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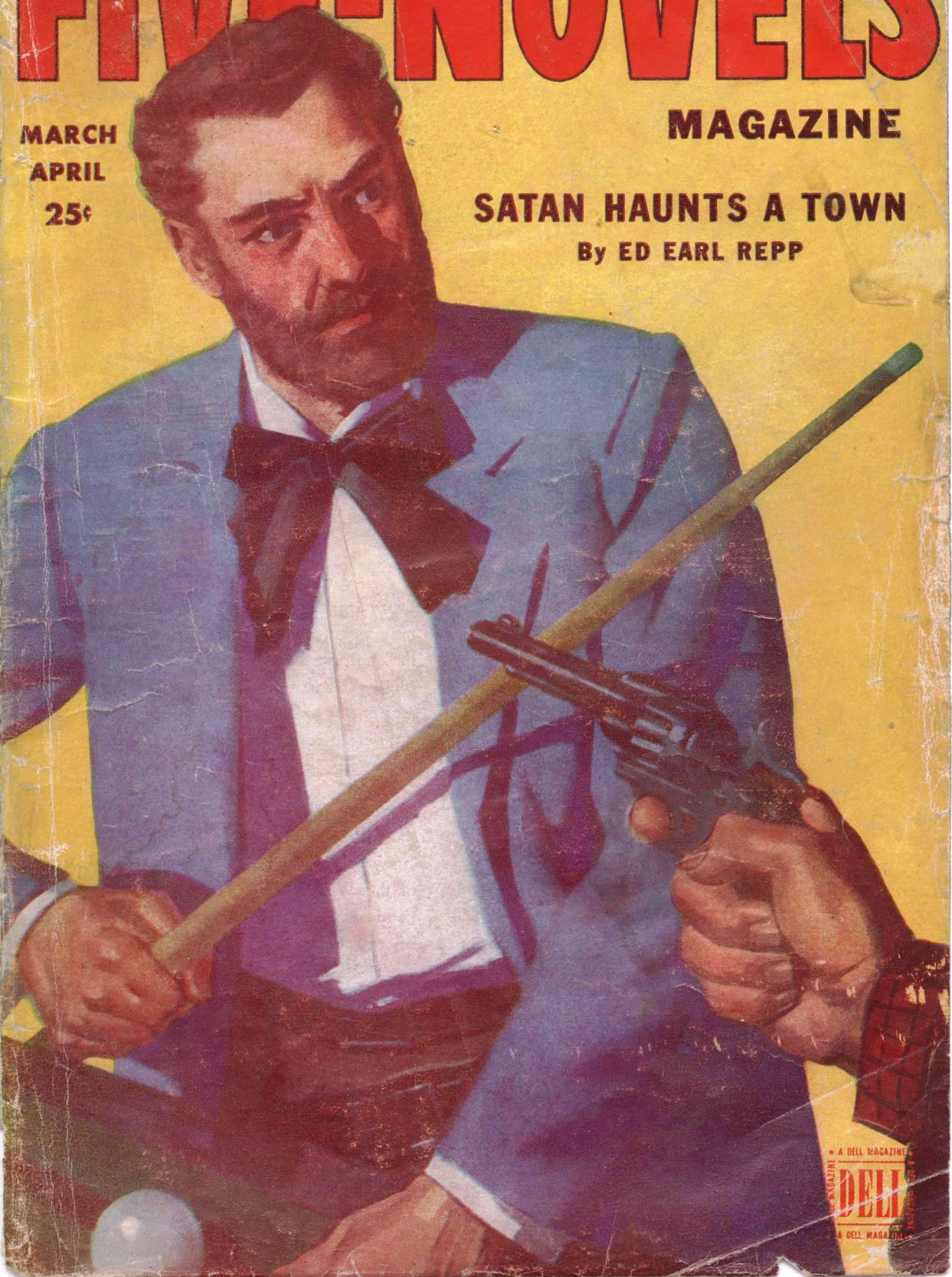
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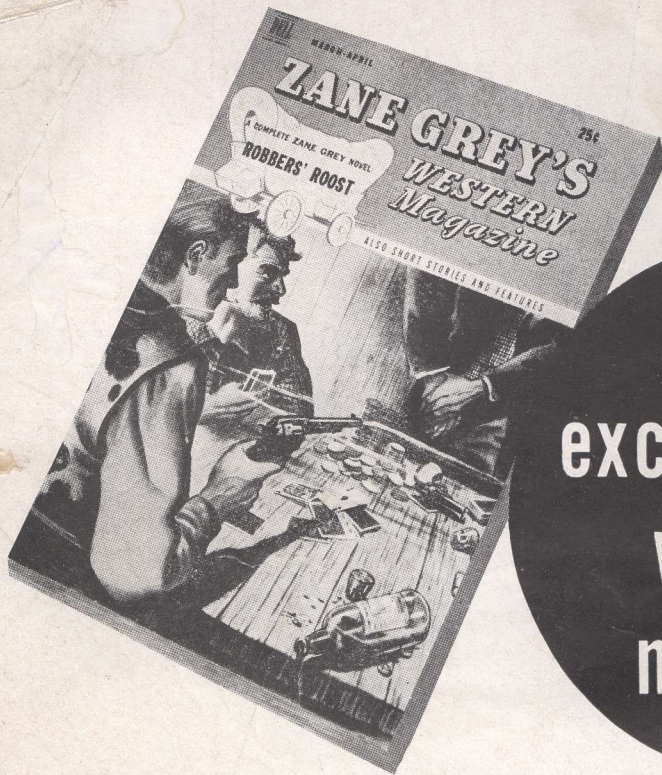
MAGAZINE

SATAN HAUNTS A TOWN

By ED EARL REPP



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FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE

K. RAFFERTY, Editor

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Volume 65

MARCH-APRIL, 1947

Number 13

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FORECAST

WILLARD P. WEBB, Resident Claims Manager, and Bruno Steele, brilliant blind detective, are working on a case again. Things really start popping when they set out to try to save Titanic Insurance Company the cost of a claim. They trace the lost diamonds to the murky depths of a swamp where, beside a horribly mauled corpse, they find the giant tread of some primeval beast with the claws of a dragon. And then a small white wisp fitting low over the marsh spews deadly flashes of gunfire. . . . Next issue's mystery is *Claim of the Dragon Claws*, a bloodchilling tale written in Curtiss T. Gardner's inimitable punchy style.

NO ONE believed that Treve Carr could open the *Black Pass* to freighting from the East. Not when his specially-built wagons were burned, his money almost gone and he began bucking the biggest rancher in that part of the country. Then there was the outlaw with the dirty blue eyes—he boded no one any good, least of all Treve. Finally there was a posse at Treve's heels and a noose waiting ahead of him! Frank Carl Young, an old-time contributor to *FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE*, writes this riproaring Western in the May-June issue.

And

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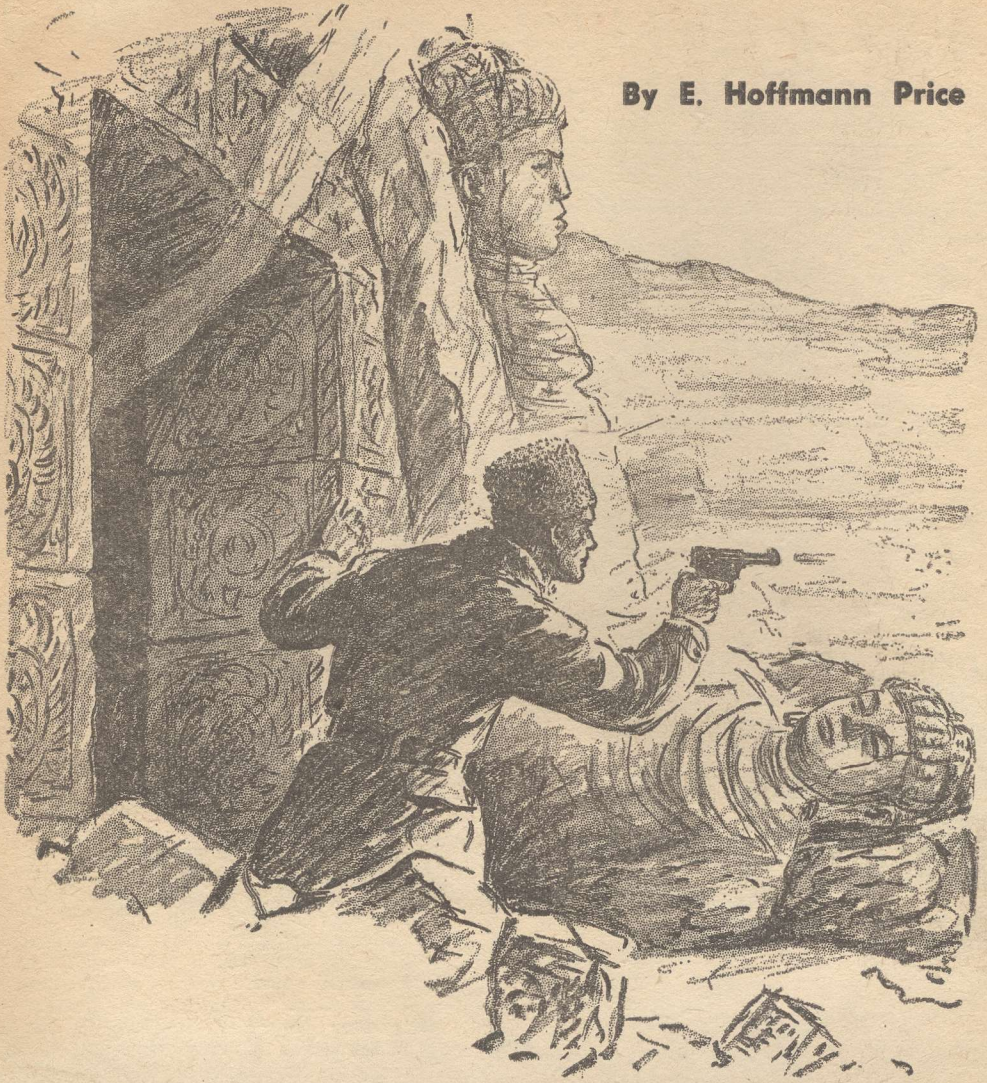
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IT'S TOO BAD, but she asked for it," Corbin repeated. "And this is Kabul, this is Afghanistan, we're not in the States, and I'm not crazy."

"But it can be done," Norma persisted. "There must be a way to get Peggy out of Yar Ali Khan's harem."

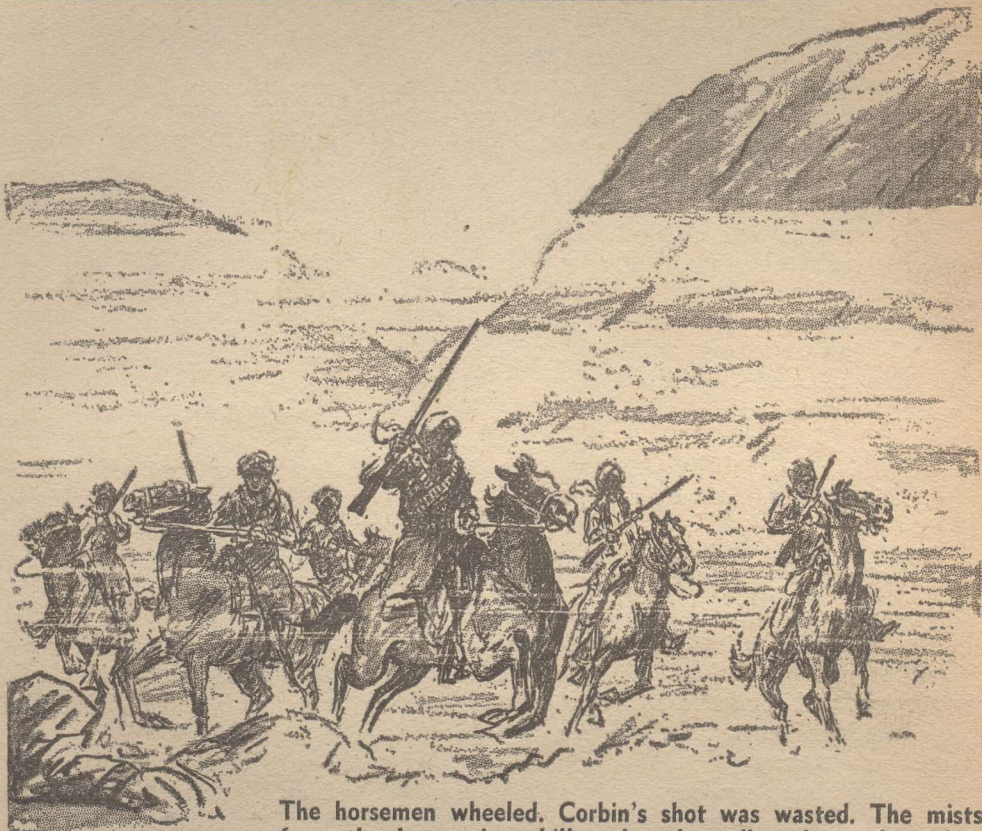
Corbin sighed, and stared dejectedly at the house tops below. He uninked long legs to cock his feet on the railing of the third floor verandah. This hotel, one of ex-King Amanullah's ideas, was the highest building in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The young king, second to succeed reckless Amanullah,

was modern, perhaps modern enough to agree that the Governor of one of his Provinces, Badakhshan, should release his American wife from what she considered captivity. But no other Afghan could agree, least of all the Governor, her husband—Yar Ali Khan.

Corbin's glance shifted sidewise, until he could see the moonlight gilding Norma Turner's hair, and outlining cheek and temple and dainty chin.

Flicking his lighter, he found pleasure in the revelation of her face; but when he thought of the ring he'd ordered in India, he began to wonder whether he'd not have to end by keeping it as a sou-

ESCAPE TO KABUL



The horsemen wheeled. Corbin's shot was wasted. The mists from the hot springs billowed and swallowed up the riders

venir. Norma, driven by her obsession, had become another person.

It now seemed that he had spent those first happy weeks here in Kabul with someone who had never actually existed, and that as far as Norma was concerned, he was important only because he was bound for Badakhshan where her friend Peggy was.

Jeff Corbin went on, "Up there, close to the Russian border, strangers are conspicuous as a torchlight procession. Weaver and I'll be hustled from town to town by soldiers we have to take along to show the mountaineers we're to be fed instead of robbed. And then—"

"You won't ever listen to my plan, you won't even let me—"

"You won't ever listen to *me!* You

meet enough native women every day in that hospital to know—"

"To know," Norma cut in, "what a horrible life Peggy's leading."

"Skip that, and look at the facts— Weaver and I go to Badakhshan, and when we're through making our geologic survey, we check out. Right then, the Governor of the Province misses his imported wife. Do you suppose he'd call it purely coincidental? And wouldn't my escort of soldiers and horse packers wonder where I'd picked up a woman? Imagine smuggling her over 300 miles of mountains back here to Kabul, and then to India."

"If you got her here to Kabul, the American Minister—"

Corbin interrupted, ironically, "I bet

you've asked him! Heck, I've even been worrying about Weaver."

"Weaver? But he's your assistant, he wouldn't interfere."

"Precisely what I mean. He'd not have sense enough! He's kinked on rugs. Hopped up with rumors about a saint's tomb up north with a sixteenth century carpet, a Herati, for a wall hanging. A museum piece, he says. So I've had the shivers figuring what I'd do if he stole or even tried to buy a sacred relic, and the indignant mullahs ran us out of the country. They pack a lot of weight, those Koran-thumpers, and they hate the guts of infidels like us. Who is Peggy, I mean who and what is she actually?"

"Just what I told you. We were WAVES together, and we'd always been like sisters."

Corbin snorted. "Back home, you'd cut each other's throats very sweetly! Anyway, she met Yar Ali Khan in New York, he was the son of the former governor of Badakhshan. He was tall, handsome, and romantic, so with a million Americans on tap, she had to marry him."

"Hardly blame her, he went to college there, and he really was of an important family."

Corbin groaned. "And he did inherit the old man's territory, but Hollywood has one idea of an Afghan palace, and the Afghans have something entirely different, so she squawks and you—I bet you took this job here in Kabul mainly to do a bit of liberating."

"I thought it'd be thrilling, visiting her, seeing the country, and then I found out—Jeff, *he's going to get another wife!* A native woman."

"And the other wife will make her so miserable, I should blow up the entire geological survey, I should give every American in this country a black eye. You know why Sir Alexander Burnes was murdered right here in Kabul, maybe sixty years ago, along with most of his diplomatic staff?"

"Because a couple of his stooges got

familiar with the wrong women, and kidnapped several to keep around the house as pets. Before the incident was settled, a British army had been wiped out— You know how this country is geared up when it comes to religion and women, only you're so full of wish-thinking, you've got no sense."

"But this is different! Before they were married he told Peggy that old custom of more than one wife was not for him. And now just because they haven't had an heir—he takes on this other woman!"

"She doesn't even have to speak to wife two does she? Or live in the same quarters?"

Norma didn't answer. She sat there, head inclined, shoulders drooping. Once Corbin got up and opened the French doors, he risked looking back. She seemed helpless now, and pathetic, which made her more dangerous than ever. Don't walk, run! And keep running. Or she'll have you rescuing that gal.

Corbin's car was waiting. Without orders, the Afridi driver took him to the company compound, across the Kabul River.

When the car rolled through the cavernous doorway which pierced the three foot thickness of dobe wall, he had made up his mind.

The warehouse reeked from the fumes of brandy distilled in Kabul for sale to infidels. After dismissing chauffeur and gate-keeper, Corbin stepped to the bunk rooms partitioned from the remainder of the building. The sandy haired man who dozed in a chair made of packing crate material had been reading. Werner Grote-Hasenbalg's *Teppiche aus dem Orient* lay on the table. It was open at page thirty-three, showing a rug whose white-accented octagonal blocks were joined by a grid of deep blue lines, all against a ground of garnet red which smoldered under the light of the kerosene lantern swaying from the ceiling. Across his knee, Paul Weaver had a two by four specimen whose pattern and color resembled the one illustrated in the book.

Weaver sat up and blinked himself awake. His wide open blue eyes were as candid as his bony face and broad mouth. He got to his feet, a tall, awkward man held together by the burning enthusiasm which took charge as he said, "Jeff, look what I picked up! A Tekke Turkoman—" He jabbed at a cerise patch whose shade and lustre made it stand out against the garnet-red of splendid wool, perfectly dyed. "Silk spots!"

"Colossal. They get the baggage rack finished?"

After draping the rug over the back of his chair, Weaver gave it an affectionate pat. "No, not quite." He picked the lantern from the hook, and as he stalked toward the car which would carry them beyond the Hindu Kush mountain range, he gestured to the portable forge and goatskin bellows which the old Hazara blacksmith and his son had left. "Said they'd be back in the morning. Early."

"That is, about noon." Corbin hefted the crude ironmongery. "If they'd skipped a few of the five prayers, we'd be ready to roll.

"Heck, that rack'll get by the way it is. We'll roll in the morning."

"What's the hurry? Half our stuff is in the customs."

"We have instruments and essentials. We're going now, to get the job done before the snow blocks us."

Weaver grinned and wagged a cigarette stained finger. "Oh-oh! Norma pay you off?"

"Worse. She tried to sell me—"

"Liberate the lady in distress?"

"Well, yes. She proposition you?"

"Anyone in Kabul she's not propositioned?"

Corbin looked both resigned and dejected.

