of the porch and climb up on the saddle to reach the roof.

Once up, he lay still, clinging, a black patch against the greyness, then he edged forward, inching his way. The window of Leveritt's room was open, they could see that, but there was no light coming from it. Earle reached the side of it, froze again. Then they saw him working the gun out of his belt, getting ready to rise to his knees.

The warm, caressive silence of the room was filled with the blanket of night. Pressed into every corner, it had spread weed-like, to cover everything. Chuck Leveritt stood in it, a hand on the foot of the iron bed, and he felt calm. He could see the bowl of Pierce's pipe glowing red, could smell the smoke of tobacco—and he wanted to go.

Pierce took the pipe from his mouth. "You hearing what I hear, boy?"

Then it came again, a faint creaking, scratching, near the open window. Whoever it was, they were moving with the lead of fear dragging them down. Chuck held out his left hand, motioning silence to Pierce, while his right eased the gun out of the leather on his thigh, his thumb slowly drawing the hammer back.

The top of the head came up, grew big and pushed in over the sill. Chuck was careful. He waited a full five seconds while the man's eyes tried to penetrate the darkness. When it came, Earle didn't know what hit him. His head snapped back and up, cracking against the window, his gun dropping inside onto the floor, then he rolled, clattering down the roof.

"Nice shooting!" Pierce began rocking again. "They can't get up the front so now they come up the roof!"

"What's the matter with the front?"

"Barbara's been sitting there with a shotgun across her knees ever since I brought you over here. They can't pass her and they know it." He dragged on his pipe contentedly. "It just goes to prove what I've been telling you. You've got to have a standing or they'll drive you out."

"Monk couldn't drive me out of anywhere, Pierce!"

"Now you're being hasty, boy, and mark my words, it's been the end of more than one good man. I'm too old for much real gun fighting any more, but in my day I did a bit—so just take a little of my advice."

CHUCK slid his gun back into its leather, picked his hat up off the chest of drawers.

"You're going right out and find Monk Myers!" Pierce snapped the words and they had the dancing deadliness of a palmed gun. "You're going to step out that front door and find yourself staring down the throats of a couple of cold irons hankering to get hot—with a body lying by the tie rail and yourself charged with the murder of an innocent man!

Hell!" Pierce got up. "Don't go taking my word for it! Take a look out there!"

Pierce joined him at the window. "That's Monk and Clark over in front of Barton's, and those two just riding up are some of the boys from the K Bar O spread Monk had coming in for the drag through the hills tonight."

"Why don't they pick up the one I shot?" Chuck curled his fingers into his palms until they became hard, white knuckled fists. The feeling he was cornered came up out of his stomach in waves. "What are they waiting for?"

"For you!" Pierce went back to his chair and began filling his pipe again. "You're going to be burning with something or other and go busting out the door, a gun in each hand, or at least your hands on the butts! That's what they're waiting for!"

"If that's the way it is. I'll stay here!"

"No, because if you do they'll come in—and Barbara won't be stopping so many. Maybe you'll listen to me. I'm not trying to run your show, I don't give a damn about it. I'm just trying to keep you from getting your crazy head blown off before you have a chance of doing as much for Monk."

"I ought to be thanking you—"

"You should, but don't, the shock might kill me. Just listen to what I have to say and remember it's not my idea. It belongs to every soul in Flintlock who hates Monk, and there aren't any he isn't paying who don't."

Chuck sank onto the edge of the bed. "Deal the hand, Pierce."

"I'm going over to Stovepipe and file a bill of sale in your favor on that little spread I've got up on Norman's Creek. That makes you a property owner in Flintlock."

"And that makes all the difference?"

"Now what do you think? You're a drifter, a saddle-gypsy, come in here to seek a fortune, make trouble, gamble, or work a bit for a living—nobody can say which. If Monk finds he can't put you out any other way, he can always call in a marshal, or even troops—say on account of a stage you held up once and some mail you took from it."

"You're giving Monk a lot of credit. He wouldn't bother framing a man. He doesn't want me around, I go out feet first, or I go out in my own saddle!"

"As a property owner you stay where you are, and anything he's got to put you out with, he's going to have to prove in court—and you know he wouldn't go to court with this."

"THAT'S the first time you've read him right." Chuck dug out the makings of a smoke. "But all this playing around the edge. What's that getting us?"

"This much, son," Pierce took a long patient breath, let it out, "you want to get close enough to Monk to settle something with him. He knows it now, and you wouldn't get within a hundred yards of him unless he had you covered. He'll see to that. You could take him from a window, sure, but that wouldn't be what you'd want. You want him to know who's handing it out when it comes—and I think I've got you straight."

"Perfect."

"All right. So up on the spread, as a property owner, you're surrounded by men who'd love the chance of mixing with anything he's got. Homesteaders."

Chuck dropped his feet to the floor, stood up. "I'd like to make him suffer a little before I do anything like killing him."

"You can do that too. I could name ways, but you can think of them yourself." Pierce pushed himself up out of the chair. "Our problem right now is to get out of here without being seen or followed."

"I'll go first. I'll leave the back way. I'll wait beside the front gate of the lumber yard. Just ride along slow—but have someone come after you. That way, we'll know if you're followed."

"Not like that, boy! They'll be watching the back, front and sides!"

"Name it then."

"I can't, right off." Pierce crossed the

room to the window, stood staring out.

"You don't figure they'll go on that drag tonight?"

"This is bigger, right now, and more important, to Monk. He'll keep them with him until he's through."

"Good enough!" Chuck jerked the sheet off the bed, draped it around himself in the darkness. "Put on the light, Pierce, then set this rocker over by the window and lead me over to it—slow-like, so they can see I'm just able to move. I want to sit there, in front of it. Then you're going to pull the shade and the lamp is going to plaster my shadow across it."