CORBIN and Weaver drove northward from Kabul early the next morning. They went over the ten thousand foot Shebar Pass which crosses the eastern spur of the Hindu Kush mountains, following the government telephone line to

the city of Khanabad, in a valley rich with rice and cotton and melons. Then came the last leg of the journey, over a road more suited to pack trains than automobiles. It led to the Kokcha River, whose gold-bearing sands told of mineral veins upstream, in the unexplored hinterland of Badakhshan Province.

Since their chauffeur had at the last minute been disqualified because, though Afghan born, he was a British subject and hence not permitted to go beyond Kabul, Corbin and Weaver took turns at the wheel.

"We owe the Foreign Office a drink," Corbin said, as he and Weaver changed places for the last time. "With a good two hundred foot drop from here to the river, and no parachute, I'd as soon we did our own driving!"

"My arms are still wooden from the last stretch, though it looks better ahead."

The final twenty miles actually were so much better that after an hour's drive, Corbin saw the Kokcha River and its high arched stone bridge. All previous crossings had been over poplar pole cantilevers held together by prayer and fasting.

On the further bank, Faizabad, capital of Badakhshan, sprawled in mud and gloom. As they drove through the outskirts, a soldier stepped from a doorway. Before Corbin could awaken Nureddin, the interpreter, who was asleep in a tangle of luggage and instruments, a civilian, too, emerged.

This man carried a kerosene lantern. Neither he nor the soldier asked a question or offered a greeting. The two turned and led the way through winding streets flanked on both sides by high walls. A cold wind whined down from Russia. Iron-black peaks in the distance, reaching for a gray sky, were enveloped by dense clouds that took shape midway between heaven and earth.

"Snow up there already," Weaver observed. "Makes hospitable Faizabad seem cozy."

The smell and warmth of animals bil-

lowed from the entrance of a caravan-serai toward which a man drove four donkeys. These, and the guides who had been waiting for the newcomers, were the only visible creatures in murky Faizabad.

When the man with the lantern halted at an entrance in the middle of a high wall, an officer and a dozen soldiers from the local garrison stood under arms at the gateway. The wheels began to spin as the car bogged down at the foot of the final incline. The officer gestured. His men broke ranks to manhandle the car up the slope and into a court of powerful odors and feeble lights.

Tall men in baggy pantaloons began to unload the gear before the interpreter was sufficiently aroused to speak to them. Bearded men wearing karakul caps gathered in the gateway, laughing and jabbering and pointing. Moment by moment, newcomers joined them. The town wasn't as sullen as it had seemed from the bridgehead.

UNSTEADY on cramped legs, Corbin and Weaver stepped down into the court to shake hands with a trim captain who couldn't speak a word of English. He made ceremonious gestures and smiled to show a splendid mouthful of teeth. When he had directed the parking of the car, a chubby man wearing a fedora hat, a wing tip collar, and a frock coat came from one of the rooms which opened into the courtyard.

"Mr. Corbin. Mr. Weaver. His Excellency the Governor commands me to make you welcome. He has expected you. He regrets his inability to receive you in person. I am Yakub Khan, his financial secretary. It gives me pleasure to offer you the governor's mansion. It is your house, gentlemen."

Corbin noted that the courtyard, which covered perhaps a quarter of an acre, stabled not only the khan, but all the khan's horses. These were in the end nearest the gate; a blank wall, beyond which were the women's quarters and court, closed the further end. Along

the right and left were rooms built against the inclosing walls, and opening into the courtyard, whose pavement Corbin discovered only after sinking two inches into a layer of mud, straw, and offal.

None of these details amazed Corbin. He had had a G. I.'s view of the glamorous Orient, but he was sorry for Peggy Layne, who lived somewhere on the further side of the blank wall.

When the secretary came to a lighted doorway, he bowed again. "I trust you will find your things in order. I shall presently send refreshments. Meanwhile, these men are to serve you."

"There are more than we need, thank you," Corbin said, and stepped into his quarters.

A white bearded "rug spreader" spoke to the interpreter, who explained to Corbin, "This room, His Excellency's own study, the next room, and opening from that is a bathroom, all these for you."

Weaver examined the carpet, which was perhaps nine by twenty. He fingered it eagerly, nodded knowingly, and looked up to say, "This must be the big boy's conference corner. Best Feraghan I've ever seen." Then he glared at Corbin's boots. "If you'd look at all that you've stepped in, you'd see why it's good form to take off your shoes before you come into a carpeted room. Especially on a rug like this." Again his hands lovingly examined a corner of the rug.

Corbin walked into the adjoining room, which contained a chair, a table, and a cot, and into another room. "Here's a bathroom!"

"Where? What bathroom?"

"Here, and farm style. What did you expect, U.S.A. plumbing?"

"But this is the Governor's palace!"

"That's what *she* must have said. Match you for *first* turn washing up. Dump the suds down the drain in the floor."

Meanwhile, one of the staff had brought a brazier of glowing charcoal into the dobe-walled room. Corbin

swung out one of the solid wooden shutters which opened on the court; there were no windows opening to the street. "Charcoal," he explained, "gives you a splitting headache in no time if you don't watch ventilation."

Presently, servants came in with tea, irregular lumps of Russian sugar, and a tray of apples, mulberries, and grapes. Yakub Khan, who was in command of the province during his chief's absence, followed the servants. He drank a cup, chatted for a few moments, then said, "You have had a trying day. With your permission, I leave you. Good night, gentlemen."

Then the next relay of servants arrived with steaming rice, boiled mutton, and eggplant stew.

IN THE morning, when Corbin would have gone out to hire horses so that he could get down to the business of his mining survey, Yakub Khan assured him that the Governor, who would presently return, would be disappointed at not having had the pleasure of personally supervising all arrangements for taking the field. So Corbin went into the crooked streets of Faizabad, whose small orchard gardens were inclosed by dobe walls.

Not a house had more than a single story. Each was low, mud-walled, and roofed with poplar poles overlaid with mud. Yellow-leaved poplars swayed in the wind, ready to replace damage done by earthquake or heavy rain. Higher up on the slopes, pistachios grew wild; small vineyards found root in rocky shelves.

Camel and donkey caravans formed to file over mountain trails leading to Chinese Turkestan. Gypsies, swarthy and slight of stature, crowded the bazaar at the river front. Their unveiled women, flouncing about in full skirts, haggled and bartered for raisins and rice and lumps of mutton fat.

Corbin wondered whether, among the veiled Afghan women who ventured from their houses, there were any who

knew the governor's imported lady, and whether she had found one friend, even among her servants. A crowd formed at his heels, following him through the bazaar as he bought sugar and dried apricots, sheepskin and felt rugs for his mountaineering. They found him more fun than a parade. Good-humored curiosity seekers, he reflected, should keep Weaver out of trouble in his hunt for priceless sacred rugs.

But thinking of Weaver put Corbin in mind of the saint's tomb; so, mounting the black stallion the governor's secretary had loaned him, he rode from the bazaar and upstream, toward the white-washed cupola where Imam Abbas was buried. Curiosity not being worth a walk, his followers remained in the bazaar to comment on the infidel's horsemanship.

The cupola, Corbin presently noted, rose from an area of ruined houses whose fire-blackened timbers suggested an ancient raid, as a guess, by Uzbeks coming down from Russia. Weeds and saplings blocked the traces of what once had been streets. However, he finally found a well-defined trail which indicated that city dwellers still came to pay their respects to the saint.

Dismounting, Corbin warily kept his distance when he saw the women at the entrance of the mud cube on which the cupola was perched. Three knelt. Two were tying bits of red cloth to sticks thrust into the ground near the low archway. From a scrubby sapling dangled blue beads, streamers of cloth, and unidentifiable small objects which twinkled as they twisted and swayed from strings.

These women, whose veils and long capes made them all look alike, were in one respect actually alike. Each had wishes to which no loving man could or would listen, so each brought her plea to one whom she could properly address.

They weren't gossiping or chattering. If words were exchanged, the wind blotted them from Corbin's hearing. He guessed at the subject of their petitions. Praying for a lover would be asking too

much even of a saint, they prayed for sons, and for the confusion of rival wives. They were deliberate about their devotions and offerings. If they were aware of his presence, they assumed that he was waiting until they left before he came nearer to pay his own respects. Instead of a hat, Corbin wore a karakul cap which made his outline differ little from that of any of the governor's staff.

Nevertheless, it seemed more tactful to back away. The stallion snorted, tossed his head. Something had startled the temperamental creature. Wheeling, Corbin got a passing glimpse of the muddy trail.

AMONG the prints of soft shoes were marks left by one pair of hard heels. Such were scarce enough, even in Kabul. In Faizabad they'd have been unheard of until the arrival of the governor's imported bride.

He judged from the prints that she had come alone, and after the others. It gave him a queer shock, thinking of Norma Turner's friend, going to hang red cloth at a Moslem saint's tomb.

Then he observed that the heel prints had swerved from the trail and into the ruins. He heard a thin, dry crackling and saw the woman who was at his left, in the angle of what remained of a crumbled house. It was in a position where she could not be seen by those at the tomb.

She lowered the veil whose upper portion was pierced by eyeholes, like a carnival mask. "Norma told me you were coming up. Thank heaven! I looked back and knew you were a stranger, so I waited, instead—"

She gestured toward the shrine. Tears ran slowly, very slowly down her upturned face, yet she would not blink. It was as though she could not deny herself an instant's interruption of her first sight of an American in many months.

Peggy Layne's eyes were very large and dark, and like her mouth, suggested that once she had smiled a great deal, which now made her tragic expression

all the more painful. Her dangerous intensity made Corbin more uneasy than did the situation itself. Her lashes, long and black, quivered constantly.

"Put up that veil!" Corbin managed to say. "You're taking chances!"

Much as he wanted to, he could not quite spur the stallion to bolt for town. Peggy sensed his tension and pleaded "Don't go yet, I want to talk to you."

"We'll both be mobbed."

"I know. Meet me at the tomb. Late tonight. I've gone there to pray before. I can get away without being followed."

"Meet you tonight—you're crazy!"

"Meet me," she said with threatening softness, "or I'll come to your quarters in my—my husband's house."

"How could I get away at night," he countered, fiercely. "Dodging sightseers is tough by day! I can't smuggle you to Kabul—do you know what'll happen if you're caught playing tricks? *Do you?*"

"I know, and I don't care. I'm going to get away!"

He tried sidetracking her with a half promise. "All's clear my way, no one's coming up the grade. There's time to hear your ideas, right now."

"They'll take some arranging. Where to meet, and then, a disguise."

"We couldn't decide until the survey is completed here, and I go on to Duang and the gold sands. Wait till then. How the devil could I meet you tonight? Even if I could, how'd I know now how things'd be in five weeks?"

"I come to pray here often."

"Turned Moslem as a front?"

She nodded.

"What are you supposed to be praying for?"

"What do *you* think? That's why he took the other wife. The one prayer I'd rather die than have answered!" she said, bitterly. Then, raising her veil, "I'm counting on you."

THAT night, the Governor, returning from an inspection tour of the province, invited his foreign guests to dinner. Yar Ali Khan wore dinner jacket and

red tarboosh. His executive staff were in sack suits weirdly tailored in Kabul. For the rest, there were gray-bearded village headmen decked out in reeking sheepskin jackets, baggy pantaloons, and top-heavy turbans; officers with trim uniforms and burnished boots; local merchants resplendent in fur-trimmed tunics, and brocaded vests. Corbin got all this at a glance, as he rehearsed the etiquette of meeting the man who was the ruler of Badakhshan, substituting for, and having been appointed by, the King himself.

"Bow. Take three paces forward. Halt. Bow. Speak when you're spoken to. . . . Read remarks of appreciation. Present your letter from the Minister of Trade . . . and for Lord's sake, don't ask how he likes American women. . ."

Corbin whispered to Weaver, "The major-domo will coach you, don't sound off till he gives you the cue."

"We eat from a table," Weaver said from the corner of his mouth. "That's a real Herati carpet—"

"Shhhhhh, you damn fool!"

The major-domo touched Corbin's elbow. "Sir—"

Corbin bowed. When he straightened, during the mispronouncing of his name, a firm quick hand had sought and found his own. Yar Ali Khan, stepping from his retinue, had covered ground like a pouncing panther, yet without semblance of haste. His heavy eyebrows joined in the center. His nose was long and straight; he had a spade-shaped chin, though his face was narrow. All this registered only as background for the smile of mouth and eye and voice.

The Governor was saying, "Short circuit the ritual, Mr. Corbin, you're among friends." He gestured casually to dismiss and reassure the major-domo. "Mr. Weaver, I'm glad to welcome you."

All the other guests squatted on the floor, facing each other in two long rows, between which servants placed gigantic platters heaped with rice, or with a whole lambstuffed with pistachios. If

the Governor had to act like a fool of an infidel, that was His Excellency's business!

The fourth at their table, Yakub Khan, whispered to Corbin, "Please do not be offended when His Excellency declines wine." A cork popped. The financial secretary went on, "What you drink will not offend any of the Moslem guests."

There were knives and forks, glass and linen at the governor's table. The use of these fascinated the men who sat on the carpet, dipping wrist-deep into *pilau*, or dipping with a scoop shaped of leathery bread into the bowls of mutton and eggplant stew.

Yar Ali Khan lifted his goblet of ginger-ale and proposed the health of the President of the United States. In his turn, Corbin offered that of King Mohammed Vahir Shah. Once formality was done with the twinkle came back into the governor's eyes, the sharp tips of his moustaches twitched, and once more, Corbin felt that he was with one of his own people.

A cream-colored hound, long haired, aloof, and too disdainful to beg, waited for the master to toss him a bit of mutton. "Cousin of the Saluki, isn't he?" Corbin asked. "Or the ancestor?"

Yar Ali Khan shrugged. "We think our Afghan hound is the most ancient of breeds. The Arabs make the same claim for the Saluki."

From dogs he got to shooting: "They tell me you have a very neat sporting Springfield."

"I don't think I'd put it against your Holland and Holland," answered Corbin, who had investigated his man. "Fact is, I saw an old chap a few miles out of Badakhshan doing some good shooting with a matchlock. No, I'm not performing before a crowd!"

The khan chuckled appreciatively. "Some day, our civilians will give up their weapons because they won't need them. The money that now buys a gun for every citizen will pay for hospitals, roads, schools. You Americans have

stopped carrying arms because you don't need them for daily use. Now, with us—"

AS THE footmen cleared the table, Yar Ali traced on the cloth, "You'll survey the lapis lazuli, the iron, the copper, whatever else you find up the Kokcha. They're all important, but the gold at Duang—here—on the Amu Darya—that's what we need. Though you'll need more than a nose for gold, you and Mr. Weaver."

"Maybe I can borrow your dog?"

"No, keep your rifle oiled. And loaded."

"Your people have been friendly," Corbin assured him.

"Our people, yes. Most are friendly, by nature, despite Mr. Kipling's ballads and fiction. But there are bandits, of all nationalities. Those who are not well disposed toward you, I have a cure for them! And there are others."

"Who?"

"Russians who don't want our countrymen to develop the border districts, especially not the gold. They don't like the idea of a strong Afghanistan, and they don't like the idea of American interests on their border. In choosing between giving the concession to the Americans or Russians we had to deny them."

"Had to?"

The khan's nostrils flared. "Compelled to, not by the over-rated British influence but by our own common sense. They're like the Arab's camel. The beast begged leave to put only his head into the master's tent during a sand-storm, and when the fool agreed, the beast tore the entire structure down about his head.

"Even with the camel disguised as a Russian, who'd want to let the stinking creature into the tent?"

Seeing that this query was its own answer, Yar Ali Khan went on, "We develop the Duang, after you find the lodes. More population is concentrated there. More wealth in machinery. So,

more soldiers to maintain order. So, more difficult for "border incidents," the undeclared war that never makes the headlines. We've killed outlaws—Russians, Afghans, mixed nationalities. We've also trapped a few parties of soldiers from across the Amu Darya who had been "lost on maneuver," and a few airplanes making "forced landings."

"What happened to these?"

The khan smiled into the hollow stem of his glass. "Some, of course, were repatriated."

Corbin grimaced ruefully. "I think I'd rather work the Kokcha Valley, and skip the Duang. I'm an engineer, not an army."

Yar Ali Khan again chuckled appreciatively. "I do not believe you scare worth a damn."

"Out of every ten soldiers I ever talked to, nine said they were scared silly, and the tenth was a full-blooded liar. Ask some of your own fighting men, man to man."

"We Afghans are liars," Yar Ali Khan answered, sadly. "We insist we are never frightened. Not even while we ran to caves to dodge bombs the British dropped during King Amanullah's reign. We told them we had won the war, until they half believed us."

Corbin laughed, ruefully. "You convinced the enemy you won the war! Well, I'd rather shoot partridge than bandits or foreign agents, though within reason. I'll take what I find. And thanks for a platoon of soldiers."

With that settled, he watched the khan sketch routes of exploration. "Upstream, for three days march, you'll follow the strike. Then, here, two right-angled tributaries, which cut the dip, and give good exposures. Mountain men will guide you to lapis and lead and copper and sulphur, but they'll lie about gold. Our peculiar mining laws." The khan sighed. "Every bit of gold in the kingdom belongs to the government. Unprofitable placers—like those up the Kokcha, where you can pan maybe a

dollar a day—say, ten *rupees* Afghani—the citizens poach there, because it's not worth stopping them. But if the lode were discovered, and developed, the placer miners would be put to work for the government. Which is harder than panning dust, and pays less."

Corbin listened intently, studying the keen taut face of a man he liked and understood. A liking and respect which made Peggy's dangerous discontent more a menace than ever. Even if he could smuggle the American wife out of Badakhshan, he would not want to.

AND THEN, perhaps sensing the query which had been growing in Corbin's mind ever since the first hand-clasp, Yar Ali Khan said, "My palace, as we call it. Why do I put up with it?"

"Er—Your Excellency, it's the most comfortable residence I've found in Afghanistan, outside the capital."

The khan smiled indulgently and understandingly. "Skip it, Corbin! I was a grown man before I entered school in the States. There was much I found distasteful. We Afghans do not really change from that which has always been. But I saw many things I appreciated. Still, I keep this place as it is because it would not be good to introduce air conditioning, plumbing, refrigerators, and radio here until a good number of my people can have at least a few of those benefits. For me to have a hundred servants instead of none, a hundred horses instead of two, a hundred modern rifles instead of a matchlock, that's a matter of quantity, and is accepted. But for me to be too different in quality—the mullahs would damn me, my people would envy me, and— Oh, yes, I can flog, I can have hanged, within wide limits, just about anyone I name, but if I offend my people—" He made a slicing gesture. "Count the Afghan kings who have abdicated, who have been assassinated, who have been dethroned. We're the most democratic people in the world. When we want a new king, we use bullets for ballots."

The khan got up. "Gentlemen, this has been a great pleasure to me." He bowed. "You may withdraw, with my good wishes."

The foreign guests backed from the table, they bowed, retreated to the door, and bowed again. The Governor, returning the courtesies, nailed Corbin with a wink.

Corbin worried about his appointment with Peggy as he skirted the wall. In the darkness, a dozen women shrouded in cloaks could go unnoticed to doors forbidden by tradition and by the Prophet's faith. Corbin thought of the dead bandits, the vanishing Russians, and of the prints high heels had left near the spot where a horse borrowed from the khan's stable had made hoof prints. The best way for a resentful native woman to finish a foreign intruder would be to tempt the outlandish creature to overstep herself . . .

Back in their quarters, Weaver made for his bunk in the reception room. Corbin, once in the adjoining smaller room, sat up to puzzle things out. Whether he avoided Peggy, or went to meet her, he'd be wrong. Yet, against sober reason, he felt that perhaps a few words coming from an American could make her endure willingly until Badakhshan was modernized and Yar Ali Khan ejected the native woman.