Pierce came away from the window. "It's an idea!"

"Sure it is! We leave a dummy sitting there. You go out the back way, mount and ride, casual-like. Barbara goes to her room, and I wait somewhere where I can see if you're trailed and drop out to the ground when they come in. I'll still meet you in front of the lumber yard."

"Get down on the bed!" Pierce wiped a match into flame on his pants, lit the lamp. "To them out there it must seem as if I just came in with your supper."

He pushed the rocker over by the window, turned suddenly, as though he'd been spoken to and said in a voice that would carry past the opened window: "Shucks, man, you're too beat up to go out! Eat your supper and act like you got some sense!"

Beside the bed he winked, jerked his head towards the window. "Take that hat off."

CHUCK hung on him, limping, settled into the chair, the sheet draped around him. Pierce pulled down the shade then went back to the bed. He rigged a dummy out of the pillows and clothes taken from Chuck's war bag. In front of the window again, he moved around to make the shadows on the shade confusing while Chuck placed the dummy carefully, dropped to all four and got out of the lamp's way.

At the door they looked back. It was perfect. Pierce nodded, opened the door and pushed Chuck through, then locked it, dropping the key into his pocket. He led the way down the hall to the stairs, and Barbara was sitting there, half way down, leaning tiredly against the inside wall, the shotgun still across her knees.

"Go to your room, Barbara, and lock the door," Pierce murmured. "Keep it locked, understand."

She looked up suddenly, her blonde hair falling partially across her eyes, then she saw Chuck and came up to them. "Where are you two going?"

"Heading for the meeting," Pierce patted her shoulder. "You do like I said. There's a dummy sitting where Leveritt was in front of the window, and when they see me go out they'll be coming in."

She nodded numbly and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll take the shotgun with me, Pa."

Monk was standing back in the doorway of Barton's General Store, chewing on a dead cigar. In front of him, within reach of his hand, was Clark, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. Spread up and down the boards were the K Bar O hands, watching. Monk took the cigar out of his mouth, spat a piece of tobacco leaf into the darkness and replaced the cigar. Pierce came out of Flintlock House, ducked unhurriedly under the tie rail and backed his horse out into the road.

Monk muttered under his breath.

"Leveritt's still up there," Clark said.

"Sure he's still up there, you haven't seen him come out have you? But Pierce is too smart to leave him up there alone."

"What do you figure then?"

"I don't." Monk threw the cigar into the road. "Unless that daughter of his is there."

"She'd be enough. She'd split you wide open, you gave her the chance."

"Yeah." Monk was breathing hard,

watching Pierce ride into the night. "Only we're not giving her a chance. Send a couple of the hands around to the back, and a couple up on the roof again. Better put the rest in the bar in case he tries to make it out that way, then we're going in the front."

Clark moved down the line, giving the orders, then he came back again. The men drifted into the street, across it, gliding shadows melting into the other shadows. Monk watched them go until the last one was out of sight.

"You set, Clark?"

"I've been ready for an hour."

MONK hesitated another moment, then lurched forward, forcing himself into a stride. He went up on the porch of the Flintlock House, Clark beside him, and opened his coat to get at the gun in his belt easier. Inside the lobby he stopped, looking around him slowly. The leather chairs were all vacant. No one was behind the desk—and Barbara wasn't on the stairs.

"Must be sitting guard in the room," Clark murmured, "or just outside the door."

Monk nodded and went up the stairs heavily, one at a time, stamping his heels with each step. "If she's up there she knows I'm coming, and so does Leveritt. The men ought to be up to the window by now."

"If they're not they're stalling."

When he saw no one in the corridor outside room fourteen, Monk stopped again. He scrubbed his face with one hand, then wiped it across his mouth. "You don't figure she'd be inside with him, do you?"

"Well she's not outside."

"Hell, I'm not blind. I've just got a feeling we've been made damn fools of."

"We come this far, we might as well see, or do you want to get out?"

"We'll see."

Clark rapped on the door with the butt of a gun and stepped back out of the way. "Open up, Leveritt!"

They waited, simmering slowly in their own silence.

"Open up, damn you!" Monk drove his heel into the door.

Once more they waited, listening, then Monk looked at Clark, his square face in the dim light of the hall turned purplish. Clark sent two slugs crashing into the lock, then threw himself against the door and it flew inward, smashed against the wall and swung back.

They stood staring at the dummy in the chair. Monk's breathing was down in his throat, rattling. Clark backed out of the room and went down to the lobby. He sat on the bottom step, staring at the gun in his hand. When Monk came down, he was silent. He walked across to the door, stopped and looked back.

"I'm going over to Kennedy's office. See if you can round up the men."

Clark nodded and watched him go.

Pierce rode out of the shadows in front of the lumber yard. He fell in beside Chuck silently.

"They came in the front door," Chuck murmured. "Monk and Clark. They stopped a minute inside the door, then went upstairs. I didn't wait to hear any more."

"Some drunken rider passed me while I was waiting, headed for the rimrock and the pass out to Stovepipe. He's up ahead."

"Then he left after you did."

"Had to. I didn't pass him, and the way he's riding, he can just about stay in the saddle." Pierce spat. "He wasn't faking it. I watched."

Chuck nodded. "That'd be him up ahead. Where's the meeting?"

"Over in Stovepipe. We strike off up here and cut through the hills."

THEY came up on the rider in silence, watching him. He was hanging on to the saddle with everything he had, his head bobbing. Every now and then he'd seem to lean over and have to struggle back, grunting and swearing.