WHEN Corbin finally left the governor's mansion, to plod through the mud and darkness of sleeping Faizabad, he had convinced himself that he was acting rationally, and in his own best interests. Taking the initiative could not possibly precipitate a situation as dangerous as could come of Peggy Layne's getting off limits in the governor's house.

Through the whining wind and rustling poplars, Corbin barely heard the squish of his boots in the mud. Passing the guards at the gate had required neither stealth nor bribery. Since they had not been put on the alert, they didn't bother to stay awake on post.

Meet Peggy and get it over before moonrise. Give her encouragement to keep her in line. Perhaps, with luck, sell her the idea that it was her duty to stick to the obligation she had assumed. Appeal to her craving for importance and a mission, and maybe she'd stay out of Norma's hair, until Corbin could hustle Norma from Kabul and back to the States.

Having it all figured out, he was taking what military men called a calculated risk. "Believe it or not," he would say, if he had to explain himself, "I was determining the true longitude of Faizabad by observations on Polaris."

And since Yar Ali Khan had gone to school in the States, Corbin took with him a surveyor's transit.

Corbin, out of breath when he came to the ruins, readily distinguished the whitewashed bulk of the shrine. With his flashlight he soon found the hoof-prints his horse had left. Then, in a sheltered angle, he set up his instrument and shot Polaris, taking six readings, three of them with the telescope inverted. These observations recorded, he drew his sheepskin jacket closer about him, and wedged himself against the dobe wall to dodge the twisting wind.

An hour passed. Growing brightness along the valley wall warned him that moonrise was at hand. His throat was dry from smoking, since his cigarettes burned fiercely in the wind which invaded his corner. Once more, he went through the routine of reading the height of Polaris.

Without warning his observations were interrupted when a woman said, "I hope I've not kept you waiting too long."

Corbin nearly knocked the transit over. "You scared the daylights out of me. Sure you've not been followed?"

"Are you sure no one's followed you?" Peggy countered.

"If anyone did, he's frozen stiff, if he had patience to watch my observations on the North Star."

"I knew you'd find a pretext," she

said and came so near that the shadows no longer concealed her.

"Now that we're both running the risk of being stoned in the plaza, what's it all for?"

"When the survey is over, I could overtake you at your first camp. A horse can make better time than a car, you know, till you get to Khanabad. And cutting the local phone wire is easy. Landslides and snowslides and earthquakes keep the line out of order half the time anyway. I'm not guarded simply because no one ever dreamed of a woman's running away. It's just that I couldn't get far without help."

She paused, and went on, "You needn't be suspected. I'll pretend to be very sick, and out of my head. They'll think I fell into the river, or jumped. I'll scatter some clothes and things."

"How do you know your letters to Norma haven't been read? And she must have written you entirely too much."

"Invisible ink's easy. Starch, or onion juice."

Corbin temporized, "Don't do anything until you know positively that the survey is finished, and that I'm actually bound for Kabul. I'll be back in Faizabad, to stock up for another traverse along the Russian frontier. Changing plans on account of your making a break ahead of time would be as bad a move as I could possibly make."

HER ready acceptance of his logic prompted Corbin to tell Peggy of his conversation with Yar Ali Khan. After summing up the Governor's plans for the province, he said, "Your husband never dreamed of telling you anything of the sort. He's simply not used to the idea of any woman's being capable of understanding such things."

"As if I don't know that!" she exclaimed bitterly. "And now you're taking his side!"

"I'm facing facts. He can't go modern in the way he'd like to go because he'd make too many local enemies. Don't

you see, you're part of a big plan for an old and backward country that's finally awakening. He's helping create a new outlook for his people. You're a pioneer in the way our people were, a century and a half ago, backing a new idea in living and government."

"I could stand everything but that other woman! And if she has a child, I'll be completely useless. As it is, doing nothing is driving me crazy."

"That's just vanity! You can't forget an old idea, or get a new one! You've not been helpful, you've whined from the start. You said before, you'd rather die than bear his child yourself. And another thing—extra in-laws give him backing in a clannish country. He probably caught a lot of hell, bringing a foreign wife to Faizabad. Your family is as good as none at all, as far as this territory's concerned. Over here, the clan—the tribe—is what counts—which is the very thing he's trying to cure, in the long run. By making concessions in order to gain concessions."

"You've swallowed his line!"

"He's genuine, according to my reckoning. You're not."

"He'd be glad to get rid of me! It's pure maliciousness that he won't divorce me the way he would a native woman. He doesn't want to give his family a chance to tell him they knew all the while that he was wrong."

"Hold it to a whisper," Corbin cautioned. "This has gone on long enough. Think it over, everything. You'll have time while I'm finishing the first part of the survey. When this part of the country is developed, it'll be a much nicer place to live in. Give him a chance, and give yourself a chance. Give—"

He caught Peggy's arm. "Someone's on the prowl," he whispered, as he nudged her away from the angle, and into the ruins.

"Where?"

"Up that way. Keep out of sight while I leave. Get back home as soon as you can. If we're caught, if you're recognized, he can't save you."

In the thinning gloom, Corbin distinguished motion. Someone apparently had left the vicinity of the saint's tomb to follow the crooked trail through the ruins. Someone who moved furtively.

There was a lull in the wind. Corbin caught the scent of a horse, and the odor of garlic and native tobacco. Presently, the newcomer was momentarily outlined against the whitish bulk of the saint's tomb. He wore a tall Astrakhan cap. Though perhaps not one of the khan's men, he could be dangerous, whoever he was. It depended entirely on why he prowled.

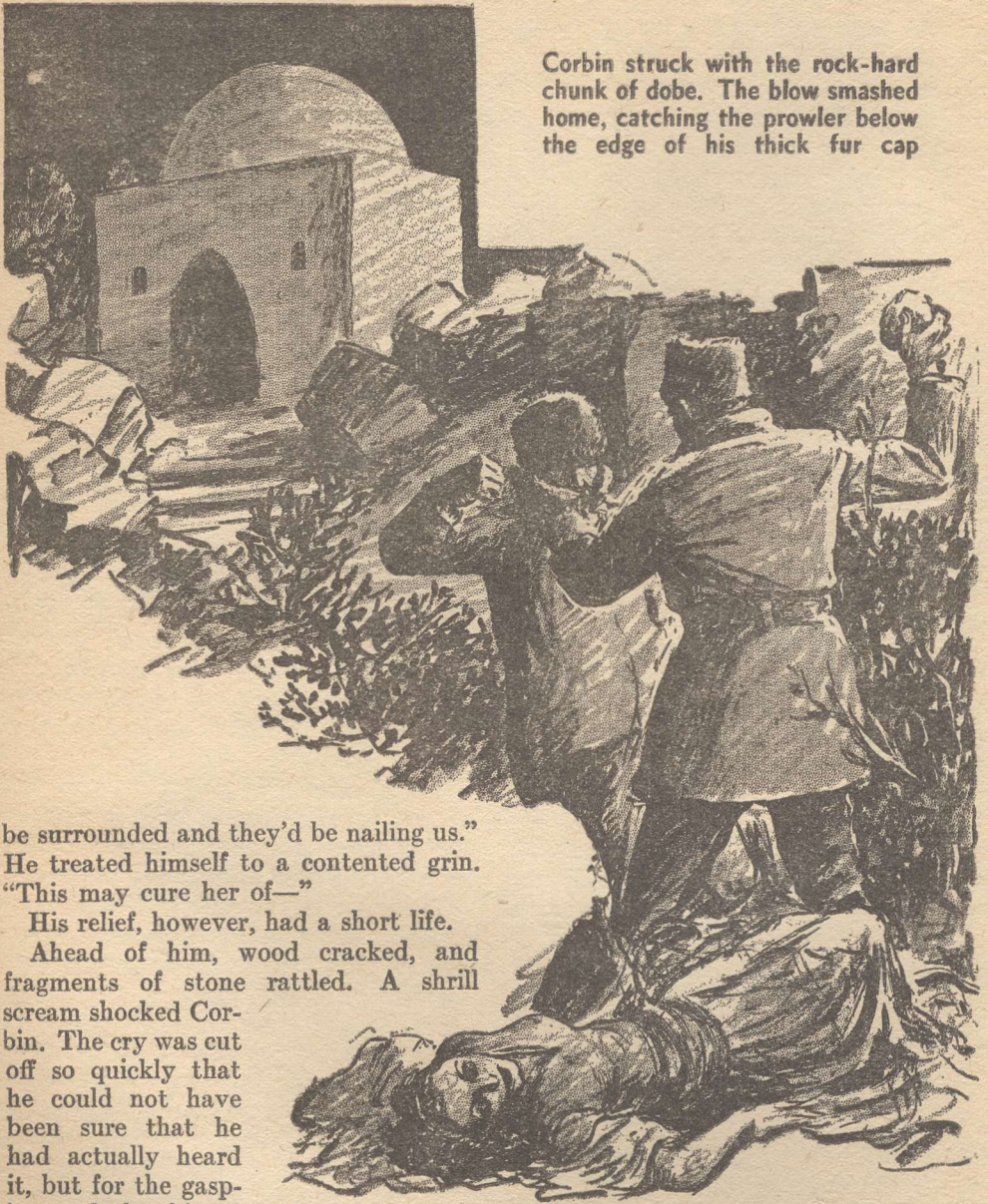
THE approaching man dissolved in shadow. From the quarter which concealed him came a bird-call, querulous, rising in a questioning inflection.

Had he not been watching the lurker, Corbin would have been deceived. When there was no answering note, he was certain that the call had been to give information, rather than to ask whether one or more confederates had reached their stations.

Yet there should be an answer, and to that answer there should be a reply. Corbin tried to hear the woman not far from him. Peggy had ceased stirring.

The call was repeated. When there was no answer, nor any further movement in that quarter, Corbin came from his corner. Peggy must be very near, otherwise the wind would have driven away the heavy sweetness of the *attar* which she wore. As he moved in her direction, he wondered whether to tell her to stay in hiding, or to take advantage of what now seemed to be a fact. The man wearing the Astrakhan cap, himself a prowler who required secrecy, had settled down to awaiting whoever he expected, the sooner Peggy left, the better.

"Needn't be such cockeyed coincidence," he reasoned, "that two sets of meetings are staged in the same spot. This is just the sort of place for a huddle. Good landmark, and good cover. If anyone'd followed her on suspicion, we'd



Corbin struck with the rock-hard chunk of dobe. The blow smashed home, catching the prowler below the edge of his thick fur cap

be surrounded and they'd be nailing us." He treated himself to a contented grin. "This may cure her of—"

His relief, however, had a short life.

Ahead of him, wood cracked, and fragments of stone rattled. A shrill scream shocked Corbin. The cry was cut off so quickly that he could not have been sure that he had actually heard it, but for the gasping and thrashing in the gloom.

Corbin snatched a fist-filling chunk of dry dobe, which was rock-hard, and reached into the tangle. He caught a sheepskin jacket by the collar. The prowler, startled by a second unexpected contact, fairly flung Peggy against Corbin. Her long cape entangled him. Limp from terror and perhaps from having been throttled, she crumpled. He stumbled over her, and would have

fallen but for the hold he had on the man who turned on him.

Corbin struck with the hard clod of dobe. He could hardly miss. The blow smashed home, catching the man below the edge of his fur cap. Once was enough. The fellow dropped to his knees and lurched face down.

Corbin clawed the gloom and laid a hand on Peggy. She tightened, but did not cry out. He whispered, "I got

him—he wasn't following you, he came here to meet—now get going before he snaps out of it."

She caught and held his hand for a moment. "I've been an awful fool, I might've got us both killed if—if—"

She clung to him, and choked back a sob.

"Don't blow up now, you're shaking yourself to pieces, keep moving, don't think of it till you're under cover."

Peggy let go. He heard her stirring in the darkness. Her perfume thinned and vanished in the rising wind. As Corbin went to his transit, it became clear to him why there had been no answer to the bird-call. The man approaching from the town side had at the last moment blundered so close to Peggy that his only resort was to throttle her into silence.

Corbin shouldered the transit. Moonrise now favored him, since the growing brightness made it more difficult every moment to see what any shadow contained. When he had put nearly a hundred yards between himself and what had almost been a trap, he heard the bird-call twice in succession. Corbin smiled bleakly, and flexed his fingers. The man he had struck on the head would not yet know whether he heard nightingales or angels.

MEN and pack animals were mustered in the palace courtyard. Corbin and Weaver, having checked the packs, were still waiting for the Governor to receive their leave-taking call. Impatiently, Corbin watched the morning wear away. Bit by bit, he began to sense that the excitement of the retainers who milled about stables and gateway derived from something other than the setting out of an expedition which waited for the Governor's blessing.

Finally Corbin's impatience gave way to uneasiness. He asked Nureddin, the interpreter, what was going on behind the door of the audience room. Nureddin claimed he did not know.

Finally the financial secretary came

out of the audience room and crossed the court to say, "His Excellency wishes you to witness Afghan justice."

Corbin went cold for a moment. "Er . . . justice?"

"Oh, yes, very interesting," the chubby official said. "This way, gentlemen. You will not be delayed long."

As he followed, Corbin wondered how Yar Ali Khan would arrange to have him share the indiscreet wife's punishment and yet not violate the safe-conduct from Kabul. Weaver looked as if his breakfast disagreed with him. Almost anything that happened in Faidzabad could be explained in Kabul.

Corbin was murmuring, "But it takes four witnesses in a case like this . . . anyway, it takes two . . . they'll put her in a sack before they throw stones at her . . . giving me the works would raise too much hell, so he saves face by pretending he doesn't know . . ."

Whatever happened, he'd have to watch it to a finish. There was nothing he could do. Propriety demanded that she be veiled until they put her into a bag which to the very last would prevent any improper exposure of face or body. Corbin shook his head and drew a deep breath. He had to compose himself. This might be a trap to convert suspicion into certainty. Her safety might depend on his matter of fact manner.

The khan sat at the head of the audience room, at a table. Officers and soldiers were lined up along the bare wall. Bearded mullahs squatted on the floor, at the foot of the dais. Their ponderous turbans made their faces even more uncompromising. Unspoken denunciation hardened their deep-set eyes. Their noses were beaked downward with disapproval.

At the secretary's entrance with Corbin and Weaver, a squad of soldiers had moved from before the khan, taking their prisoner with them. He was a dish-faced Uzbek wearing a quilted jacket, felt boots, and a very tall Astrakhan cap. Narrow eyed, stolid, he gave no sign of hope or fear.

Yar Ali Khan got up to greet his guests. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, cheerily, "I regret the delay." He gestured. "This worthless creature will interest you. Have you ever seen his kind before?"

"Of course, an Uzbek. A good many of them between here and Khanabad," Corbin answered.

Yar Ali's smile made his moustache tips twitch. "An Uzbek is an Uzbek, except when he is a Russian subject and not an Afghan subject. You remember our conversation, a few nights ago?"

"Yes, indeed."

"This chap was practicing bird-calls at an unusual hour, and in a place where he could not have been snaring fowl. I didn't care to bore you with the details of the investigation. But—"

He waved airily, "Take him out and set to work!"

They hustled the Uzbek to the door. The governor came down from the dais, and with friendly touches on the elbow, urged Corbin and Weaver ahead of him to watch.

THE soldiers stripped off the man's heavy coat and flung him face down in the muck and refuse of the court. Two others came with green poplar rods somewhat thicker than a man's thumb. Methodically they flogged him. With sure practiced strokes and nice rhythm, they alternated their blows while their fellows knelt to put their weight on the prisoner's shoulders and his hobbled ankles.

Thump — thump — thump — without malice, without pleasure, and without any pity, they hewed and flailed him until with each impact, he grunted, twitched, jerked. Finally, despite his stoicism, he began to moan. The beating continued as though the two would never weary.

When the man went limp and soggy, the governor spoke, else the beating would have continued. At command, they yanked off the prisoner's boots, flung icy water over him to revive him,

and then, since he was too weak to kick or squirm, they readily beat tattoo on the soles of his feet until Yar Ali Khan raised his hand.

"Throw him out and let him go home," Yar Ali Khan ordered, then, as he offered the guests his silver cigarette case. "Better than shooting or beating him to death. Let him go back and give his report. You see, the modern touch. Not revenge, but correction."

They dragged him to the gateway and flung him headlong down the muddy slope.

Yar Ali Khan continued, "It would upset you if I told you how they would have dealt with him when that man of iron, Abdurrahman Khan, was Amir of Afghanistan. I have detained you unduly, but I felt that you'd be more at ease, after my possibly disconcerting remarks of the other night. Good prospecting and good mapping, gentlemen! I await your early return, and the story of your success."

And when Corbin, mounted on the stallion which the governor had given him, marshaled his caravan to ride from the court, he saw the Uzbek hobbling toward the river.

They sketched as they rode up the Kokcha Valley, traversing by time and compass to record a trail which skirted the river. Where ledges of gneiss and granite blocked the way, flimsy spans of poplar poles bridged the roaring stream to reach the wider spaces on the further side.

Later, the gorge broadened into a valley planted with apple trees and with patches of opium poppies. Flocks of partridges rose from gleaned barley flailed and winnowed by the men who lived in the cramped villages overlooking the river. In these flat-roofed hovels, Corbin's party billeted. He would have preferred camping but the *hakims*, the local headmen, being responsible for the safety of travelers in their territory, insisted that the strangers accept the protection offered, or else move on to the next settlement.

Finally, the trail rose from the river bank to follow ridges so narrow that a slip would precipitate rider or pack animal a thousand feet down into the gorge on either side; and the only geology which Corbin could record was under his feet.

When he reached the lapis lazuli mines, whose tunnels, high up on the face of a cliff, had been closed and boarded up since King Amanullah's time, Corbin found the first evidence of mineral wealth. Along the river, mountaineers were panning gold. Others worked with rockers. But neither by bribe nor persuasion could he get guides to the heights from whose lode the dust was washed down to the sand bars, and to the "traps" dug in the gravel to snare the gold during high water. These men wanted no rush of disturbing strangers.

Corbin said to Weaver, "After all, we're not here to strike it rich, we're here to map mineralized areas. The persuading is up to Yar Ali Khan."

"Using poplar sticks to beat the facts out of them!"

"That comes under the heading of Afghan justice. Well, they won't dummy up about the sulphur mines, or the galena veins."

As he continued his curved course, from east to south, for a while paralleling the Northwest Frontier Province of India, and at last moving west and north again to close the five hundred mile circuit, Corbin was content with the skimpy data he got. The geologists and engineers who followed would go directly to the most promising of the areas he had mapped. Afghans, scientifically trained, some abroad and some in Habibullah College, would know how to deal with stubborn and secretive mountaineers. His task here was finished. Now for the frosting on the cake, the survey of gold-bearing reaches of the streams which fed the Amu Darya.

AFTER those squalid mountain villages, Faizabad seemed little short of metropolitan, and as he rode into

the courtyard of the Governor's house, Corbin said to Weaver, "Thinking back to those dumps in Skarzar and Anjuman, this is damn well a palace."

Weaver, whose skin crept and crawled from the memory of the infested felt rugs on which he had slept, agreed readily.

That night Corbin joined Yar Ali Khan at dinner to tell about the traverse and to arrange for the survey of the Duang gold district, the project for which everything else had been no more than a field test. The Governor, however, shook his head. "I am sorry, Mr. Corbin," he said, tapping an official letter, "but I have received orders from Kabul forbidding you to enter the military area, the thirty kilometer zone along the border."

"There must be some mistake!" Corbin exclaimed, and tried to hide his apprehension. "The matter of entering military areas was entirely cleared up in Kabul. It must have been clear in your mind when we talked about Duang five weeks ago."

"That," the Governor said, "was five weeks ago. What can I do?"

"Go partridge hunting."

Yar Ali Khan smiled. "Ordinarily, I should be inclined to look the other way, while you discreetly violated orders. But there are two kinds of orders—those issued as a matter of form and those which are to be obeyed. Unhappily, I'm faced by the latter."

After a pause, he added, "I'm just as sorry as you are. Believe me, my loss is greater than yours."

Weaver glanced about him. Secretary and staff had been dismissed. He asked, "Confidentially, Your Excellency, what is behind it?"

Yar Ali Khan eyed Weaver, and said, "This is confidential. So much so that if I were to tell your chief, I could not afford to have even you as a witness. Nothing personal is intended, I apologize before asking you to be kind enough to withdraw, for a moment or two."

"Tickled not to carry state secrets," Weaver answered, and got up from the table.

Yar Ali Khan watched him amble toward the fireplace in a far wall. "Mr. Corbin," he whispered, "someone has spread the story that you are fomenting pro-British sentiment among the people and attempting to stir up revolt in Badakhshan. Our government has good reason to be suspicious of Britain."

"Me? Good heavens! That's ridiculous. Anyway, I'm an American."

"Yes, but you speak like an Englishman. And look at Lawrence of Arabia. Lawrence caught our fancy, and became a legend. Many in Kabul believe he is still alive. Tradition never dies here."

"But I'm just an American mining engineer. I was educated in England but that was years ago. I have no interest in politics, I'm out to do a job."

Yar Ali Khan sighed. "Whatever idiot started this in Kabul will finally be convinced. Meanwhile, return to report success as far as you've gone. Or, stay here to plot your maps in detail, and draw up your reports. You'd have to do that anyway, so why not now, while you're waiting for me to assure them in Kabul that your military genius has been overrated." Once more, his eyes twinkled. "We'll have a bit of partridge shooting. I'd enjoy your staying."

Corbin was not sure that Faizabad was a safe place, since his continued presence would give Peggy Layne too much time to shape new plans for escape, so he said, "Judging from the past few days, we might be snowed in."

"Not a chance!" Then, persuasively, "Your car took a frightful beating. Let Mr. Weaver drive to Khanabad—there's a mechanic, an Italian, who arrived while you were in the mountains. Repairs, drawing your maps, shooting partridges—killing three birds with one stone, as it were. There is a chance, a decent chance, of getting permission to go to Duang before it's too late."

"I'll think it over," Corbin temporized. "There are a few lapis lazuli veins

downstream I'd like to examine more closely. Interesting mineralization. Galena, among other things."

"Tell Mr. Weaver it's decided!" the khan urged, and Corbin accepted the suggestion which was little short of a command.

WHEN Weaver returned from Khanabad, he said. "I phoned Kabul and asked the military attaché to check up. He told me he's trying, but can't get anywhere at all. Doesn't know whether someone has frightened or bribed the Minister of Trade, or the Minister of War, or the Foreign Office."

Corbin groaned. "Each one dummies up and points at the other department?"

"Right. The old Afghan runaround. Only thing Major Croft is sure of is that Yar Ali Khan's been doing his best, with letters, and with phone calls from Faizabad relayed on to Kabul."

"That relay business at Khanabad! Someone's doublecrossing him there."

Weaver shook his head. "Judging from what Major Croft told me, Yar Ali Khan's messages are getting through all right, the trouble is in Kabul. If we don't get going soon, we'll be stuck for the winter."

"Be damned if I am going back without making a traverse to Duang. We'll tell Yar Ali Khan we're through. We'll pack up to leave Faizabad." Corbin put his finger on one of the maps spread out on the table. "Here's where we'll camp, just outside of Kara Robot. While you were gone, I got acquainted with the headman, old Ghulam Khan. Quite a character. Wears English riding boots, with spurs upside-down, and he believes in prospecting."

"How'd he get that way?"

"I didn't ask him. The old boy helped me a lot—" With his finger, Corbin indicated contour lines on his map. "Showed me some old diggings, tunnels boarded up for years. Don't amount to much, but everyone else lied about them."

"Like to meet him, but how'll he help us?"

"He'll stake me to horses," Corbin answered. "I'll head from Kara Robot, and over the divide, for Duang."

"There's no trail."

"There is a trail, if you look hard enough, Ghulam Khan and I did a bit of hunting. I made quite a fuss over his old Snyder and let him use my Springfield. Anyway, you and I leave Faizabad, with the Governor's blessing and regrets. We camp, as I said, outside of Kara Robot. In the morning, you drive on to Khanabad and stall around there."

"What'll I tell the governor of Khanabad?"

"That I'm making a short traverse and will be along directly, which is gospel. You make for Chah-i-Ab, the road's good and fast. I'll be looping around through Duang and meet you."

WHILE there was a risk, Corbin counted on his previous accomplishments to keep him out of trouble in Kabul. Once back in the capital, he'd soon convince the bureaucrats that he was not a pro-British agitator. For a moment, he had been tempted to let Weaver in on the jest, but decided against revelations. Yar Ali Khan, realizing the absurdity of the suspicion, had been remarkably broadminded in giving Corbin the facts, instead of withholding the story to save face for his fellow officials.

The following day, Corbin deliberately let his preparations for departure lag. Once on the way to Khanabad, he and Weaver were more conservative even than the rutted road required, so that they reached Kara Robot so near dusk that camping instead of pushing on to the next village could not seem unusual.

Ghulam Khan, boots burnished, spurs upside-down, and riding crop carried with an air that must have come from long observation of British officers along the Northwest Frontier, rode out on his hammer-headed stallion to greet them.

After salutations, the old fellow pointed the crop at Nureddin and said,

grandly, "Let the milk-fed boy asleep, we don't need the interpretation!"

Weaver set to work unloading the luggage which Corbin would need. The master of Kara Robot protested, "No camping outside the walls. My house is yours. My city is yours."

Corbin flashed him a pointed look. "My assistant understands everything, Your Excellency. Or are you worried about your men?"

Ghulam's glance swept the half-dozen riders who had fanned out on either side of him. "My men worry about me! It is other peoples I mean." A dramatic crop-sweep northward. "Those from across the river. The Russki pork-eaters."

"You didn't give them much thought the other day."

"This is today." He gave an order, and watched two horsemen wheel, to gallop for the mud-walled fort whose square tower reached high above the shelf on which the settlement sprawled. "Come, I have responsibility for you. Someone may be watching from anywhere."

Weaver and Corbin exchanged glances and nods. As they followed Ghulam Khan to his stronghold, Corbin said, resignedly, "Well, I can get de-loused again, and I've got to humor the fellow who furnishes the horses."

Though the dusk that piled up about the stronghold was quickly turning to darkness, slanting sunlight still picked out the further reaches of the road. Weaver said, reassuringly, "Nothing to worry about, Jeff, I've been over that stretch three times to your once, and the headlights aren't bad."

He gunned the engine, and took off for Khanabad. Aside from having to keep awake and alert, he'd be far more comfortable driving than would Corbin be in the verminous *robot*.

The interpreter's sleep had not been disturbed by the halt for parley and food. Weaver had only to turn him loose in Khanabad with some pocket money. The local opium would keep him

from wondering where Corbin was.

"Pick your horses now," the old khan said, "then sleep, we leave to march before sun-up."

Corbin followed Ghulam across the court to the stables. It didn't take long for him to decide on a long-legged Ferghana stallion. That settled, he drank more tea with the khan, smoked a pipe, and "spread his rugs."

WHEN light shining on his face awakened him, he wondered how the night could have ended so quickly. Next, he wondered why Ghulam Khan had waited until then to display any possession as rare as a flashlight. Finally, remembering the old man's reasons for insisting that his guest billet safely in the *robot*, Corbin concluded that Russians or bandits had sought and found him. He spent uncomfortable instants feigning deep sleep, as he tried to decide whether to reach for his knife or wait for information.

Before he could do any of these things, the spot of light shifted. A woman said in English, "Wake up, Jeff."

Corbin wished he were anywhere but in Kara Robot. He was sick and frightened, yet able to say, "You damned fool, how'd you get here?"

The light shifted somewhat. He saw that the woman was not Peggy Layne. The face was Norma's, though the complexion was many shades too dark, and the braided hair was black instead of chestnut-bronze. She wore a gypsy's jacket and striped skirt; she reeked of garlic, the smoke of camel dung fires, of rose *attar*, and of rancid hair oil.

"Norma—how'd you—how'd you get in without the dogs' barking their heads off?"

"I've been learning things. Lord, I'm half dead! It's a frightful walk from Faizabad."

"From where?" he gasped, and then saw the other woman.

Norma said, "Yes, I gypsied to Faizabad, with some folks I'd met at the hospital. Grateful patients."

"So I'm here," Peggy said, with a blend of apology and defiance. "I couldn't have shopped for make-up and clothes, but she could and did and—"

Peggy swayed, and for a moment sounded as if the effort to keep from sobbing and laughing at once would be too much for her.

"Oh, my stars!" Corbin groaned. Then resentment flared up. "Get her out of here! You idiot, this means a capital sentence for all of us, including the boss of Kara Robot. You must have asked someone where I stopped, the Governor will hear about it, he's already heard it!"

"But the road's better from now on, so he can't catch up in his Chevvie," Norma told him.

"Weaver's taken my car on to Khana-bad. I'm bound for Duang, on horse, and over the lousiest trail in Badakhshan!"

"We can stand it."

"We'll be bottled up whichever way we go!" He turned to Peggy. "Go back. You're a dead duck otherwise."

"What'd I be if I went back?" she retorted. "Finished!"

"If you hoofed with gypsies from Kabul," Corbin argued, "and the both of you hoofed from Faizabad, you'd have a better chance going it alone."

"You know we wouldn't, Jeff," Norma said. "We're here, and you're stuck. You might put her in a bag and carry her back to Faizabad, but you couldn't talk yourself into the clear."

"That's gospel," he admitted, bitterly. "Well, he'll phone Khanabad, and they'll go over Weaver and the whole town with a fine tooth comb."

"Oh, but he can't phone Khanabad," Norma said triumphantly. "There was a crooked pole, I managed to climb it and smash an insulator and break the line. Peggy has her passport—she's never let it out of her sight. We're awfully tired. Where are the blankets?"

"Here, if they haven't crawled away. Sweet dreams, darlings, while I'm thinking up a yarn for Ghulam Khan—believe

it or not, I always had a yen for gypsy gals, and I got these for a pack of cigarettes and a candy bar."

THOUGH Ghulam Khan did furnish horses and men to take care of the horses, he decided at the last minute that there was no need of his going to the border of his district with Corbin. Neither he nor his retainers paid any attention to the two gypsy wenches who wanted to plod along afoot, under the protection of the pack train. Being pagans, their doings didn't count.

Fortunately, the first day's march was through territory which he had already sketched, the narrow valley of a tributary which brought water from the divide beyond which lay the Duang gold region. From time to time, Corbin noted the familiar mouths of tunnels leading to deposits which the Afghan miners had years earlier considered exhausted. However, he looked behind him more than he did ahead, for the dangers of the zone beyond the divide now seemed trifling compared with those at his back. This was because, as he gained elevation, he and his men could be spotted by whoever went along the trail from Khanabad to Yar Ali Khan's headquarters.

The best he could do for Norma and Peggy was let them hang to the straps of his saddlebags. More would be revealing, and to let either ride would make him a fool in the eyes of his men. Being without soldiers, Corbin had forfeited much of the force of his official credentials, which Yar Ali Khan had not amended to exclude him from the military zone. In the next hakim's district, he'd have to achieve the perfect blend of persuasion and self-assurance, or he'd get neither horses nor men for the next leg of the march.

Norma, who dared not risk a word of English, made an inarticulate sound, and pointed backtrail. "*Khabardar hol!*" she said in Hindi. "*Ghoral Ghora, huzoor!*"

Though all he understood was "Look

out," seeing the far-off horses was enough. He focused his glasses. The riders were soldiers. Despite the distance he was sure that the leading animal was Yar Ali Khan's white stallion. The beast's gait, and tall rider's posture were fatally familiar.

"This is it! Your make-up won't fool him."

Exhaustion and the altitude had already distorted Peggy Layne's face so that fear could make no further change. Her legs buckled, and for a stride, only her grip on the strap kept her from sprawling. She started to laugh. The cut of his riding crop checked her before any horse-tender could wonder.

"Buck up!" Corbin said, "There's a dip ahead. Easier going!"

The pursuers fired a volley on the run. The reports were faint. Corbin did not hear the bullets, which was odd, since they could neither have fallen short, nor have missed the entire ridge.

The pack train ahead set the pace. Hearing the carbines from a great distance, the men looked back, muttered among each other, and continued thumping and cursing their animals. Being still in their chief's territory, they weren't alarmed or even interested in far-off musketry, which might be a salute, for all they knew.

"I won't go back!" Peggy said, and let go the strap.

She cleared the rump of Corbin's mount. A second bound brought her to the edge of a two hundred foot drop. Corbin half wheeled, trying to stop her, but vainly; his horse shied, ignoring boot and rein. Norma, knocked asprawl, recovered in time to catch Peggy by the arm.

They struggled. The open handed slaps ended it. With a choked cry, the fugitive surrendered, and let Norma half drag her along.

The pack animals being over the hump, their drivers had neither seen nor heard.

"Jeff—I can't do anything with her—for heaven's sake, ride on and leave us—

facing it out with us can't help."

"If you both dropped over the side, the buzzards'd point you out to him. And no horse'd be fast enough to take me away from him."

HE WAS now quite calm. "Believe it or not, Your Excellency, I wouldn't have taken the whining wench if you'd offered her to me . . . you might've left well enough alone, mightn't you . . . It's near Halloween, and the gals were just masquerading, Your Excellency, it's an old infidel custom, heck, you went to school back in the States . . ."

Then he reined in his horse, right on the crest. Once more, musketry echoed, and from a distance not quite as great. "Keep on, keep on," he said, when Norma and Peggy would have stopped. "Over and out of sight. It's simple, awfully simple, and so am I for not thinking of it." He pointed. "See anything up the slope beside rock?"

Wide-eyed, Norma answered, "No, Jeff, is there?"

"Uh-huh. I found it a few days ago. Lapis lazuli mine, and really forgotten. None of the khan's men know about it. I pried a board loose and crawled in for a look."

He dug into his saddlebags and got out parched barley, dried mulberries, and some matches. "Sit tight, and I'll be back for you, maybe."

"But where are you going?" Peggy asked, with new life.

"Back to meet your husband."

A gray buttress screened the ascent of the two women. They weren't leaving enough sign to count. Only occasional bits of scree rattled to the trail. The caravan men, who had come to a widening of the way, were halting to rest and eat and drink from the nearby spring. Corbin, riding back, could soon recognize Yar Ali Khan with his unaided eye.

Corbin dismounted when the khan reined in. The man was smiling. He waved, and paid the high compliment of getting off his horse.

"Hope the shooting didn't alarm you, but I had to catch up before you got out of Ghulam Khan's district. And got into trouble."

"I've been here before, Your Excellency." He gestured. "And there's an interesting vein. I couldn't resist the temptation."

Yar Ali Khan said, amiably, "Resisting temptation is a thankless task! Rock punched a hole in the crankcase of my Chevie, and I was afraid I'd not overhaul you. Your men halted?"

Corbin glanced at his watch. "Very likely."

"Mount up then. I could do with tea and a smoke. Haven't anything but canteen water."

Despite the narrowness of the trail, they rode knee to knee, etiquette giving the khan the inside. *Asiatic guile* Corbin was thinking, *shove me over the side in one easy move, and then write regrets to Kabul, and no one loses face but me.*

The khan went on, "You'd never guess what happened in Faizabad. There was an earthquake last night. Someone desecrated Imam Abbas' shrine. And stole the rug."

"Any clues?"

"Only suspicions. The earthquake flattened the tomb. Privately, I'm glad. Superstitious women spent entirely too much time praying there and leaving offerings, which is against our faith, but what can one do?"

BY THEN, the caravan men were making their salaam, and spreading a rug for the distinguished guest.

"Tragic," Yar Ali went on, as he took his syrupy-sweet tea. "Two worshippers killed by falling wreckage."

"Sad," Corbin agreed, watching the khan's keen eyes shift from one pack to the next, and scrutinize the drivers.

The khan chuckled. "I fancy you're still wondering why I'm here? I didn't have the heart to give you hell for sneaking off limits, though I had considered it. Anyway—some of my fanatic people sabotaged the phone line from

Khanabad, but I noticed the break, had it fixed, and then tapped in. Meanwhile, a courier had brought me dispatches, which is why I set out." He leaned forward to whisper, dramatically, "Kabul unofficially acknowledges that your unofficially being accused to being British agitator was—a *canard*. I set out to overtake you at Khanabad, since the wire was out, and then—well, Ghulam Khan is still perjuring himself—"

"He didn't really know my plan, Your Excellency."

"Say no more about it! and not a word about that idiotic report. Red faces embarrass our officials."

The khan got up. His bugler sounded the signal to mount.

"What orders shall I phone to Khanabad, for Mr. Weaver?" the khan said.

"Why not let well enough alone? He'll be meeting me in Shah-i-Ab."

Corbin, watching the khan mount up and ride away with all but four soldiers he had detached from his escort to go on with the survey party, felt weak, sick, and uncertain. Whether left there to find a missing woman or a rug, the four soldiers made it bad for Norma and Peggy.

As the caravan came within spitting distance of the divide, Corbin told himself that Yar Ali Khan could not possibly acknowledge the fact of Peggy's desertion until she was back in his hands. Harem servants would gossip. The governor would lose face. No matter how eager he should be to get rid of her, honor demanded that he punish the desertion. Being modern enough for the hardshell mullahs to hate him, he could not afford to give them a chance to undermine him by saying that he had no more honor than an infidel.

Now that Corbin was in a strange territory, it was time to resume his traversing, riding ahead of the pack train until, toward the day's end, he'd retrace his course to camp. This offered a chance of going back to the tunnel to tell the women that they could follow, well behind the pack train.

If the khan's search finally tapered off for lack of new leads, the two could complete the circle and get back on the motor road to Kabul. Bribery in Khanabad, and a freight truck bound south—it was not impossible, provided they hid by day and plodded by night, swinging wide of villages.

For three days Corbin carried on, each afternoon riding back to take food to Norma and Peggy, and to tell them of the road ahead, of the blind forks and of the hazards he had noted by day. At the end of this time, he came to another village, where he left one set of drivers, and picked up new ones, as well as fresh pack animals. And, though he did not realize it at the time, his going back had an important outcome.

HE HAD quit camp early, and he had ridden fast. Norma and Peggy were waiting. They seemed ready to drop, despite the day's rest. "Get a good look ahead," he told them, "we'll soon come out into the open valley. Look at the sun on those ridges, they're not hemmed in. The grades are tapering off."

"You make it sound so easy, Jeff." Norma said.

He looked at her and at the fugitive wife. "I wish I could walk it for you."

Peggy smiled, wearily. "All you can do is keep your neck on the block. Most of the time, I've been wishing I'd never started!"

"But you did start, so buck up, you can't go back. Look ahead, you can see Russia and the Amu Darya."

He pointed, and though his vision couldn't reach as far as he had said, he leaned forward, feigning eagerness. He unslung his binoculars to build up the act.

"Wonder if I can see—sure, there's a hammer and sickle flag," he announced, and grinned to make sure they'd not take him too seriously.

"Hmmm . . ."