They divided to pass him on each side and Chuck turned in his saddle to look at him, then pulled the piebald up sharply.

It was Kennedy, and he stopped when they stopped, looking at them bleary-eyed. His face was bloodied. He nodded.

" 'Lo, Leveritt. I'm not out looking for you. I don't give a damn where you are. I hope you kill that—"

"How'd he do it, Kennedy?" Chuck kneed his piebald in closer.

"His heel."

Chuck nodded. "You're not Sheriff anymore?"

"I'm nothing. I'm getting out."

"You'd like a crack at him?" Pierce was watching him carefully.

"I'm not going near him. I'm done. I'm like Leveritt here. When I'm back on my feet, I'm going to hunt him down and kill him—if he's not dead by then."

"You don't have to go near him to cripple him." Pierce's voice was soothing. "Just come over to Stovepipe with us to the meeting. The commissioners are going to be there. Tell them how you were made Sheriff. That's all we want."

"And they'll lock me up!"

"They won't lock you up. But they'll let us hold another election for a sheriff, and they'll send a Marshal in to keep it straight this time, like we want."

Kennedy sat a moment weighing matters while Chuck rolled a cigarette, lit it and handed it to him. He dragged on it deeply, blew the smoke through his nose, then jerked his head up.

"If you say they won't lock me up, I'll take your word."

The meeting place was a long, bare-walled room on the first floor of the Court House in Stovepipe. Smoke had staled the air, it hung in soft, almost motionless clouds just above the heads of the men in the rows of chairs. Pierce pushed on up to the front with Kennedy. Chuck remained at the back, looking around. Some of the men were from Stovepipe, some were homesteaders, some spread owners from Flintlock. He let his eyes sort them out slowly, casually, then they found Kate O'Shea and her father. O'Shea was sitting carefully propped up in a chair with a pair of tree-fork crutches across his knees. There was no empty seat beside them, but Kate was on the aisle. Chuck went down and squatted beside her.

"Howdy." He said it softly, casually.

HE KNEW she was turning her head slowly, looking down, and that all she could see was the brim of his hat. He dug out the makings of a smoke. She didn't say anything. Her eyes were back on Kennedy and Pierce up in front. They had been recognized by the chair and Pierce was getting up on the platform.

"Some of you," he said loudly, indicating Kennedy, "know this man. For those of you who don't, he was, until tonight, Sheriff of Flintlock. His face doesn't look pretty. His boss did that to him. So they're through—and he's here, gentlemen, to tell the truth about how he became Sheriff."

"That ankle still bother you?"

Kate O'Shea stiffened visibly. She sat there silently while Kennedy told his story, then she stood up. "Could I say something, please?"

The chair bowed to her.

"This man beside me here in the aisle is one of Monk Myers' gun hands!"

Chuck started to get up and someone behind pushed a gun into the small of his back.

"Just take it easy, mister," a voice murmured, "or you'll go back to Monk on a slab!"

"One minute!" Pierce was almost dancing up and down on the platform, waving his arms but nobody was listening to him. "One minute, damn it!"

The chair banged for silence and kept it up so that it sounded like someone driving in a spike. Chuck lifted his hands, felt the irons on his thighs slip out of their leather. Kate O'Shea was talking rapidly to some woman behind her.

"I'll have silence here!" The man was big, burly, and he stood on the platform, his hands on his hips, holding the front of his coat open, his flowered vest catching the dusty lamp light. "Silence!"

They gave it to him abruptly, and its suddenness made it strange. He turned to Pierce beside him, motioned to the people and went back to sit behind his table as chairman.

"I'll give my word for that man," Pierce said loudly. "Name's Chuck Leveritt. I've told most of you about him."

"He's still a Monk Myers man," Mr. O'Shea shouted, waving one crutch. "I know."

"You don't know anything, O'Shea. You've been shut up in that box canyon too long!" Pierce was white with rage. "That man is fighting Monk. Don't ask me why. I don't know. I just know he's got a hatred for him. Maybe he was Monk's man once."

Kate O'Shea was on her feet again. "Can I say something?"

Pierce fixed her with a burning eye. "You've all ready done your best, ma'am, to start a murder here. What have you got to say now?"

"We've a lot at stake, everything in fact—"

"That's not news, ma'am. You homesteaders have a lot in this play, but so have we. We lost Flintlock—and we aim to get it back."

"Mr. Pierce," she cried, and curled her hands into white fists, "will you let me talk?"

"I'm not stopping you, ma'am."

"If you've all checked this man and found him on the level, I'm sorry I started anything. But we're not letting strangers walk in without questioning."

"Still a wildcat, ma'am," Chuck murmured.

She looked at him stonily and sat down.

"Turn him loose, and give him back his guns," Pierce said. "You're all acting like a bunch of spooked steers."

Chuck felt the gun leave his back and turned. The man behind him was middle aged, bald. He had two hard blue eyes in a sun-blackened face. He nodded and held Chuck's irons out.

"Sorry, Leveritt."

THE meeting droned on, but Chuck didn't hear any of it. He stood at the back of the room, his arms folded, watching Kate. There were motions and votes taken, then more motions followed by discussions. He took out the makings of a smoke, shoved them back in his pocket restlessly. This might be getting somewhere, but it wasn't the way he'd do it himself. It wasn't the way Monk would do it either.

"Will you come up here, Leveritt?" Pierce's voice cut through his thoughts.

Monk got up from Kennedy's desk, walked to the door and back, looked at Clark leaning against the far wall, let his eyes run over the other hands draped around the room, then threw himself back into the chair.

"All right," he breathed, "so he outsmarted us. They got away from me!" He looked at them one by one to see what any of them thought of that. His fingers closed on the arms of the swivel chair until the knuckles showed white, glistening. "When he comes back we get him. You got that? I want it clear. If there's a slip this time I'll personally kill the fool that makes it! We get him the minute he comes back!"

"Look, Monk," one of them murmured, "why don't you throw this up and let's go back to our old game?"

Monk looked at him slowly, silently, then walked over to stand in front of him. "You getting scared?"

"No, no." The man took a step back. "You know better than that. It's just that—well, maybe we'll be licked."

"Shut up! If you knew anything you'd keep that mouth closed permanently—but you don't know anything, see! I've got Flintlock in my hand. You know what that is? No. You're too damn dumb. I'm going to make us rich! I'm

going to squeeze gold out of it until it's dry! And no stinking gun-slinging saddle-bum is going to do me out of it!"

"I was talking with Luke over at the Flintlock House, and he says that Leveritt has taken quite a fancy to O'Shea's daughter, is taking her side."

Monk went back to the chair, dropped into it, dug out a cigar. He bit off the end, spat it out and sat there staring at the desk. No one said anything. Clark took out the makings of a smoke. Monk turned and looked at them, and his face was tired. He put the cigar between his teeth.

"If I could lay my hands on her, it would be easy." He said it quietly. "Any of you know where she is?"

Silence hung, cloud-like, over the room.

"I can't let you men go back to the spread because I want them here at dawn, but I'm going to let you go down to the Silver Crown," Monk said. "You can have a couple of drinks, but if any one of you gets himself soaked up, I'm going to work on his skull with a gun butt. Got that?"

They nodded.

"I don't want you to spread. When it comes time, Clark's going after you and I want every man there and able to ride or shoot!" Monk stood up, pushed his hands into his pockets. "Now get out!"

They went wordlessly. Monk was taking a checker board out of the desk, setting out the pieces.

Clark rubbed his eyes, leaned back in his chair. Monk gathered up the checkers. He placed them carefully in their box, pushed the box and board back into the desk. He took the dead stub of a cigar from the edge of the desk and placed it between his teeth.

"Time to move, Clark. Get the hands spread out. I want them covering every trail into town, then come back. If he gets through somehow, you and I are going to finish it here." Monk pushed himself up, brushed ashes off his coat lapels.

"How far out do you want them, Monk?"

"Far enough so there won't be witnesses."

Clark nodded, pushed his chair back and got up. "I'll cut them into groups of four or five and tell them to go about a half mile out."

"And just remind them, if anyone butchers this, this time I'm going to personally split him wide open."

CHUCK drew rein where the homesteader's wagons forked for the hills and their hideouts. Pierce came up beside him, sat his roan in silence, filling his pipe. When the O'Shea spring wagon drew abreast, Chuck kneed the piebald up beside it.

"Your pardon, ma'am," he said, "but I wanted to know if there's any hard feeling."

"About what, Mr. Leveritt?"

"About me."

She turned the wagon out of the line. "I have no feeling about you one way or the other, Mr. Leveritt."

Chuck wiped a match into flame on his pants, cupped it and held it close to her face, leaning from the saddle. Her eyes caught the light, filled with stars. For a moment her mouth was tight, then it crinkled, smiled. He let the match go out.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"For what?"

"I'll be back after you, when I've seen Monk." He kneed the piebald back to Pierce's side.

"You take a great deal for granted, Mr. Leveritt!"

O'Shea gave a throaty laugh. "I'll tell you the truth, Leveritt—she won't sleep tonight for thinking about you!"

"Pa!"

Pierce chuckled and fell in beside Chuck, but he didn't say anything. They went down a dry wash then climbed to the rimrock. Pierce rode with the reins looped around the saddle horn, sucking on his pipe. Chuck took out the makings of a smoke, rolled it while the first grey

light of dawn filtered into the east.

"We got away last night," he murmured. "It doesn't say I'll be able to do it all the time. This is no regular trail into town, is it?"

"It's no trail at all. I'm just riding by the stars."

"Good."

Pierce looked at him sideways, took his pipe out of his mouth. "Not nervous, are you?"

"Shucks, no—but this is it. The rest of you can sit up there in that room and talk, but I know Monk."

"Then you know what he'll do."

"He'll drop me on sight." Chuck pulled the piebald up abruptly. "Look down by the trail there."

Pierce edged up beside him, peering, then he shoved his hat back on his head. "Well damn me!"

"I'll give you a hundred dollars today, if they haven't orders to channel me the minute they see me!"

"It'd be a surprise to them," Pierce muttered, "if we dropped a few slugs between them from here."

"They'd know we'd passed." Chuck stroked the neck of the piebald, watching them below. "I'd sure like to send them packing though."

Pierce just sat watching, waiting, until Chuck pulled the piebald around and kneed it into the timber again.

"You're not going down?"

"If I did," Chuck said quietly, "it'd be just what Monk wanted. With him, they've got orders what to do—without him they're just a bunch of gun hands without enough brains to come in out of the sun."

"We'll break out of the timber just above the lumber yard." Pierce took out his gun, opened the gate and spun the cylinder, counting the loads. He pushed it back into his belt.

BARTON became conscious of daylight sifting into his little office through the dusty pane beside the desk. His head was a thundering thing, twice as big as it should be and filled with ringing noises. He opened his mouth to wet his lips and groaned. Memory came back slowly, washing in in little lapping waves. He lifted a hand to his forehead and took it away. There were granules of dried blood on the fingers.

He took hold of the chair and pulled himself to his feet and looked in the mirror beside the coat pegs. A broad band of dried blood lay across his temple, disappeared behind his ear. His hair was matted with blood. He touched the wounded spot gently with his fingers and sharp pains shot through his head. He sagged into the chair, holding onto the arms, his teeth grinding.