His face tightened. Norma exclaimed, "What is it?"

"Gun barrels reflecting light. Men

shifting under cover. Something salty, somewhere, their moves just don't fit."

"Think it's an ambush for your pack train?"

"Could be."

"You have four soldiers."

"If something starts before I get back, they'll have no reason for holding their ground."

"Good Lord, Jeff, then stay here!"

He shook his head. "It's not the loss of pack animals, it's the principle of the thing, I can't have it look as if I ran out."

Norma caught the near rein. "What'll we do, if—if—"

"Wait till something happens to me. Hike and bribe and buy, you'll make it. How you fixed for cash?"

She dug into her blouse, and said "Lots."

Corbin booted his horse. On galloping out of the first dip, and to the rise which gave him a view to his party, he pulled up, and would have fired a warning shot, but for the chance that the signal would be misunderstood and draw him a volley in return. He pressed on, and into the dusk of the lower stretches.

DESPITE the lack of an interpreter, Corbin did well enough in giving directions to Habib, the corporal in charge of the escort, in a blend of English and Uzbek, enriched with Hindu, Persian, Pukhtu, and profanity. Having prepared his remarks on the gallop, he delivered them as he slid from the saddle.

It looked bad, the bearded noncom agreed. And, "*Huzoor*, you are damn well right, bellying around in the rocks is not game for this time in the day. Making camp is right pretty soon."

As they picked sheltered spots for the animals and cover for defense, Corbin said, "Your idea of going up the slope and getting behind them to blast their pants off is a nice idea, only they may be looking for somebody else. We're not here to start a war."

When his preparations for safety were

done, Corbin continued, "Corporal Habib, you and I go now to find out what is ahead."

Without waiting for an answer, he flipped his Springfield to imitate the way of mountain men when they use their muskets as walking sticks. He didn't hear any hobnailed boots crunch behind him. He was certain the men were not frightened. Rather, judging from the twitch between his shoulders, eyes were boring into him as soldiers and drivers appraised him before accepting the leadership he had offered.

He was sweating plenty, which he didn't want to do; and he couldn't spit, much as he wanted to. Everything was wrong.

Once at the crest of the next rise, he'd be in full view of the ambush. What he knew of taking cover would pass army standards, but this was a land of bush-whacking experts who could hide with no cover at all, and who could spot anything which moved. That he'd been able to see them in the first place was only because of their contemptuous carelessness and self-assurance.

Corbin felt very much alone. "Pure bull about whistling your way past a graveyard. When you're scared, you can't whistle," he said to himself. He began to sing,

*"Johnny came home the night before,
He saw a hat upon the rack*

Where no hat ought to be-e-e-e-e!

*My own wife, my dear wife, my dar-
ling wife says he,*

*Whose hat is on the rack where my
hat ought to be?*

*Oh, you poor fool, you silly fool, you
drunken fool, says she,*

*It's nobody's hat but a sugar bowl,
my grandmother gave to me!"*

He had no use for Johnny's rejoinder to his spouse's logic. Hobnails crunched. The corporal was running, gesturing. Corbin stopped.

"Go slow, plenty slow. Sing more. Those fellows go up to cover us."

Corbin, following the final gesture, saw three soldiers worming their way up

the rocky shoulder. He understood without further words, and said, "Shabash! Pretty good, Habib."

"Give me glasses."

"OK, *dahbashi!*"

"You sing more, making noise, then those fellows don't hear us."

The corporal slung the strap about his neck, and headed up the slope. Corbin, having sung himself into spearheading the attack, had to live up to his bluff, so he tramped on.

"Oh, I've sailed the ocean o'er,

I've been from shore to shore,

*But a sugar bowl with a hat band on
it*

I never did see before!"

NEARING the crest, he threw himself flat, and crawled. He held his karakul cap vertically, as it would be on the head of a man riding. When he was sure that he had attracted attention, he dropped the hat, backed off a way, and put on his headgear. This time he hugged the rocky wall until he had exposed himself, clearly, but only for a second at whose end he stepped behind a protecting buttress.

While making this move, he waved as though to men behind him.

Again, the exposure was only moderate, yet tempting. A bullet shattered against the rock, spattering his cheek with jacket fragments. The sharp whack of cordite came on the heels of the impact. Corbin pitched sidewise, in full view until he hit the trail, and the crest protected him. A slug popped the air.

The drivers, well back, yelled and beat their beasts. Hooves clattered. The simulated panic almost convinced Corbin. Ahead of him were shouts. The ambushing party seemed to consider that the show was over, with one down and the rest in flight.

Creeping back to the crest, Corbin peeped from cover. Eight or ten men had popped into view. They were afoot, not caring to waste time getting the horses which they must have concealed near their lurking spot. From protect-

ing shadow, Corbin leveled his rifle. Musketry blazed from the steep slope above him. Corporal Habib's men were at work.

Two of the advancing bandits dropped and rolled like rag bags. Another made a dive over the side. Dirt kicked up from the trail. The scream of ricochets reached high above the yelps and grunts of the ambushed ambuscaders.

Corbin drilled the leading man, who was less than two hundred yards away, which turned the rush into a panic retreat. By the time Habib and his men came sliding, bounding, bouncing down from their vantage point, the enemy had fled beyond pursuit. To make sure of the three who kicked and twitched in the trail, the khan's soldiers plied their bayonets.

Then, by the dimming light, Corbin saw that the man he had dropped was big, blond, and square-headed. He could have modeled for either a Russian or a German in any of the wartime illustrated magazines. Another was a blond, two Mongol-faced Uzbeks. All wore felt boots, padded jackets, and turbans.

Then, after taking weapons and trinkets and cash, he had his men roll the bandits over the side. Already, vultures wheeled black against the ruddy sky.

Corbin and his escort went back to make camp, and pick lookout posts before dark. In the midst of the preparations, a rider coming from the direction of Kara Robot hove into view. Two soldiers leveled their rifles. Corbin, after peering into the dusk for a moment, hailed the man. It was Paul Weaver, who should for the past several days have been taking it easy in Khanabad.

WEAVER explained, "I got the news at Khanabad about their deciding you weren't a successor to Lawrence of Arabia—anyway, the radiator developed a lot of bad leaks and has to be practically rebuilt. So coming back gives me a chance to take a hand instead of loafing."

"Lucky you didn't arrive after dark,

the troops are trigger-happy!" Corbin told him about the ambush, though without any reference to Norma and Peggy. Since only he himself had been involved, he preferred to say nothing about the women, so that if there were a showdown with Yar Ali Khan, Weaver would in no wise be an accomplice. Finally, Corbin didn't want to hear any discussion of the risk, or of ways and means of minimizing it. The situation was bad enough without futile talking.

"Didn't meet Yar Ali Khan heading back toward Kara Robot?"

Weaver shook his head. "Or I'd still be having tea! The man has a mania for bumping his gums whenever there's an engineer about. Flattering, only it keeps me on edge, trying not to pull some quip that'd ruffle Afghan etiquette."

Against Corbin's better judgment, the corporal had built a very small fire in a sheltered angle. By its embers, he appraised Weaver's horse, a bay with black points, long-legged, broad-chested, and durable.

"Doesn't show much sign of the beating he must've taken. Who's he belong to?"

"Bought him, where the heck'd you rent a horse like this?"

Corbin watched the old caravan man rub the beast down with a bit of felt. "Bet when Yar Ali Khan hears about that brush with the Russkis, he'll give me a horse, and for a good measure stake me to a saddle-drummer and a troop of lancers. Not having seen me crawling with my chin against the trail!"

"You'd better get yourself measured for a uniform." Weaver's face twisted quizzically. Then he stretched and grimaced. "I'm dead on my feet, I'm picking me a nice soft rock. What watch do I stand?"

"Pound your ear, pal, the guard's been detailed."

Corbin, after watching Weaver "spread his carpet," shoveled dirt on the embers. He sniffed the air. There was no scent of opium. So, with no poppy-heads

in the party, there would be less chance of surprise. Nevertheless, he was uneasy. Whether these were bandits operating for profit or Russian agents, they might be back.

When they set out in the morning, Corbin soon read from hoof and footprints along the trail that the survivors of the ambush had headed north at a gallop. Nevertheless, he sent one of the soldiers back to Kara Robot with a report to be phoned to Yar Ali Khan at Faizabad.

AROUND midafternoon, Corbin contrived to backtrail with rations for Norma and Peggy, and without any chance, as he saw it, of having made his purpose conspicuous. However, when they made camp after having mapped eleven miles of new country, Weaver approached and asked, "What's the idea of holding out on me about those two women you're feeding?"

"I didn't imagine you'd be interested."

"It happens I am."

"How come?"

"One of them is Norma Turner, and I have a damn good idea who the other one is!"

"What sharp eyes you have, grand-ma!"

Weaver grinned and tapped his binoculars. "After what happened yesterday, it's my business to see things. Pretty dangerous, isn't it?"

Corbin let out a long breath. "Sure it is, Paul. I held out because the less you know, the better, in case of a showdown. He knows you went to Khanabad alone. That, and your being really amazed by a blowoff, would keep you in the clear, leaving me to face the rap. Better for the survey than if it seemed we'd been in cahoots."

After giving Weaver the details of his meeting with Norma and her companion, he concluded, "So what could I do? Whatever I did, I'd be dead wrong."

"Nothing," Weaver admitted grudgingly. "But I've been thinking ever since you went back." He pointed to the

height from which he had spied the meeting of Corbin and what seemed to be nomad women. "I believe I have something."

"Let's hear it."

"There's a ravine down the valley," Weaver said. "With cave temples. Buddhist ruins. Like those in Bamian, only smaller. That'd be a safe hiding place, which is what's needed, now that you've sent word to Yar Ali Khan about being attacked. Two women can't keep it up indefinitely, trailing after us without being noticed. Once we've made the traverse around Duang and are ready to head back for Kabul, we can pick them up and we'll have a much better chance of taking care of them."

"Get a good look at those ruins?"

Weaver produced his sketch book. "When I saw the steam, I remembered the old fellow, back at Kara Robot, who had spoken of hot springs. So I branched off, while you were working the main fork."

Corbin pondered. "With the men on the alert, I'd have the devil's own time, making those rides back to the last night's camp. Let's have a look. Can you make it by dark, or do you want to wait for moonrise?"

"It's an easy trail, and no use waiting."

That night, Corbin told the corporal that he and Weaver were riding out to patrol. Whatever the noncom thought about such security precaution, he made no comment.

When they came to the hiding place of the synthetic gypsies, Corbin said, "This time, you ride. But hang on tight, till we find out whether these brutes will carry double."

"Double or nothing," Norma said, as he gave her a hand and a stirrup. "We've played nothing else!"

Weaver led the way down a slope so steep that the horses had to brace their legs and slide. Stones clattered into the ravine and splashed into the stream. Belly-deep, the animals picked their way along the rocky bottom. They slipped

and they splashed, though without losing their footing.

Then the stream widened, and they were able to ride along the further bank until, several miles beyond camp, he came to a tributary emerging from a slash in a granite cliff. "Not as bad as it looks," he said, and led into the blackness of a cleft so narrow that it shut out all but a thin stripe of stars.

BEFORE long, the air became warmer. It had a sulphurous odor. "Steam heated," Peggy Layne cried, in a voice that made Corbin say to Norma, "Couple more night marches, and she'd be blowing her top, she sounds about all gone."

"She is. Oh, Lord! If I'd known—Jeff, if I ever get through this—"

"Let's make the good resolutions in Kabul," he told her. "The whole business is crazy. If some idiot hadn't circulated a rumor that I was a British agitator, we'd have headed for Duang right away, instead of stalling in Faizabad. You wouldn't have met me at Kara Robot or anywhere else. You'd been on your own, right from the start."

For some moments she said nothing, then, "I guess I must be a fool for luck."

Though Corbin let it go at that, he was not quite able to swallow the notion that even a person as obsessed as Norma could be reckless enough to assume that he'd be in Faizabad until a synthetic gypsy could arrange for Peggy to leave the governor's palace. He might never learn who was responsible for the gossip in Kabul, but it wouldn't be for lack of trying. Someone, he was convinced, had designedly dropped hints to egg Norma into her mad venture, and thus put the survey party and American technicians generally into evil repute which no amount of diplomacy could wipe out.

The Russian consulate, he reasoned, might have got in some pointed digs.

Moonrise and the widening of the cleft took Corbin's thoughts back to his immediate problem. On either side of the stream was a band of meadow. Steam

billowed from distant hot springs. Before long, it became clear that the valley dropped eastward, and that the cleft through which he had passed was the result of a relatively recent earthquake.

Three great niches had been cut, centuries ago, into the vertical cliff. Standing in bold relief were gigantic figures whose faces and hands still bore traces of gilding. Coming nearer, he saw cave-temples, with ornately sculptured entrances flanked by small pagodas.

Despite the warmth, Norma tightened her hold about him. "They don't want us here," she whispered. "They've been standing guard for centuries."

"You'll find tall gods better company than the mountaineers," Corbin told her, yet he could not lightly dispose of the sculptured Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* and *asuras* who regarded him from their niches.

Weaver pulled up and helped Peggy dismount. "Nothing to do but clear out the rubbish and you'll have a snug spot. Jeff, you get a fire going while I bring in the rations."

EARTHQUAKES had knocked stucco from the walls and cracked the stone beneath. Images of gods and demons had tumbled from their niches. A tall grating, carved of teak, stood at one side of the Buddha's lotus seat. The companion piece had toppled forward because of the buckling of paving slabs. Rags, scraps of sheepskin and felt rugs, a disjointed pack saddle, faggots, and shards of pottery added to the litter over which the Buddha looked. He ignored the litter in his contemplation of the Absolute.

Corbin saw all this by the feeble glow of his flashlight. "Fuel, anyway," he said, as they pulled pieces of wood from the tangle.

Bats, disturbed by the intrusion, flitted out of dark corners, cheeping and twittering. Weaver, coming in with the saddle bags and a felt mat, dumped his burden and set to work kindling a fire and brewing tea.

Peggy drew a deep breath. "And no cover charge!" she said, smiling wanly. "I'd say AUM MANI PADME HUM a thousand times a day, if I could be sure the Buddha could stand the foreign accent!"

But she didn't quite fool Corbin. Her lashes twitched, and so did her cheeks. Peggy's eyes, weighted with mortal weariness, did not respond to her effort at appreciating warmth and shelter. Corbin, who couldn't endure a very hot drink, watched Peggy and Norma as he swirled his pannikin to cool his tea.

The *devas* and *asuras* smiled mysteriously from the wall; their features suggested that they had been carved and painted by Graeco-Buddhist artists, perhaps twenty centuries ago. Their eyes seemed to follow Corbin as he hitched over to a more comfortable chunk of masonry. It was time for planning, if only to reassure the fugitives, but the warmth of the cave-shrine made him languid.

"Giddy from relief," Corbin whispered to Weaver, and indicated Peggy, whose fatigue-drawn face had relaxed.

Weaver nodded. "More tea?"

"This is still too hot, I'm the real coffee-cooler!"

Weaver knocked off another chunk of sugar, neither brown nor white, but streaked like rock salt. "Sweeten 'er up, I short-changed you the first deal."

Corbin stirred the tea with his hunting knife, then lit another cigarette. When he offered Norma a smoke, she ignored him till he touched her hand. Her gaiety had subsided. There was an odd expression in her eyes. Her face had become vacant and so had Peggy's.

"It's awfully dark," she mumbled. "I can't see . . . anything."

The embers flared up. Her pupils, instead of being dilated, had contracted strangely. As though in a trance she let him put a lighted cigarette between her lips.

Corbin tasted his sticky-sweet tea. It had an odd flavor. He blamed it on dust and incense ashes stirred up by their ar-

rival and on the fumes from the distant hot-springs. Peggy was swaying, and ready to topple. He took another taste.

That was the payoff. "What the hell's the idea of opium in the tea?" he demanded.

Weaver grinned, though his eyes sharpened. "They're all done in. It's good for them, within reason."

Corbin said, "I'm far from pooped out—*say!*" He dropped his pannikin, and pointed to Weaver's saddlebag, which was not as empty as it should have been. "What're you doing with my map case? You could have brought a lot more grub!"

TOO LATE, Corbin knew that he should have acted instead of talking. Weaver, without bothering to sit up straight, had drawn an automatic pistol from beneath his sheepskin jacket.

"Take it easy, Jeff. You'll find out soon enough." He sighed, almost regretfully. "Opium would've been friendlier, but I didn't have a chance. Sit down, I'm expecting some people."

With his free hand, he reached for more wood, lest darkness whittle down his advantage. Corbin's only weapon was the Springfield in the saddle boot.

"People? Russians, I suppose." Corbin said.

"Hell, no! That's what they'll think in Kabul when the American survey party disappears with the maps of Afghanistan mineral resources. Also the Khan's wife. Don't blame Norma for not telling you I helped her. She was too grateful to tell you. By that time we'll have America at Russia's throat and Afghanistan furious at both. Norma and Peggy are American citizens but the Afghans are also beginning to be a little worried about Peggy.

"In the meantime we sit back and wait 'til you've destroyed each other. An incident here—an incident there. Disagreement over Central Europe, in the United Nations. We do all right. And now we have the maps."

"We? Nazis, you mean?" Corbin said.

"That's right. We had our agents in Afghanistan as elsewhere. Some went under cover, some fled and turned out-law."

Corbin snorted. "Had a neat ambush to mow us down."

"You spoiled that, you know," Weaver said.

"It never occurred to me, it never occurred to me, when I noticed your horse wasn't worn out, that you were one of that party!"

Weaver nodded contentedly. "We'd hardly have a second chance, with you on the alert, and sending back for more soldiers."

Outside, the hobbled horses jingled their curb chains. The motion of the moonpatch which came in through the entrance told him how slowly time could march. Stalling, Corbin said, "It was you I socked, near Imam Abbas' tomb, back in Faizabad, and your buddy was a phony Russian who made just enough bird-calls to be nailed and get the day-lights whaled out of him. That would make the Afghans sore at Russia, too. You were going to steal the shrine carpet but you left that for your pals to do?"

"The theft gets blamed either on Russians or Americans," Weaver said smugly, "and in the meantime we have the carpet. We've been great collectors, all over the world."

Corbin heard a low rumbling. The Weaver he believed he saw was sitting fixedly before him, pistol hand resting on his knee. And now Weaver snored the grandfather of all snores, like the roll of saddle drums when a khan of the old school visited a city.

Then for an instant there were two Weavers, neither of them snoring. One scrambled in panic. The other remained squatting, only to vanish a split second later.

The floor twitched like the skin of a fly-tormented horse. Flagstones buckled from compression against each other. An impact knocked Corbin on his side when, earthquake or not, he would have lunged to floor Weaver.

A gilded image toppled from its niche to crash to the floor. Wood groaned and creaked. Rocks detached from the rim of the valley crashed to the bottom, shaking the earth. Others splashed into the stream.

Where Weaver had taken previous quakes in his stride, the fear of being buried in a cave temple prodded him to panic. He bolted for the left of the altar, instead of toward the entrance near which the life-sized image of a Buddhist saint had fallen. Corbin tried to tackle him, for the man had forgotten that he still clutched a gun. Weaver wheeled to correct his mistake. Corbin turned to hurdle the women who huddled on the felt mat. They were still drugged beyond feeling. He tripped on one and lurched across the other. Before he could recover, or Weaver gain the vaulted entrance, the remaining teak grille was torn loose from its support. Dust, billowing dust, for a moment obscured the result.

A pistol bounced into the rubbish between Corbin and the man flattened by the weight of teak, a wood so dense it will barely float. Still driven by impulse, Corbin snatched the weapon. He wanted to shoot it out; and yet he was sickened by the thought of a man pinched in half by the falling panel.

THE RUMBLING swelled again. A second jerk made the stones shift under his knees. The Buddha teetered, then settled back to contemplate the Thousand Petaled Lotus. Smoke filled the shrine, for falling rock had knocked embers into the rubbish. Instead of dragging the drugged women into the open, Corbin stamped out the smoldering patches. Bit by bit, he realized that he was trembling as violently as the mountains had, and that he was drenched with sweat. Only a fixed notion had kept him from bolting for the open, ignoring the risk of being crushed by the thousand foot drop of dislodged rocks.

Then Corbin learned that Weaver had not been flattened, or shorn in half at

the hips. The man was conscious, pinned to the floor, rather than crushed. He made choking sounds, as though vomiting were necessary yet impossible. His hand clawed the flagstones.

Norma mumbled and got to her knees, but slumped again. She had almost shaped words. Peggy moaned and stirred. Outside, a curb chain tinkled. The horses, far from breaking their hobbles and stampeding, were cropping the thick grass.

Corbin said, "Never mind your gun, I'm keeping it."

Weaver groaned and began to struggle. While there was hardly enough light for Corbin to see how the trap had been shaped by accident, working more cunningly than any engineer, he was certain that he could lever the deadfall sufficiently to liberate Weaver.

Corbin went out to the horses. He came back with his rifle. He was still confused, so that after staring at the Springfield, he set it carefully against the wall. He caught Norma under the arms, but after lifting her to her feet, he decided to carry, rather than drag her. By the time he got to the entrance, he was engaged in a foggy debate with himself as to whether it'd be possible to carry two doped women by lashing them to a horse.

He thoroughly hated the khan's wife for being there, for merely existing. He didn't know how to feel about Norma, which redoubled his confusion. Blood trickled down his cheek. Blood ran into his left eye. His hand came away wet. The lump on his head was at least the size of an egg.

Norma was no longer so hopelessly limp. "What happened? Where's Peggy? Put me down . . . I can walk . . ." she said dazedly.

He stumbled back with Norma. The maps were the most important. Save them first.

"What are you going to do?" Weaver asked.

Corbin carefully seated Norma against the wall, then answered, "Leave you

here. Your buddies will take care of you."

Weaver began to struggle. "But they may not show up! Pry this timber off my leg. I'll starve."

"This is your party," Corbin retorted. "You were buried by an earthquake, and that's the end of the story."

THE darkness outside had thinned. There was a taste of dawn in the air. Vapor from the hot springs billowed down the valley. Corbin, hearing one of the horses whinny, went to the entrance. Half a dozen riders loomed up, thick blobs in the mist. One must have noted him, for he called, "Weaver! How is it?"

Before Corbin could reply, Weaver had yelled, "Watch out! He's got a gun!"

The horsemen wheeled. Corbin's pistol shot was wasted. Fog swallowed the enemy. After a few minutes of consultation, the one who spoke English shouted from cover, "You can't get out. What is happening to Weaver?"

Corbin answered. "Get away from here, or I put a bullet through his head. If you try to stop me when I come out, he gets the first shot."

While waiting for the invisible council to come to a decision, Corbin said to Weaver, "Tell them I am not fooling."

Weaver explained everything, with emphasis on the earthquake which had trapped him. He was eager to convince his pals that he had not bungled. But they said, "We cannot let you force a safeguard, Weaver. Your prisoners must come out."

"They're not my prisoners!" Weaver screamed. "I'm his prisoner, and he won't go out!"

"Then we'll come in."

"He'll shoot me, he means it! He's afraid you'll finish him and the women. Tell him they'll not be hurt, he'll listen to reason." Weaver called.

Corbin shouted, "Come in and get me!" And since dawn had been sneaking up, he could distinguish one of the cordon. He leveled his rifle and squeezed a shot. Though there was a yell, the scream

of the bullet told him he'd nicked the rock with which the blurred figure had blended.

"I sent a man to Yar Ali Khan for soldiers," Corbin told them. "Do you want to wait, or come in now?"

While the spokesman wasn't alarmed, his voice betrayed concern. After muttered debate, he made an offer. "Come out with the maps. You may take your horse and go your way. We won't hurt you."

"You think I'm a halfwit?"

"Otherwise we get brush and dry grass and smoke you out!"

They had only to send a man to the brink of the cliff to drop bundles of blazing brush and grass in front of the entrance. The way the fog drew into the cave temple indicated that smoke could very quickly stifle the besieged.

Corbin asked, "How about the women? How about Yar Ali Khan's wife?"

Before the spokesman could reply, Peggy demanded, "Jeff, what's all this? Who's asking for me? What's happened?" Terror came into her voice as, awakening from the drug, she remembered where she was. "Who's asking for me? Has he . . . have they . . ."

Norma, who apparently had heard a good deal without speaking, tried to quiet Peggy. "Let Jeff alone, please! It's all right! Pull yourself together, darling."

"How about Yar Ali Khan's wife?" Corbin repeated.

"You're welcome to both, and all the better for us."

"Let me talk it over," Corbin proposed.

Ignoring Peggy, and Norma who tried to help the befuddled girl assemble her wits, he prodded Weaver with the revolver. "This is your party, Paul. You go out there in my place."

Weaver's voice was shaking. "No!"

"I'll get you loose." Corbin said, "They promised they wouldn't hurt me when I came out." He raised his voice. "Just a minute, out there!"

Corbin took the teak beam and heaved

until red spots danced before his eyes. "Give him a hand, Norma!" he gasped.

WITH a grimace of disgust, she helped Weaver crawl out. Then she wiped her hands on her grimy gown. Weaver flexed and massaged his cramped leg. His face was beaded with sweat. Corbin dusted off his own karakul cap, and handed it to him, along with the map case. He held the revolver against Weaver's back. "Go ahead."

Weaver limped hesitantly to the entrance.

Norma knelt by the coals to brew some strong tea for Peggy.

Peggy, however, jumped to her feet still half-submerged in the fog into which she had relapsed after her semi-lucid interval. She was on Weaver's heels as Corbin grabbed for her.

"Jeff," she cried, and caught Weaver's arm. "Don't go! Don't leave us!"

"Peggy!" Corbin yelled.

But she didn't hear him. Half a dozen rifles blazed as Weaver stepped from gloom into the half-light. He spun and crumpled. Peggy, right on his heels, lurched against the jamb and fell across Weaver. The map case slid on the wet grass. The echo from the opposite wall had hardly lashed back at Corbin when the enemy leaped from cover along the river bank. "We're coming, Weaver!" they yelled triumphantly.

Corbin's rifle showed them their mistake. They had not even taken time to reload. Two dropped. The others rolled over the bank for cover. A volley raked the temple entrance.

In a few minutes, sunrise thinned the mist, until the further wall was clear. Corbin said, "Too late for them to try to smoke us out. I'll pick them off before they can get to the top of the cliff. They either have to rush us, or else pull out before Yar Ali Khan sends men to look for us, which'll be soon."

Moments passed. Horses, sheltered by the bank, splashed and floundered in the river. Corbin, however, took nothing for granted. As he lay there, alert for the

sniper who might be waiting for him to show himself, Norma wormed herself to his side.

"Is Peggy . . . are they . . ."

"We'll be able to go out in a minute. Doesn't look as if either of them have any life."

She snuggled against him and sobbed without restraint. Far up the valley, Corbin heard the pounding of hooves. "Can't be too sure, honey," he whispered. "Got to make sure first."

"Oh, if I'd only watched Peggy!"

"I tried to grab her. Now listen. Keep your head down and lift my hat just a bit and to the right. But not till I tell you."

He slid to a new position and waited for the bait to draw fire.

She raised the hat. No one fired. Corbin exposed himself long enough to be tempting yet narrowly enough not to run too great a risk. "They're really gone," he said, and proved it by stepping into the full sunlight.

Wheeling vultures cast shadows at his feet.

He examined the bodies. Weaver, who had been hit in three places, was lifeless. Peggy Layne, although unconscious and bleeding at the shoulder, was otherwise unharmed.

A MOMENT later he heard the sound of riders approaching from the saber slash at the valley head. He knew that scavengers had guided them.

"Yar Ali Khan! The Governor himself. Best to play it this way," he said to Norma, "For all we know she's a dead gypsy girl. We'll get her out after I get rid of Yar Ali Khan and his men."

"What'll I do?" Norma gasped.

"Stand back, but don't hide. I'll talk first."

He waited beside the bodies until the khan pulled up and dismounted.

Corbin drew a deep breath. "Poor Weaver. I never realized he was so reckless. I told him—told him there was no use trying to take those bandits by surprise. But he almost succeeded. They

had two prisoners, two gypsy women. Both made a break when he attacked. Poor devil, he never knew what struck him."

The khan raised his hand in a military salute. "A fool to risk his life for two nomads but still—a very brave man." Yar Ali looked casually at Peggy, and then at Norma, who stood rigid as any of the images in the temple. He spoke to his troopers, and then said to Corbin, "At the next village, I'll have them make a coffin, according to your customs, for your friend. You'll probably want to go with the remains to Kabul. Then come back. Winter is still far enough away for you to finish your traverse in the lowlands around Duang."

Corbin shook his head. "Bury him in the mountains. I'd like to see my work finished and my report delivered. Though I should go as far as Khanabad for more supplies."

"Just right," Yar Ali agreed. "Precisely what I wanted, though I hesitated out of respect to your sentiments. Thank you, Mr. Corbin, and good wishes. I will send men here to take your orders."

Without even a glance at Peggy

Layne's limp body, Yar Ali rode away.

Norma busied herself binding up Peggy's wound. "Jeff—do you think—could it be he didn't recognize his own—one of his own wives?"

"I'd not advise asking him. An earthquake in Faizabad buried two women when a saint's tomb collapsed, and as far as the public is concerned, that could account for the missing wife. The Khan's men had never looked her in the face until this morning. For all we'll ever know, he may be satisfied to have his American romance settled this way, before she embarrassed him publicly."

Norma shuddered. "But his face didn't change for a second, he wasn't even interested. He's absolutely inhuman!"

"No, just raised different!" Corbin caught her by the shoulders as she rose from Peggy's side. "Sometimes I wish I could be that way about you! But I can't, so kiss me now, before they come to help with the luggage. Once you two are in Khanabad, it'll be easy to get to Kabul. And Peggy has her passport under her maiden name. She can leave right away. You stay there until we're ready to leave Afghanistan—together."



WHAT'S HIS NAME?

Many famous athletes have nicknames by which the sporting public knows them best. Can you name the owners of the following nicknames? Answers on page 93.

- | | | | |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. King of Swat | 6. Galloping Ghost | 11. The Strong Boy | 16. Grand Old Man |
| 2. The Iron Man | 7. Manassa Mauler | 12. The Georgia Peach | 17. Old 98 |
| 3. Two-ton Tony | 8. Toy Bulldog | 13. Slinging Sammy | 18. Rapid Robert |
| 4. Slapsie Maxie | 9. Gentleman Jim | 14. Murderers' Row | 19. Poosh 'em Up |
| 5. Da Preem | 10. The Gorgeous Greek | 15. Leo the Lip | 20. Cinderella Man |

DEATH DRAWS A BOW

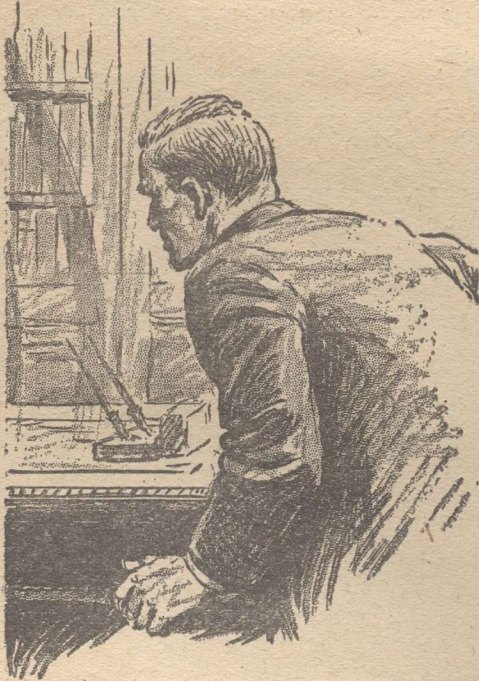
By **WILBUR S. PEACOCK**



THIRTY-ONE years is too long for a guy to be a cop. Your hair gets grey and your nerves tighten up like string on a damp day, and the men you work with, even those about your age, begin to call you Pop.

More than half my life I've spent on the force and in general it's a pretty routine job. Oh, I've gotten to be a Lieutenant, I don't pound beats any more, but mostly it's just a question of investigating and checking on details. Only sometimes the routine matters turn out to have complications, like the case at Doc Miller's.

I was over at the Highway Department that afternoon, asking some questions about an accident at a culvert washout at Pearl and Langdon roads. Not that my department has anything to do with the streets; it's just that things overlap sometimes, and after all, we did have a traffic accident to go into our records. So that's where I was when the call came in from Headquarters.



Doc Miller watched out of dead eyes. A bubble of air broke in his throat and blood trickled out of his lips

"Doc Miller called in a couple of minutes ago," the sergeant told me. "Says he got a threatening letter and wants protection. The Captain told me to tell you to go on out and have a look. Find out what's cooking and then call back."

This was strictly routine. More cranks write letters to prominent people than you'd ever guess, and we've got to check on all of them. I'd done it before, and I'd do it again, so I figured I was cut in for a boring evening.

Not that this Doc Miller didn't deserve receiving such a letter. He was really a grade-A stinker, if ever I saw one, and I've seen plenty. Big and fat, with jowls that flopped when he talked. He'd made a killing during the war. After the war, he'd been investigated by the government because claims had come through about the rotten stuff he'd palmed off through his war contracts. But he'd gone free, nothing proved.

So anyway, I drove out to his place and honked the horn at the gate. He had a big place, the old Vandermeer estate which he bought and fixed up. It was right on the edge of town, at the city limits. I could see the white house, big enough for a hotel, and there were trees and a lot of gardens and landscaping around.

Well, the gatekeeper came up to the gate and looked at me suspiciously and finally let me in, after I'd shown my badge. He was a wizened-up little guy, white hair sprouting like fuzz on his head. Not that he was so old, it was just that his hair made him look that way.

I drove on up to the house and parked beside a bunch of other cars. I could hear voices out to one side and took a look before going in to see Miller. There were a bunch of people around the swimming pool, some in bathing suits and some dressed. A hell of a good-looking blonde was on the diving board, and I recognized her for Miller's stepdaughter. She was laughing, and a Latin-looking guy was bouncing on the board, trying to make her fall into the water.

I went up and knocked on the front

door. A butler answered and took my hat and then led me to the library where Miller was sitting at a desk.

"I'm Lieutenant Oliver," I said to him. "I came out about the threatening letter."

HE LOOKED like a hog in clothes, so help me. His eyes were little and his face was greasy, and his thin hair had been slicked into a cap over his head. But he was cordial enough; and he handed me a sheet of paper and indicated a chair where I could sit and look at it.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," he said, and there was a thin edge of worry in his voice. "Ordinarily, I don't pay much attention to notes like this one, but it has a ring of authenticity I don't like."

"Yeah, sure, Mr. Miller," I said, and took the letter.

Mr. Miller, it read, this is not a crank letter. It is simply a statement that you will die sometime today, unless you are willing to buy your life for fifty thousand dollars. That was all.

I turned the sheet over carefully in my hand, not leaving any extra fingerprints. This was the McCoy, all right; I'd seen ones similar to it before. Nuts and crackpots usually rave about injustices or the like before making their threats. This was as businesslike as a threat could be.

"Where'd it come from?" I asked.

"The mail," Miller answered. "It was with other letters this morning."

"Where's the envelope?"

"Here." He pushed an envelope forward with a letter opener like an icepick.

The postmark meant nothing, it was so blurred. But we've got a laboratory which works miracles, so I put the envelope and threat into a large envelope from the desk and then put everything into my pocket.

"Any ideas?" I asked.

Doc Miller shook his head. "No," he admitted, "not a one. I've got enemies I suppose. Most big men have. But I don't think any of them would be this

melodramatic — business rivals and such."

I could hear the voices out at the pool, and I jerked my thumb toward the side window. "How about them? All of them clean?"

Miller nodded, and mopped at his greasy face with a silk handkerchief. "I know most of them," he said. "Betty's having them out for the weekend. You'll have to look farther than this house for whoever wrote that note."

I lit a cigarette and reached for the desk phone. When the department answered, I had the call put through to the Captain. "This is Oliver," I said. "I'm at Miller's. The note looks like the real thing. Miller hasn't any ideas." I listened and then went on. "It came through the mail, and that makes it the FBI's baby. Yeah, I'll stick around. Okay!"

I cradled the receiver. "I'm to stay with you until the Feds decide what to do," I explained. "Mailing the letter brings it under the jurisdiction of the FBI. Somebody will be along shortly to pick up the letter for the lab men."

"Good!" Miller smiled, fat creasing in his face. "What shall I do, stay here, or lock myself in a room, or what?"

"Might as well circulate," I said. "You're a lot safer in a crowd than by yourself where anybody can get at you. Anyway, I'd like to take a look around."

"All right!" Doc Miller heaved to his feet and waddled toward the door.

I followed him, taking in the layout. We'd been in the library, and its walls were paneled in dark polished wood, the books like patches of bright and faded colors on the panels' surfaces. There was a fireplace which looked as though it would burn real logs, and since the library was at the corner of the house, two great windows were on each of two walls.

We went down the hall, which was light and airy, furniture scattered so haphazardly the effect had to be planned, and out onto the terrace by a side door.

THE AFTERNOON sunlight was fading, shadows thickening, and there were fewer people at the pool. They were using towels as though getting ready to come in and dress. A good-looking woman about forty-five came toward us.

"Florence," Doc Miller said, "may I present Lieutenant Oliver. Lieutenant, this is my wife."

"How do you do," I said, and she held out her hand.

"Good evening, Lieutenant. I suppose you've come about that letter."

It wasn't a question, but rather a statement. I nodded and answered, meanwhile taking a good look at Miller's wife.

Why is it that the funniest looking men get the best looking wives? Florence Miller would have been a knockout any place. She was dark, almost olive skinned, and her hair had the bluish sheen that true black always has. She was beautiful. And here she was, married to a man who looked like a hog on two legs. Somehow, it was incredible.

"I'm glad you're here, Lieutenant," she said. "Walter and I were both worried about the threatening note."

"We'll do what we can, Mrs. Miller," I said.

"I know you will," she said, and perfect teeth flashed in a smile. "Please excuse me now; I must see if dinner is ready."

We walked slowly past the pool and through a gap in the hedge which towered like a green wall fully six feet high. Twenty feet away, Betty Miller stood, slim legs braced far apart, and drew the string of a long bow. Far ahead, fully a hundred and fifty feet, three targets gleamed in the last of the sunlight, golden bull's-eyes staring blindly from concentric rings of blue and red and black.

She loosed the arrow, and I barely caught its flight before it smacked with a flat slapping sound into the center target.

"Good girl," the handsome dark-haired

man at the girl's side said. "Nicked the gold, I believe."

Betty Miller was laughing as she turned around, but when she saw us watching her face sobered and she was silent. The man flicked his gaze our way, and he too looked serious.

"Hello, Betty," Doc Miller said then, waddling closer. "Nice shooting. What are you using, a forty?"

"Fifty, Walter," Betty Miller said, and let the bow sag in her hand.