He was still sitting there, staring at the wall, when Steve's key rattled in the front door and he came in whistling. He wanted to call him, but he couldn't make any sound come out of his throat. Steve passed the office door, putting on his apron, and then came back to look in, his eyes wide, his mouth gaping.

"You been here all night, Mr. Barton?" Steve's eyes ran over him in the dim light, blinked quickly like an owl's, and then he was out in the store, running for the front door.

Barbara came down into the lobby, when Luke called her. She had on a pink wrapper, her hair done up in a blue silk cap with little bows of pink ribbon. She stood on the bottom step, looking at Barton, her mouth open, then she came across the lobby.

"Where did you find him?" She looked at Steve standing beside the sofa, wringing his hands. Her fingers parted the clotted hair and she gasped.

"He was sitting at his desk, ma'am. Just sitting there, staring at the wall." Steve gulped, ran a hand over his sweating face.

"Get some hot water and towels, Luke." Barbara loosened the string tie, unbuttoned the shirt and laid it open.

"Yes, ma'am. And you'll be wanting your medicine box."

Barbara nodded. "Hurry! Steve, get a shot of whiskey from the bar!"

Barton opened his eyes when the

whiskey burned its way down his throat. He stared up at Barbara, and a faint smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"Ashamed of me, aren't you, Barbara?"

"No more than I would be of any man who ran." She opened the box Luke brought. "Fortunately you only grazed yourself, but it's deep."

"You don't have to fuss with me. Just get me on my feet." He shut his eyes tight, tried to sit up.

"Don't be a complete fool, Frank!" Barbara pushed him back.

Heavy steps crossed the porch, stopped inside the door. It was Monk. "Who just came in here, ma'am?"

"Get out!" Barbara said.

"I asked a 'civil question, ma'am." Monk came around the jutting door, stood looking down at Barton and the corner of his mouth went up. His tone was mocking. "What's the matter? Run into a door?"

Barton opened his eyes, stared up at him. "You heard Miss Pierce! She told you to get out!"

Monk grinned derisively. "You didn't go trying to kill yourself, did you?"

"Get out!" Barbara turned on Monk, a pair of shears in her hand.

"You don't think I'd want to stay here, do you, ma'am? The thing I don't understand, you'll excuse me mentioning it, is what a woman of your courage sees in that!" Monk turned on his heel and stamped out.

Barton closed his eyes. "Finish it, Barbara."

"Luke, go up and get a blanket."

"I'm not staying, Barbara."

"You're going to remain right where you are until you can get up on your own feet and walk by yourself." She closed her little box, handed the hot water and wet towels to Steve. "Get the blanket, Luke, don't just stand there gaping like a fool!"

O'SHEA sat rocking on the wagon seat, his cold pipe clutched tightly between his fingers. He saw Kate pass the dim trail that led back to their box canyon and keep on the trail into Flintlock, but he said nothing. In fact, he told himself, he had expected it—she being an O'Shea. At last he reached under the seat and brought up the carbine, levered a shell into the breech and laid it across his knees.

"You figure there'll be shooting, Pa?" She said it quietly, her eyes on the back of the mare.

"He hasn't come for you yet so we're not exactly wanted is the way I see it."

"What makes you think he'd come for me?"

"You know a heap better than I do about that. I'm just looking at the man and know better. You're looking at him and feeling something between you." O'Shea knocked his pipe out on the gun butt, dug out a bag of tobacco. "The thing that troubles me is, he's not the kind would want women around when he's got work of that sort to do."

"You know too much, Pa." Kate flicked the reins down on the mare's back self-consciously. "Besides that, you say too much."

"You're meaning what I said to him back there?"

"Something like that."

"Something like that!" O'Shea snorted. "That's love, pure and simple. If you went in and asked for a sack of flour you wouldn't say, something like that—unless you were plain crazy minded."

"Maybe I am."

"Right now you think you are sometimes, and you like the feeling." He nodded his head at her, his eyes narrowed. "Now I'm saying too much again, but I'm your father, Kate. When you were born I was big enough to pick you up, carry you around. That makes me just a mite older than you and gives me just a mite more living than you've done yet."

She fell silent and he didn't press her. He rubbed a match into flame on the seat, cupped it over the pipe bowl with his hands and sucked. The flame disappeared, lifted in a yellow shaft and

disappeared again each time he pulled on it. He shook the match out at last and dropped it over the side to ride with his own thoughts until their banging around in his head became unbearable.

"What I'd like to know," he said at length, "is just what you plan on doing?"

"We're going into Flintlock."

"That's all—just going into Flintlock. Like we were going calling on some neighbors."

"I don't know what we're going to find. I want to be there, that's all."

"You know I'm supposed to be dead, don't you? When Monk Myers gets a look at me he's going for his irons."

Kate pulled the mare up sharply. "I'll let you down here, Pa, and pick you up later."

"Get on with you, girl!" He spat into the brush. "Now you're making me into a coward, your own father! Did you ever see me run from the likes of him?"

SHE clucked the mare into a trot again. He looked sideways at her, then at the trail ahead and shook his head, jabbing his pipe between his teeth.

"You feel about him like your mother, God rest her soul, felt about me, Kate. I'm sorry if I hurt you any. Just remember I'm your old Pa and sometimes I talk too much."

Kate flicked the reins unnecessarily, her lower lip between her teeth.

"Your mother, Kate," he murmured, "was a grand woman. If I was in mortal danger she'd have followed me just in case there was a little something she could do. Just like you're doing. She'd be afraid right now, afraid and yet mighty proud to see you so much like her."

When she didn't say anything he lapsed into silence and then brightened again. "When do you think we'll be going back to the homestead, Kate?"