"Big stuff, eh," Miller said, and introduced me to his stepdaughter and the young Spaniard whose name was Juan Mercado.

"Have you ever tried a bow and arrow, Lieutenant?" Miller asked, after the introductions.

I felt the weight of the gun in my shoulder holster, and I guess I smiled.

"Not yet," I said. "In my business we need something that will put a man on his back permanently."

"Oh!" Mercado said, "You think a gun is more deadly than an arrow?"

"Well," I was embarrassed, but I held to my point. "I guess bows and arrows are all right for stuff like this, but I'd rather trust a .38 any day."

They were all smiling then, and I could feel my dander rising. I took out my .38 Special on a .45 frame and balanced it in my hand.

"This gun talks with a loud voice," I argued.

Doc Miller took the bow from Betty's hand. "See that pail?" he asked, pointing to a bucket filled with sand a few yards away.

"Sure," I said.

"Put a bullet through it, sand and all."

"Well, that's hardly possible," I said. "After all, a bullet does only so much."

"Go ahead," Miller urged.

"Now?"

"Sure. We use this as a target range sometimes; nobody'll notice."

I SHRUGGED and tilted the gun. It bucked in my fingers, and the *spang*

of the shot was crisp in the evening air. The pail jounced, and a black hole started draining sand.

Miller nodded me toward the bucket, and we examined it. The bullet had punctured one side and gone at least six inches into the sand. If the bucket had been a man, he'd have been a gone gosling.

"Fair," Doc Miller commented and plugged the hole with a wad of grass.

Then he came back to the others and selected an arrow from a quiver held upright by a wooden support. He nocked the arrow with easy familiarity and began to draw the string. The bow bent slowly, the arrow slipping back, and I could see the muscles ridging on Miller's hand and neck.

Then the arrow slid with lightning quickness through the air and struck the pail. The metal head hit and kept on going. It went through one side of the pail, churned its way through the packed sand and came out the other. Lord knows how far it could have gone, except that its head dug into the earth behind and slashed its way for several inches, leaving only the last five or six inches of the arrow still caught in the passageway the arrow had cut through the pail of sand.

"Toy, huh!" Miller said derisively. "Come on, Lieutenant, let's go back to the house."

We moved away, me still looking back at the ruptured bucket. It was hard to believe that a splinter of wood could have more power than a chunk of lead and steel backed by hundreds of pounds of pressure from exploding powder.

"Impressed?" Miller said, as we approached the terrace.

"Lord, yes!" I said. "I never realized those things were that powerful."

Miller grinned. "That isn't a powerful bow," he said. "Some bows pull as much as a hundred pounds. Take a look some day at the records bowmen have made. They might startle you."

"I'll still take my Special," I said. "Imagine making a fast draw with a

six-foot bow and a heavy arrow."

"You could be right," he said; and then we noticed the cop at the side of the terrace. "Hello, you've got reinforcements."

"The Captain sent me for the letter, Lieutenant," the cop said.

"Here it is," I said, handing it to him. "What time am I to be relieved?"

"The Captain said to tell you to stick around until about eleven. The Feds can't send anybody before then; they're all on another case."

"Okay, tell the Captain I'll hang around, and tell him nothing's turned up."

"Yes, sir," the cop said, and left.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Miller, I'd like to call my wife," I said shortly, peevish about the long wait.

"Of course; in the library."

We went together down the hall and into the library. Soft lights glowed there now. Miller rummaged through a drawer in the desk, while I dialed a number.

"Look, Meg," I said, "I've got to work until late, so don't wait dinner. . . . Yeah, that's right. . . . Okay."

I cradled the phone and nodded at Miller. "It's okay," I said.

He was sitting in the big chair across the desk, and behind him I could see the very last traces of sunlight being wiped away by night. The big window was open, and a curtain stirred softly in the breeze.

"Well, in that case—" Doc Miller began.

There was the faintest flicker of motion, then a *whup* sound almost as loud as a hand clap. Doc Miller moved slightly, as though pricked by a mosquito bite, and then said nothing more. He just sat and stared at me.

"Yes?" I said.

A shotgun roared outside the house, and my gaze, flicking up, caught sight of somebody a couple of hundred feet from the house.

"Stop!" a voice yelled, and I recognized it as the white-haired gateman's.

I went toward the window and my

.38 was in my hand. I could hear voices in the house, loud and excited, and then I was leaning from the window.

"What's wrong?" I yelled, and the man carrying the gun came running toward the house.

"Don't know," the gateman yelled, brandishing the gun. "I saw somebody fire an arrow toward the house, and I shot to try and stop him."

"Oh," I said, and felt the momentary fear leave me. "Probably just those kids."

I swung back into the room. "It's okay, Mr. Miller," I said. "Your man got a bit careless with his gun."

I SAW the arrow then. I saw the bright feathers and the slim length, and my mind followed the shaft to its head, and I knew then what held Doc Miller upright in his chair.

I reached for the phone. "Homicide," I said, when my connection was made, "this is Lieutenant Oliver, out at Walter Miller's house. Bring your men, Miller's dead, shot through the back with an arrow. Yeah, an arrow. Hurry it up."

I sat on the edge of the desk, shaking. Doc Miller watched me out of piggish eyes which were still and dead. A bubble of air broke in his throat, and a trickle of crimson touched his lips.

Doc Miller watched from his dead eyes; and then, as though he had seen enough, his head fell forward, and I was alone in the room.

Spangler, Captain of Homicide, had arrived with his crew and taken charge. Men were in the garden, searching the ground where the gateman had seen the archer, and others had rounded up the house guests and servants and family for questioning in the huge living room. The staff men had taken their pictures and made their drawings, and now were integrating what little they had found out.

I had told my story and was momentarily forgotten by the Captain, so I went into the garden, using a flashlight from my car. Other flashes moved

through the night, searching the ground for the bow the murderer used.

"Find anything?" I asked the first cop I came to, and he stopped searching and threw his light into my face.

"Not a thing, Lieutenant," he said.

Another cop called out, and when I went his way, I saw that he had found the murder bow. It hung high in the branches of a tree, almost hidden from sight. Evidently it had been tossed there and lodged.

"I'll get it, Lieutenant," the cop said, and shinned up the trunk, helped by another officer.

"Watch out for fingerprints," I said, and then reached up and took the bow as it was handed down.

It looked just like any other bow to me, arched, with grooved horn tips, the string heavy and twisted. I held it in the flash's light for a moment, seeing the red cord which was wound for a grip at the center of the bow, and remembered that Betty Miller's bow had looked like that. Then I shrugged, and went back to the house.

I gave the bow to the Captain, and he passed it to the fingerprint man who began to dust it with powder. I didn't have any particular hopes about the thing, since anybody whose prints were there could claim he'd put them on innocently.

I saw then that the Medical Examiner had arrived. He and his helper had laid Miller on the floor, and I went sickish when I saw how the arrow had been pushed completely through the body's chest for removal.

"Had to do it that way," Captain Spangler said. "The head keeps an arrow from being pulled out."

I SAW the hole in the chair and the crusted stain on the darker leather. The arrow lay on a sheet of paper on the desk, the steel biting head vicious and stained. It was shorter than I remembered the arrow Miller had driven through the pail to be.

One of the technicians looked up from

a sheet of paper. "Captain," he said, "figuring the line of flight and the angle of impact, the arrow could have come from about where the bow was found."

Captain Spangler nodded and then looked at me. "You're sure you didn't see anybody other than the gateman on the grounds?"

"Not between here and the trees," I answered. "You can see for yourself that the lawn doesn't have anything to hide behind, and I was at the window within a few seconds after Miller was killed."

Spangler scratched his hair, and I felt sympathy for him. He was younger than me, and his responsibilities about three times as much. He was a nice guy. I remembered when he was only a rookie pounding a beat.

"Let's question the gateman," he said, and gave an order to a uniformed cop.

The cop went out and came back in a couple of minutes with the gateman. I felt sorry for the poor devil; his hands trembled and his face was almost as white as his hair. He was just about tall enough to come to my shoulder, and I'm only six feet.

"Sit down," Captain Spangler said, and pointed to the couch.

"Yes, sir," the gateman said, and sat at the couch's corner.

His eyes were on the M.E. and Miller's body, and I could see the sweat running down the sides of his face. He looked like a mouse trapped by a flock of cats, no way to run.

"Let's hear what happened." Captain Spangler said.

"Well, I was just beginning my night rounds, like I do every day, when I saw somebody back in the trees. I didn't pay much attention, seeing as how there were so many guests here. Well, I walked on, and then looked back, and I could see that this person was pulling a bow and getting ready to shoot at the house. Before I could yell, he fired, and the arrow went through the library window. I shot into the air, yelling for the person to halt, but he took out, anyway. That's about all."

Captain Spangler nodded. "You've got pretty good eyes?" he asked.

"Well, yes, sir, I guess so," the gateman said.

"You saw the arrow?"

He swallowed, and his gaze whipped about the room. "Well, sir," he said, "I thought I did; I can't rightly say. Anyway," he finished earnestly, "I didn't hear it hit the house."

"I'm through here, Captain," the M.E. said.

"Anything special?" Spangler asked.

"Huh uh!" the Examiner shook his head. "Died instantly, spine severed, probably never knew what hit him." He gestured at his helpers. "Take him away, boys," he finished.

WE WERE silent, watching the body lifted onto the folding stretcher and carried out. The room came more alive then, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Even being a cop as long as I have, I still can't get used to stiffs lying around.

"I'll make out a report and turn it in to your office, Captain," the M.E. said. "Good night."

"Night," Spangler said absently, and then swung about to the gateman. "Let's hear something about you," he suggested.

The little man nodded, only too eager to please. His fear was so evident, I began to be annoyed. After all, cops are just guys doing a job; we're not sadists.

"Well," he said, "My name is Nicholas Berg, and I've worked here about four weeks. I live over the garage."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Germany. I emigrated to this country." His voice got hard then. "I was in a Nazi concentration camp for over three years."

That explained the white hair and fear of uniforms. I felt sorry for the poor cringing fellow.

The fingerprint man finished his task and brought the bow over to the Captain.

"Not a thing," he said. "It's been wiped."

Captain Spangler handed the bow to Berg. "Ever use one of these?"

"No, sir," Berg said.

"Let's see," Spangler said. "Pull the string, as though you were shooting an arrow."

Sweat was like tiny balls on the gate-man's shrunken face. "I can't, sir," he said.

"Can't!" Anger touched Spangler's face.

"No, sir," Berg said, and his tone was like the whine of a whipped dog.

"Why not?"

Berg laid the bow aside and then unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it down from his right shoulder. I winced, looking at his upper arm; it was shrivelled and misshapen, scar tissue fanning like a twisted vaccination mark.

"What did that?" Captain Spangler said in a tight voice.

"A dog, sir, one of the guard's dogs caught me trying to escape. It almost took my arm off."

"Yeah!" Captain Spangler said, and breathed deeply. "All right, Berg," he finished. "Have you any idea as to who the killer was? Could you identify him or her?"

"Oh, no, sir," Berg said earnestly. "I wasn't that close. I saw the killer run, but he got away through the trees and hedge, and then I came back to the house. Mr. Miller was dead, and Lieutenant Oliver was calling to report he'd been killed."

"That's all," Spangler said.

"Yes, sir, shall I patrol the grounds as usual?"

"No!" Captain Spangler lifted the bow. "Stick around and don't talk to anybody about what you've seen here or been asked. Wait in the living room."

"Yes, sir," Berg scuttled out of the room, looking back once at Miller's death chair, and then closing the door behind him.

"Let's get it over with," Captain Spangler said. "Keep your eyes open, and if you think I'm missing something, throw in your questions."

I nodded; this was routine. Now we'd play questions and answers and probably get no place. I had a hunch this killer was no dummy; and if he, or she, was really in the house, no questions were going to trip him up. But since it was my job, I went along with the Captain, first wrapping and taking along the murder arrow.

WE WENT down the hall to the living room, where people sat in silence about the room. Spangler laid the bow on a side table, and I put the wrapped arrow beside it.

"We weeded out practically all of them, Captain," Sergeant Carouso whispered. "They were in a bunch upstairs and alibied each other perfectly. These here we saved for you. The rest of them we sent home."

"Thanks, Sergeant. Wait just outside the door."

Captain Spangler looked over the group, while I went to one side and leaned against the fireplace mantle.

"I'm Captain Spangler," the Captain said friendly-like. "I'm sorry that I have to ask you some questions, but that's part of my job, and the sooner I ask them and receive the correct answers, the sooner this unpleasantness will be over."

Juan Mercado looked up from where he sat at Betty Miller's side. "You understand, Captain," he said, "that I do not have to submit to this questioning."

Captain Spangler nodded. "Mr. Mercado?" he asked, and at the other's affirmative gesture, he continued. "You will be questioned—by me or a Federal officer—take your choice. Meanwhile, can any of you offer any help or suggestions?"

I was bored. I'd been through sessions like this before. Everybody in the room shook his head at the question.

"All right," Captain Spangler said. "Whose bow is that?"

"Mine," Florence Miller said. "But the last time I saw it was in the archery room, with the others." Her hands were

the only things which moved, and they twisted a tiny handkerchief into knots. "Was that the—the bow which was used?"

"That was it," Spangler said. "How do you know it's yours?"

Florence Miller smiled faintly, but I could see that her eyes were shadowed and dark; she had been crying not long before.

"The grip winding," she explained. "Each has a different color."

I left the mantel and unwrapped the arrow. "Is this yours, too?" I asked. I brought the arrow close to the group, looking from face to face, searching.

Betty Miller gasped softly, seeing the crusted blood on the arrow, and then looked away, her face white and taut. Berg huddled even deeper in his chair, eyes wide and frightened. Juan Mercado was impassive, his dark eyes cold.

"That's mine!" a man's voice said from the shadows to one side.

"Who're you?" I asked, not recognizing him.

"Jackson, Herman Jackson," the man said, and leaned forward into the lamp-light. "I am—I was Miller's partner."

I remembered him then; he was splashed all over the papers when the Senate investigation was going on. He had his fingers in a lot of rich pies, everything from food-canning to making bad cement during the war. He was blocky, giving the impression of squareness, and not a bit of it was fat. He had been a miner, a lumberjack, a sailor, and only the devil knew how many other things, before he hooked up with Miller.

"That arrow killed Miller," Captain Spangler said quietly. "Maybe you can do a bit of explaining!"

Jackson grinned, without mirth and without warmth. His square face split and he chuckled, and I could feel the sound rasping my nerves.

"You aren't pinning anything on me, Captain," he said. "First, I wasn't even here when Walt was killed, and secondly, anybody could have got that arrow; I keep dozens like it in the archery room."

"You say you weren't here," I said, still holding the arrow. "Where were you?"

"In town." There was cold defiance in his voice.

"By yourself?"

"Look," Jackson said, "I've been questioned by experts, and your questions bore me. I was in town, and if need be I'll produce an alibi. Until then, leave me alone."

"Like that, huh!" Captain Spangler said quietly. "A tough guy with a tough tongue. Mister, this is murder, and we don't care whose political shoes we step on. Play nice or play rough, we'll match and call anything you have."

THE GRIN left Jackson's face then. He stared at Spangler and me, and I could see a muscle twitch in his cheek. Then he shrugged carelessly. "Go ahead," he said indifferently.

I relaxed. We'd set the pattern now for any questioning. There's always some smart aleck who likes to stir up trouble, and until he is chilled, everybody always clams up. With Jackson put in his place, there'd be less trouble.

"If you please, Captain," Florence Miller said suddenly, "would you ask your questions of me? I'd like to go to my room as soon as possible."

"You're Mrs. Miller?"

"Yes."

A soft laugh came from a far chair, and I almost dropped the arrow. Hell, people were popping out of everywhere. I made a quick survey of the room, and was glad to see that this finished up the group.

"Tell the truth, Florence," the voice said. "Tell the police how, except that your decree wasn't final, you were no more Walter's wife than I."

"Shut up, Grace," Jackson said harshly.

"Just a minute," Captain Spangler snapped. "Who are you, Miss?"

"Grace Blaine," the woman said, and came slowly from her chair. "I was Mr. Miller's secretary."

"She's a no-good," Betty Miller said briefly. "Ask her to take dictation or type a letter."

I could feel the dislike and hate swirling about the three women, but none spoke again. Grace Blaine was standing beside her chair, slim, wearing a creamy sweater. She was blonde, like Betty Miller, but her bloneness had come out of a bottle. She was appealing in the lamplight, but I had the impression of hardness sheathed behind her careful makeup.

Jackson shifted uneasily in his chair. "What is the point of this, Captain?" he asked. "Are we suspected of murder?"

"Walter Miller is dead," I said then. "Somebody put an arrow through his back, and that doesn't add up to anything else but murder. The bow is Mrs. Miller's and the arrow belongs to you. Somebody pulled that string. You figure out whether you're under suspicion."

"I want a lawyer," Jackson said.

"Why?" I asked, trying to pierce the blocky mask he wore for a face.

Jackson grinned thinly. "I've met the law before," he said. "If you don't find the real killer, you'll find a patsy—and I don't figure on burning for something somebody else has done."

I felt the muscles tightening in my back. Okay, so cops make mistakes, so do most people. But the percentage is so low, it's almost nonexistent. And the crack about framing somebody to cover our mistakes—well, that didn't do my temper any good.

Captain Spangler barked. "We seem to be working at cross-purposes," he said. "Let's leave personalities out of this. Now, did any of you see a man or woman running in the garden at the time Mr. Miller was slain?"

There was silence, except for the sound of Jackson's gusty breathing.

"All right, then," Spangler said, "where were all of you?"

"In town," Jackson snapped.

"Dressing for dinner," Grace Blaine

said with a defiant note in her voice.

"I was bathing, when I heard the shot," Florence Miller said, and for the moment her hands were still in her lap.

"And you?" I prompted the Spaniard.

Juan Mercado shrugged. "I don't remember."

"He was with me," Betty Miller said then, and a flush tinted her skin.

"Fair enough," Captain Spangler said. "I've given you the chance to tell me anything you might know. If anyone is concealing information, he will regret it. You may go now, but nobody is to leave the grounds until I give permission."

THEY FILED out of the room, not looking back. Betty Miller was at Mercado's side, and her mother went ahead of Jackson and Grace Blaine. Berg came behind, blinking in a nervous smile, stopping to lift his shotgun from where he had placed it beside the door.

"Watch yourself with that gun," I warned him. "There are cops on the ground."

"Yes, sir," he said and ducked his white head so servilely it made me sick.

"Now what?" I asked the Captain when we were alone.

Captain Spangler took the arrow, rewrapping it and placing it beside the bow. He shrugged. "We'll just have to wait it out. Meanwhile, I'll do a bit of checking on Jackson, and the FBI can backtrack on Nicholas Berg. As to the others, we'll just have to keep needling around until something breaks."

"Okay!" I agreed.

"Come on," Spangler said. "We'll make a final check with the men and send them back to town. Then we'll have to stick around until the FBI man gets here."

"Fine!" I said sarcastically. "Meg'll blow a fuse if I'm much later."

Captain Spangler grinned sympathetically. "Better call her again," he said. "Sorry to do this, Pop, but you're stuck for the tab. Somebody will have to stay here tonight, and you're it." He

hugged. "It isn't my idea; Mrs. Miller asked for protection."

An hour later, I watched Captain Spangler's car go down the drive. The FBI agent had arrived and asked his questions and then disappeared again toward town. Nothing new had cropped up, and the house had apparently settled down for the night.

The butler had left a pot of hot coffee on the library table, and I drank a cup, not too sleepy, what with the excitement of the evening.