"Pa—" she held her voice low, controlled, "just don't talk, please. I don't mind anything you said, it's just that—I'm thinking, Pa, and praying."

He patted her knee and eased back in the seat, his arms folded above the carbine, one hand curled around his pipe bowl, his eyes misty, staring into distance.

Monk crossed to the jail, pushed the front door open and then the door to Kennedy's office. Clark was sitting straddling a chair, his forehead resting on the back, on top of his wrists. He lifted his head, looked at Monk and let his head down again. Monk threw himself into the swivel chair, hoisted his feet to the desk.

"Was Barton. Tried to kill himself or something. Grazed his forehead and back through his hair."

Clark grunted. He rubbed a hand over his sleepy eyes and stretched. Monk's lips curled. He said scornfully, "If you're not more wide awake than you are right now you're going to sleep permanently!"

Clark grunted and got up on his feet. "I've heard a hell of a lot about this Leveritt. What's he got?"

Monk looked at him slowly, let his eyes run over him from his dusty boots to the shock of black hair sticking out under the front of his hat, then deliberately ran his eyes down him again. "He's got enough to lay six away like you."

"He's good then?"

"You don't think I'd offer any ordinary gun hand two hundred a month and his keep, now do you?"

"He better than you with a six gun?" Clark was grinning.

"No, but he's as good. Riled up he's hell, that's what he is! When he comes in, if he does, you can go over to the Flintlock House and meet him personally."

"I met him."

"Not the way you're going to—and he knows it, because he knows me!" Monk pulled his feet off the desk, let them thump on the floor. "Go and get yourself a few drinks before your eyes close up entirely!"

"I don't need any drinks."

"Then curl up in a corner somewhere and catch some sleep!"

"Go to hell!" Clark took out the mak-

ings of a smoke. He sat on the edge of the table. "Kennedy and Earle wouldn't face him."

"You're not getting scared, are you?" Monk started to push himself up out of the chair.

"I haven't met the man I'd run from." Clark said it contemptuously, but he spilled too much tobacco and had to pour more.

Monk watched shrewdly and didn't like what he saw. He had been counting on Clark to back him all the way and this was a bad time to find his sand running out. There was one thing for it, if he couldn't be counted on for steady backing then, by God, he was going to front. He was going to go over, if Leveritt got through, and meet him first.

PIERCE moved out of the timber ahead of Chuck, looked up and down the road into town, then beckoned him out, waiting for him to join him, his eyes on the Silver Crown down where Flintlock's Main Street cut the Rimrock Trail.

"Town's just coming awake," he murmured, when Chuck came up to him.

"Won't make any difference. Monk hasn't been sleeping." Chuck kneed the piebald into the center of the road.

"You want to go down the back alley?"

"You take it and I'll meet you at the hotel."

"And what are you going to do?"

"This is it, Pierce, and I'm riding to meet it. Don't go getting yourself bloodied up for nothing."

Pierce stayed with him to the corner, turned with him down the Main Street, his eyes swivelling from one side of the street to the other. No one was moving. The swamper came out of the Silver Crown with his brush and pail, took a look and ducked back in, slamming the door behind him.

Chuck rode easily, casually, all of him tense, his hands resting on the saddle horn where they could streak for his sides. He wanted a smoke, felt a positive hunger for it, but pushed the thought out of his mind forcibly. To do anything with his hands right now would be —could be—suicide, and thinking of Kate and his brother Johnny. he wasn't looking to die just yet.

Pierce turned in at the Flintlock House tie rail, slid out of the saddle and ambled across the porch into the lobby. Chuck followed him with deliberate, studied slowness. They stood inside, looking at Barton on the sofa. Pierce spat at the nearest spittoon.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

Barton opened his eyes, sat up with an effort that lined his face. "I've been waiting for you, Leveritt."

Chuck nodded, moved out of the doorway to get a solid wall at his back. Barbara came in from the kitchen, looked from one to the other of them, then sank into one of the leather chairs.

"Will you build that house for me, Leveritt?" Barton wet his lips.

"When?"

"When you get ready."

"You don't want any connection with me. You said so." Chuck smiled, took out the makings of a smoke. "You got a shot of whiskey handy, ma'am?"

Barton looked at Barbara, and then at Chuck and desperation made his eyes intense. He lifted a hand to the bandage on his head. "I did this myself. Right now I just want you to say you'll build the house for me."

"If you feel so strong about it," Chuck nodded, "I'll build it. That's what I came here for anyway. But first I've got some other business that needs attention."

Barton pushed himself to his feet, stood swaying a moment, then walked across the lobby. "Thank you, Leveritt. I've got some business needs attending to."

"Stop him," Pierce roared, "the man's out of his head!"

"No more than you are," Chuck said quietly. "If he's going to have a house like he wants, he's going to need a woman in it—and he's not going to have that woman, if he doesn't do some—"

Barbara came in from the bar with two

whiskeys. She looked at the empty sofa, then at the both of them, and her mouth moved soundlessly. With a second effort she found her voice.

"You let him go?"

"That's right, ma'am." Chuck nodded. "He had some business needed attending."

She set the whiskey on the desk, started for the door, and Chuck caught her arm, pulled her back.

"He'll be killed," she panted. "Let me go!"

"If he's killed, he'll never know it. Right the way he is, ma'am," he said soothingly, "he couldn't go on living with himself and you couldn't live with him."

"But he's no match for Monk!"

"I grant you that, ma'am, but he's got to make the effort to fight like a man."

BARTON didn't knock on the door. He turned the knob and kicked it open. Monk was sitting at the desk, Clark on the edge of the table. Monk looked up, startled, then annoyed. Barton stood there in the opening, swaying on his feet, fighting desperately to focus his eyes on that floating red face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you white-livered coward!" Monk jerked himself up on his feet.

"Leveritt's building for me!" It was out. Barton swallowed, wet his lips. "I don't give a damn what you have to say about it!"

Monk's fist landed in the middle of his face and drove him back into the vestibule. He smashed up against the wall, leaned there, shaking his head, his hands balling into fists, then he came wading in. The bloated red face was appearing and disappearing in front of his eyes. He drove a fist at it and met air, then something hammered into his mouth, split his lips. He ran his tongue over them and sought to throw himself on the face.

He struck the floor hard on one elbow and lay there, trying to see, to hear something beside the terrible noises in his head. Monk's voice ripped over them, sawed them in half, then chopped through them again.

"So he's building for you?" Monk drove a foot into his side. "Building what, a coffin?"

Barton pushed himself up to a sitting position. He stared in the direction of the voice but everything was a whirling string of lights blinking on and off. He spat out a mouthful of blood.

"You're done, Monk!" he heard himself laughing, a crazy, crackling laugh that started down in his chest and tore its way up his vocal cords until it was high in his head. "You're all done!"

Monk measured him slowly, carefully, then crashed a heel into his bleeding mouth, driving him back on the floor. Knotted veins bulged in his temples, his bull-neck grew dark with blood, his lips were sucked in against his teeth. He turned Barton's head sideways.

"Hold it like that, Clark!"

Clark got down off the table, held Barton's head down with the toe of one boot. Monk kicked at the bandage until it was torn off and the long gaping wound was bleeding again. Clark turned his head away, and Monk spat, smashed his foot on the nose until he heard it break like the cracking of a walnut shell.

He stood there panting, staring down at Barton for a full minute, then his head came up slowly and he looked across at Clark.

"That means Leveritt's back! He got through."

"That's what I figured."

"Well what the hell are you waiting for? Get over there!"

Clark moved to the door. "You want me to send Leveritt over, right?"

"You don't need any plan. Just walk in—and walk in ready to fight, because that's what you're going to do." Monk threw himself down into the chair, searched his pockets for a cigar. "Take that out to the street with you and leave it!"

Clark lifted Barton to his shoulder, shifted him, like a sack of meal, until he was balanced, then opened the door.

"Go on!" Monk jumped up and kicked

the door shut behind him.

OUTSIDE Clark stopped, looking over at Flintlock House, then he moved up the walk to the front of Barton's General Store, turned sharply and crossed the road. Up on the hotel porch he stopped again, shifting his burden a little to give his right arm more play.

"Lay down your guns," he said slowly. "I'm coming in peaceful-like!"

Barbara came to the door, looked at Frank hanging over his shoulder and covered her mouth with one hand, her eyes wide, staring.

"Come in, Clark!" Chuck came up behind her, thrust her aside. "Keep that hand away from your iron!"

Pierce cleared the blanket off the sofa, threw it on the floor. "Luke! Where the hell are you, man? Get water and towels, then go over and get Doc Tompkins! Move your damn legs before I plant a boot on you!"

Clark laid Barton on the sofa gently, stretched him out carefully, then straightened, looking at Chuck. "Lift my gun, man, and throw it away!"

"Monk sent you over?"

"That's right—but after that, and Kennedy and Earle, I've had a gut full." He looked at Barbara, half smiled. "He put up a first class fight, ma'am, considering his condition. I didn't think he had it in him."

Chuck slid his own gun back into the leather, ignored Clark's. "Where's Monk now?"

"Sitting over in Kennedy's office, smoking a cigar, and just waiting to see if I can do his work." Clark wiped a hand over his mouth. "I never met the man until last year, and I never saw you until you hit town, but I can sure see why you don't cotton to him. Now me, I'm just a wrangler, on the loose for a job. He gave it to me. But I don't take to his kind of fighting."

Barbara took the towels and water from Luke, and Pierce shoved him towards the door.

"Stop your shivering! Who in tarnation would waste a shot on you! Get the Doc and be quick!" He turned to Barbara. "How is he?"

"He'll live, Pa, but he's going to be a long time getting over it. His nose is the worst."

"How'd Monk do it?" Chuck spun Clark around.

"Stomped his face."

Chuck took out one gun, opened the gate, spun the cylinder, closed it and put it back. He took out the other, removed the empty that had accounted for Earle, replaced it and snapped the gate shut.

Out on the porch he stood stone-still, staring down the street at the front of the jail, then he walked slowly to the edge, stepped into the road. Monk had seen him, because he came out to stand in the doorway, watching him, his coat open, his hands on his hips, the one gun in his belt bulging big against his belly.

CHUCK saw Kate and her father coming down the center of the road out of the corner of his eyes. Kate stopped the mare dead and O'Shea sat there, the carbine resting in his hands, his pipe jutting out of the corner of his mouth. Chuck kept his eyes on Monk, knew that Monk saw Kate, and saw her father, and that it was seeing someone come back from the dead for him—but Monk didn't move, just stood there waiting, his hands on his hips under the black coat.

A good twenty paces from Monk he stopped, and his eyes were chipped flint. They nailed Monk against the door and held him there. If he moved for his gun he was going to have to be fast. When it came to that Monk could match him, and knew it. That's why, right now, he was slightly contemptuous, confident of the outcome—daring Chuck silently to make the first play.

"I figure you're ready, you don't need time," Chuck said dryly.

"You're ninety parts jaw, Leveritt!" Monk spat. "If you've got business with me, state it!"

"I'm planning to." Chuck stepped up

onto the porch, stopped only when he was almost rubbing against him. "I'm surprised you didn't draw," he muttered.

"I'll draw when I'm ready!" Monk was breathing hard, had his lips pulled back against his yellow teeth.

Chuck drove a fist into his pulpy face, heard his head snap back, crack against the door. Before he could recover he caught the front of his coat, jerked him around and drove another into his mouth that sent him running backwards across the porch. He went off the edge, smashing into the tie rail, and it went down with a tearing, splintering of wood.

Monk was on his feet in an instant, his face almost purple, and the gun was in his hand. Chuck heard the first slug thud into the wood behind him, and the second plowed into his shoulder, half spinning him, knocking him off balance. The third chopped into his thigh, breaking the bone, and he went down, whipped himself over and onto one knee.

He was bleeding badly, he knew that, and the pain of moving so quickly was like having his leg torn off. Monk was over his first wild flush. He was calm again. He wiped the back of a hand over his bleeding mouth, and Chuck's slug caught him in the middle of his belly. He stood there, his hand falling away, then sank to the ground on top of the broken tie rail. But he stayed on his knees, his eyes a little glassy. His fourth grazed Chuck's neck, ripped away part of his collar.

Monk went forward abruptly on both hands still holding his gun. He tried to straighten himself and Chuck laid one in the center of his head. He went down hard, shuddering. Chuck placed two more beside the other, and one for Johnny, and he was still.

He saw Kate jump off the spring wagon and start running towards him. He had a glimpse of Clark and Pierce coming out of the Flintlock House, one trying to outrun the other, and he sagged back against the door of the jail, letting the darkness wash down over him, over the pain.

---

it may never happen again!

BOXING'S LAST CHAMPIONSHIP BARE KNUCKLE BOUT WAS FOUGHT JULY 8, 1889, WHEN JOHN L. SULLIVAN BEAT JAKE KILRAIN AT RICHBOURG, MISS. MIKE JACOBS WILL NEVER BELIEVE IT, BUT THESE BOYS WENT 75 ROUNDS!

GEORGE (MIKE) MIKAN OF DEPAUL UNIVERSITY, CHICAGO, SET AN ALL-TIME MADISON SQUARE GARDEN SCORING RECORD WITH 53 POINTS TO BEAT RHODE ISLAND STATE 97-53 IN THE 1945 NATIONAL INVITATION BASKETBALL TOURNEY.

FRANK MURRAY, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA FOOTBALL COACH, NEVER PLAYED A GAME IN HIS LIFE! HE HAS LED MAJOR COLLEGE TEAMS FOR 23 YEARS SINCE UNDERGRADUATE DAYS AT TUFTS. HIS STRONGEST EXPLETIVE IS HOLY COW!"

CLAUDE PASSEAU OF THE CHICAGO CUBS SET THE TIGERS DOWN WITH ONE HIT IN THE 1945 WORLD SERIES. ONLY TWO MEN REACHED FIRST BASE!

BUSY AFTERNOON! OHIO STATE'S JESSE OWENS SET FIVE ACCEPTED WORLD RECORDS IN A SINGLE TRACK MEET AT NORTHWESTERN MAY 25, 1935. HE BEAT THE BOOKS IN THE 100 YARD, 220 YARD, 200 METER, 220 YARD HURDLES AND BROAD JUMP EVENTS!

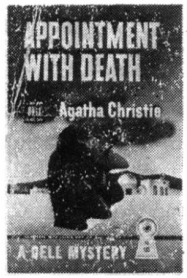
LUCKY 7—TED ATKINSON, ONCE AN $8 A WEEK BROOKLYN SHIPPING CLERK, RODE SEVEN CONSECUTIVE WINNERS AT AQUEDUCT IN 1944. COPPING THE LAST TWO RACES SEPT. 15, HE OPENED THE NEXT DAY'S PROGRAM WITH FIVE STRAIGHT!

ANN CURTIS, 19 YEAR OLD WOMEN'S NATIONAL AAU SWIMMING CHAMPION, IS THE ONLY WOMAN EVER TO WIN THE SULLIVAN AWARD. THE BLONDE SAN FRANCISCAN WAS JUDGED THE OUTSTANDING U. S. AMATEUR ATHLETE IN 1944!

murder

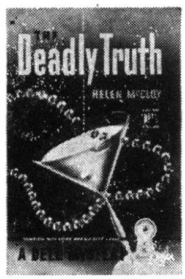
was Detective Rex McBride's business, but when it happened to his pal, Rex got sore. So he moved into the gambling town of San Gorgonio, Nevada, and finds that to avenge his pal he has to clean up a smelly mess of under-cover intrigue. Two more murders and a suicide lead him through some exciting adventures before he winds it up in a whirl of breathless suspense.

THE CROOKING FINGER
by Cleve F. Adams



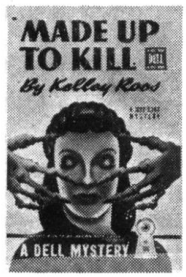
APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH by Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie's famous French detective, Hercule Poirot, overhears an ominous remark and finds himself in the middle of an enthralling murder mystery, this time in Palestine. Another exciting Poirot story with a surprising conclusion.



THE DEADLY TRUTH by Helen McCloy

The fabulous Mrs. Bethune's parties were always sensational, but her last one was positively sinister. Starting with "truth serum" cocktails, it ended with Mrs. Bethune herself strangled to death with her own emerald necklace.



MADE UP TO KILL by Kelley Roos

An attempted poisoning on-stage of a new Broadway play, followed the next night by the brutal knifing of the leading lady, leads Jeff Troy, advertising man and sleuth, through a fast moving, suspenseful mystery packed with action.

THESE THRILLING NEW DELL MYSTERIES NOW ON SALE 25¢