I was restless, so I left the library and went into the archery room. What a place! Robin Hood could have outfitted half of England with the weapons in that room.

Bows, long, short and medium, lay on racks screwed to the wall. Their woods gleamed softly in the light, and a string was coiled at the tip of each for, as Jackson had explained to the Captain, bows are never left strung. Each bow was marked with a different color winding at the grip, and strangely, when I lifted a bow, it felt as comfortable to my hand as a .38.

I put it aside and looked at the arrows. There must have been several hundred, ranging in length from less than two feet to more than three. They were slim and deadly, each wearing a striped band of paint to designate individual owners. Some had bullet points, smooth and blunt; these were target arrows. Others had razor-sharp blades for tips, and these were the arrows for actual hunting. Some were fletched with feathers, and some had felt the touch of modernity, for their guiding vanes were thin curves of colored plastic.

I shook my head, looking around. I'd never run across anything like this before, and like anything new and unusual, it was impressing. This room seemed like something out of the middle ages.

I got an idea then, and I was nursing it into life when I heard the step at the door. I guess I whirled fast. Watching one man die with an arrow through his

back had tightened my nerves. Then I relaxed a bit, seeing Grace Blaine standing in the doorway.

"Anything new, Lieutenant?" she asked, and I saw then that she was drunk.

SHE SWAYED a bit, throwing out her hand to steady herself on the door jamb.

"Nothing yet," I admitted. "Why, did you think of something?"

Grace Blaine shook her head, looking at the arrow I still held in my hand. "Not much," she said, "except the fact that Florence came running into the house a few seconds after Berg fired at Walter's murderer."

"She what?" I dropped an arrow back into a quiver and came across the room.

"I said that Florence wasn't in the house when Walter was killed."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" I could feel anger swirling in me. People all want to play detective and act smart.

"I still worked here then," Grace Blaine said, and suddenly she was ugly, mouth twisted with memory.

"Then?" I prompted.

"Yes!" She fumbled a cigarette from her dress pocket, and I held a match. Her eyes watched me, calculating and hard with resolve. "I've just been fired."

"Why?"

"Because Walter's dead; because now Florence Miller inherits everything Walter had."

"How does that concern you?" I asked, and knew the answer even before she gave it.

Grace Blaine laughed. "Because Walter and I were to be married when the divorce was final. Now I've been canned nicely and neatly."

I ran the information around in my mind and found a question. "Was Mrs. Miller asking for big alimony?"

Grace Blaine nodded and flicked ashes on the floor. "She was asking, but she wasn't getting," she said grimly. "Walter was almost broke."

"Broke!" I was naturally skeptical,

remembering the war contracts and the appointments of the estate.

"Yes, broke. Add that up, copper, and get an answer. Now if you were Florence, and you figured on getting a big slice of alimony, and then found out most of the dough was gone—what would you do?" She grinned. "Yeah, me too!"

The cigarette fell from her fingers, and when I straightened from picking it up, she had turned and was going down the hall.

"Think it over, copper," she said from the stairway, and then she was gone, the click-click of her heels on the treads abnormally loud in the stillness of the house.

I WENT quietly back to the library suddenly cautious, hearing the sounds from within. People were everywhere. "Hold it," I said and went through the door.

He was bent over the fireplace, and his shoulders jerked when I spoke. Then he turned slowly and I recognized Herman Jackson. "Hello, Lieutenant," he said calmly and brought a packet of matches from his pocket. Even as I walked across the room, he lit a match and set fire to a crumpled newspaper lying under the three logs in the fireplace.

"What's going on?" I asked and stopped at Jackson's side, stooping a bit, making certain no evidence or papers were being burned. After all, this was a Spring night, not cool, and lighting a fire was completely out of place.

"I like a fire at night," Jackson said and came to his feet. He moved toward a side table and lifted a decanter. "I see you have coffee, Lieutenant," he finished. "Want to brace it a bit?"

"Thanks," I said and held out the empty cup, watching while he poured. "When?" I said, and filled the cup with coffee still hot and steamy from the pitcher.

The easy chair squeaked when I sat, and I sipped at the coffee. Jackson killed

a fast one, and then sank to the couch, nursing his refilled glass.

"Figured anything out?" Jackson said idly, but his eyes were sly and shiny.

"For instance?" I countered.

Anger tightened the square of his face. "Don't be coy," he said sharply. "I'm as interested as you in finding out who killed Walter."

"Why?" I asked. "Think you might be next?"

"Oh, sure!" he answered with heavy sarcasm. "One of us here is a homicidal maniac running amuck!"

"Well," I shrugged, "all of you are under suspicion, unless we find out an outsider did the job."

"That isn't news. What else?"

"Nothing!" I said. "That is, unless you know something."

Jackson finished his drink and reached out to pour a third. "I don't know a damned thing," he admitted, "except that Walt forbade Betty to marry Mercado."

"Why?"

"How should I know? Walt was a strange duck. He never had a dime until he hooked up with me, and the money went to his head. He had the idea Betty should marry high in society, particularly not a foreigner."

I took a drink of the laced coffee, feeling warmth spreading through me.

"You figure one of them killed Miller," I said flatly.

"I didn't say that," Jackson argued.

"Who is this Mercado?"

"Just a kid. I don't know much about him. Seems all right to me, if you go for the Latin type."

The room was becoming too hot from the fire, and I came to my feet and opened the windows. The moon was past its zenith now, and shadows were squat and deep.

"How about you, Jackson?" I asked. "How do you stand, now that your partner is dead?"

THE SILENCE then was so drawn out I thought I was alone. But when

I turned, the blocky man still sat on the couch, twirling his glass in stubby fingers.

"We had a partnership agreement," he said. "Most of his stock and the like reverts to me."

I whistled soundlessly. Now there was a nice motivation for a killing. And remembering some of the stories about Jackson, I had a strong hunch that the man would not stop at murder if he wanted something badly enough.

"Look, Lieutenant," Jackson said suddenly, "get that idea out of your head. If I'd knocked Walt off, I wouldn't be so melodramatic about it. I'd have used my hands or a gun." He grinned humorlessly. "Anyway, why should I kill him? Both of us had plenty of dough, and as partners we stood to make a good deal more."

I leaned against the window sill. "Grace Blaine says Miller was almost broke," I said.

"Grace is nuts!" Jackson said heavily. "She was in love with Walt, or so she claims. When she found out Florence was withdrawing her divorce suit, she almost went crazy, shouting and yelling. She should be locked up."

"You dirty stinking liar!" Grace Blaine said from the doorway, and her face was like a hate-mask.

Jackson turned without surprise. "Go to bed, Grace," he said softly. "You're drunk."

"Drunk am I?" She came into the room, and I think if she had had a gun in her hand she would have killed him. "Well, maybe I am now, but I wasn't this evening, and I could see who it was running toward the back road after Walter was murdered."

"Shut up!" Jackson snapped, and the whiskey glass dropped from his hand.

"The hell with you!" Grace Blaine whirled to me. "Okay, copper, you want to know so much; ask him what he was doing in Florence Miller's room when Walter was killed!"

I could feel the weight of the gun at my hip, and I moved slowly, shifting

so I could get at it in a hurry.

"What were you doing in her room, Jackson?" I said. "I seem to remember your saying you were in town."

Herman Jackson came slowly to his feet, and he was brutally dangerous. His flat shiny eyes swung from Grace Blaine to me, and his face was gray with controlled rage.

"I've said my say, Lieutenant," he said almost gently. "If you don't like what I told you, then get a warrant for my arrest. But I'll tell you now, you'll just be looking for trouble."

"Cops like trouble," I said.

"I'll be around to accommodate you," Jackson said. He brushed past Grace Blaine and left the room.

I could hear his footsteps in the hall and then the grating of the terrace door as it swung open. Grace Blaine laughed softly.

"The sneaking rat!" she said. "Trying to mix me up in this!"

I LEFT her standing there and followed Jackson. I paced out to the terrace, my eyes unable to focus for a moment in the moonlit night.

I thought I heard the scuff of feet to my left and went that way. The night was still except for crickets in the trees and the mournful singing of frogs somewhere near the garden pool. A few lights still burned in the house on the second floor. Moonlight glittered on the white cement and black water of the swimming pool, and the far hedge was a black barrier through which nothing could pass.

I went around the corner of the house, walking softly, and saw Jackson a hundred feet ahead. He was lighting a cigarette, the flame cupping his face in yellow radiance. He flipped the match away and disappeared about the corner at the rear, going toward the big garden.

I broke into a faster walk, wanting to catch him before his anger cooled. Men in a rage sometimes talk more than people who can think straight.

My feet made echoes on the walk,

He clawed at his throat and made bubbling grunts as if strangling



and I touched the wall of the house to steady myself as I went around the corner.

"Jackson!" I called, and went rigid with shock.

He was there, his face a gaping mask in the moonlight. He clawed at his throat, and the sounds he made were bubbling grunts as though he strangled.

He took two steps toward me, and each lowered him as though he paced down a flight of stairs. His eyes were terrible, appealing, and then he was on the ground, arching in indescribable agony.

"For God's sake, Jackson," I began, bending over him, and blood gushed from his mouth in a final spasm.

He was dead then, the slim shaft of an arrow protruding from his throat, fingers still laced together in a desperate effort to stifle the pulsing flood which had jutted from his neck.

I heard the sounds in the trees at the side of the garden and went that way, my .38 in my hands. I went fast, but cautiously, and heard the sounds farther away with each passing second.

I circled the pond where water lilies floated in white splendor, and ducked to go through heavy bushes. I heard a grunt of exertion, and in that second knew that the killer had lured me on with stones thrown far ahead. I tried to throw myself aside and walked straight into a blow which smashed at my head with a violence I had not thought possible.

Something pounded at my skull and drove me straight downward. Gravelly dirt cut my face, and there was no feeling in my gunhand. I tried to call out, and then the night rolled over me in a dark cloud and there was nothingness.

How long I was out, I don't know. I came to and was sick on the ground. When at last I came dizzily to my feet, my head was the size of the house I faced and each movement sent stabbing pains whirling through its depths.

I found my gun and staggered toward the house. Jackson's murder had to be reported and fast, for now I knew that no outsider was mixed up in his and Miller's deaths.

Stars still danced before my eyes, and I braced my hand on a bench for a moment. Then I went ahead to where I had left Herman Jackson lying, and then blinked, turning, thinking I had come the wrong way.

For Jackson's body was not where it had fallen. It was gone, and the moonlight showed only a faint dry patch of blood where it had been.

"This is stupid!" I said to myself, still trying to collect my wits, and then bent down to where the blood blotch still stained the walk.

I saw the shoe print then, the pointed toe and outline of the sole in the dried blood. I was thinking the killer had really made a mistake then.

I heard the step behind me and tried to whirl. But I was at a disadvantage, for I was squatting and couldn't rise in time.

Then I was slugged for the second time. I didn't see who hit me; I had only the impression of somebody swinging at me with vicious strength. The blow caught me squarely in the temple, and I blacked out.

I felt hands tugging at me, then I knew no more.

CAPTAIN SPANGLER'S head floated like a white balloon in front of my eyes. He was saying something I couldn't catch, and I tried to push myself erect so I could listen better. Then hands were pressing me back, and Spangler's voice was saying words I could understand.

"Take it easy, Pop," he was saying. "Rest for a minute and then we'll talk."

"Jackson!" I said, and the voice I used was smaller than a whisper.

"He's gone!" Captain Spangler said. "Take it easy, we've got an alarm out for him."

I shook my head despite the pain. "Not gone," I whispered with growing strength, "but dead. Somebody shot him in throat with arrow. The killer knocked me out. Take a look in back of the house."

I had to repeat it before he understood. Then Betty Miller was holding an ice bag to my head, and I let myself forget things for a time. My head ached and I felt sick, and I wondered if my skull was fractured. I lay like that

for half an hour. Then I got up, despite Betty Miller's protests.

"I'm all right," I said, and went to look for the Captain.

I found him behind the house, his flashlight cutting through the moonlit dimness. Other cops searched, too, and I caught a glimpse of Berg wandering about, shotgun grasped in his hands.

"How do you feel, Pop?" Spangler said, and I forced a grin.

"Okay, I guess," I admitted, "except my head wants to roll around on the ground."

"Just take it easy, and then I'll have you driven back to town." Captain Spangler turned the flash so the light struck my face. "You're sure that Jackson is dead?" he finished. "We can't find his body anywhere."

"I saw it," I said flatly. "I saw the blood and the arrow. Come on back to the walk and I'll show you."

"The walk?"

"Yes, come on."

I led the way, stopping where I had seen Jackson fall. Spangler flashed his light on the cement, and I felt panic touching my mind. Maybe I was sick. There was no body—and no blood which held a footprint.

"Well?" Captain Spangler said.

I bent, studying the cement, and after a moment, felt a sigh of relief touch my throat.

"It's been washed," I said. "The woman who hit me washed away her footprint."

"Woman!" Captain Spangler's voice tightened.

"Yes! It was the sole print of a woman's shoe, narrow with a pointed toe.

"Which one?" the Captain asked.

"I don't know." I touched my bruised head sympathetically. "Find the one whose shoes are bloody and you'll have the answer."

Captain Spangler lifted his voice in a shout, and two of his squad came running. He gave orders quietly, and the men vanished into the rear door of the house.

"If those shoes are in the house," Spangler said grimly, "they'll be found. Now, let's hear everything that happened after I left."

I lit a cigarette, and told the Captain all the information I had obtained from Jackson and Grace Blaine. The Captain whistled once or twice, nodding his head, and spoke again only after I had finished.

"So Florence Miller was outside when her husband was killed," he summed up. "And Jackson was in the house. This Grace Blaine seems to know a lot—for a woman who was dressing when the first murder happened, and who was plenty handy when you say Jackson was killed."

I nodded. "Better quiz her again. She's tight enough to spill plenty." The cigarette tasted like hell. I stamped it out.

"Okay, I will. Now you're sure about everything else, your being hit and all?"

"Look, Captain," I said, "I don't bang myself around for fun." A thought came. "Say, who found me—Berg?"

"No! Betty Miller. She said she heard a sound and looked out the window and saw you lying on the walk. She woke Mercado, and then both of them came down to investigate. He carried you in and she telephoned Headquarters."

"What did she hear?"

"Just a strange noise, she said."

I GRUNTED ill-humoredly. "Seems to me everybody is peeking out or into windows. And she's a husky girl, for all her being so slim." I felt the headache bounced around my skull. "Maybe she knocked me out and then conveniently found me again!"

"Could be," the Captain agreed. "We'll find out. Meanwhile, you'd better go in and lie down." He stopped me as I turned away. "Incidentally," he finished, "the lab says the threatening letter was dated a month ago."

"A month!" I said. "Look, Miller told me it came today—that is, yesterday, since it's after midnight."

"I know," Spangler admitted. "But the postmark was put under ultraviolet,

and the date came out clearly."

"That's screwy," I said. "Why in hell should Miller pull a phony and say it had just come?"

Captain Spangler grinned. "Maybe he thought it was new; maybe somebody didn't want him to get it for a while after it came."

"Maybe!" I agreed. "Sounds like a doublecross—" I caught a memory of a thought I'd had in the archery room. Maybe Berg had some way of doing the killing. Maybe, since he couldn't use a regular bow, he'd used a crossbow. The whys and wherefores were so farfetched I didn't want to voice the idea. "I don't know, Captain, the whole thing's got me whirling."

"You'd better go in and lie down," Spangler said.

"Okay," I agreed, and went around the corner of the house.

But I didn't go toward the side door. I waited until Captain Spangler had gone back to his search for Jackson's body, and then I hotfooted it for the garage, over which the gateman had his apartment.

I slipped through the garage door, palming the knob against any creaking, and then shut it carefully behind me. The smell of oil and paint and metal touched my senses. My head still ached, lumps growing in the flesh where I had been struck.

I went past the two cars and up the stairs which were at the back. It was so dark I could barely see, and I stumbled a couple of times, before my hand touched the stair railing to balance myself. Wood creaked at each step, and I found I was holding my breath in anticipation.

Then I was at the door, trying it gently. It swung open at my twist on the knob, and I went through, closing it again. Unconsciously, I had drawn my gun, and I balanced it in my hand as I tiptoed through the three rooms which made up the apartment. Satisfied I was alone, I drew the shades tight and then switched on the light.

I was in the living room. A daybed with ruffled sheets and a light spread was on my left. Along the right wall was a workbench, parts of a lawnmower scattered on its surface. Evidently, Berg did his repair work in his apartment.

There was a small radio on a magazine table, and three chairs. A worn fiber rug was on the floor. I made a quick search, but found nothing even resembling a crossbow. Then I searched the kitchen and bathroom, with exactly the same results.

I CAME back to the living room, staring about for the last time before leaving. I saw the rod then, a three foot steel tube, and lifted it, searching carefully for blood or wisps of hair. It was just possible that this had been used to knock me unconscious.

But the rod was too light for that. It was just a tube; and when my memory began to work, I recognized it as a screw-together, sectional rod used for cleaning shotguns, one end battered, but still serviceable.

I grinned and laid the tube on the bench. Automatically, I replaced a file in its rack. I'm a neat man, and I can't stand clutter. Evidently Berg wasn't that type, for tools were scattered among the lawnmower pieces, and the wall was dirty and pocked with deep holes in the plaster, the wood of the workbench stained and greasy.

It was then I knew I was being watched. I sensed it, rather than heard. I whirled and saw the gaping muzzle of the shotgun pointed at my chest, and suddenly it was very hard to breathe.

"What are you doing?" Nicholas Berg said.

"Looking around," I said. "After all, you're under suspicion, too."

"Oh!" Berg seemed to have trouble thinking, and then he smiled and the gun moved its muzzle away from me. "I'm sorry, I thought for a minute—" He didn't finish.

"Thought what?" I asked sharply, relieved that the gun no longer menaced

me. Two loads of buckshot can rip a man in two.

"I thought," Berg had the grace to flush, "you might be hiding some evidence against me." Fear screwed up his face at my involuntary movement. "Please!" he finished. "Please! I keep forgetting that this is the United States."

I remembered then about his imprison-

I whirled and saw the gaping muzzle of the shotgun pointed at me



ment, and felt the anger fade. I changed the subject. "How was it you didn't find me when I was knocked out?" I asked.

Berg's wizened face flushed. "I told the Captain," he said in sullen anger, "that I'm only one man; I can't be every place at once. I didn't even know about it until that Spanish guy came out to get me." He grinned thinly. "I almost put a bunch of buckshot through his face, when he came tearing after me."

"Mercado?" I asked.

"Yeah, that guy. Now, if you ask me, there's the guy who killed Mr. Miller.

Why, they had a terrible fight only a couple of days ago."

"About what?"

"About Miss Miller. He wanted to marry her, and Mr. Miller said he'd have him deported if he married her. Oh, they was raising hell, and I was ready to step in and stop the fight with my gun, if anything got out of hand."

"Did you tell the Captain this?" I asked. When he shook his head I said, "What the hell's the matter with you? Miller's dead, and so's Jackson and you play games with information which might help!"

"I'm sorry, really I am!" There were tears in the faded eyes. "I just can't seem to talk to police."

"All right, all right," I said wearily. "Now, we're going down and talk to the Captain, and stop playing games. Tell him everything you know or suspect. Damn it, it's important!"

"Yes, sir," Berg said, and turned back throught the door.

WE WENT down the stairs. I closed the door after turning off the light, and the stairs were ebony dark after the brilliance. Berg went with the sure feet of a cat and was at the outer door before I was at the bottom of the stairs. He waited for me, and then side by side we went toward the garden where the flash-lights had congregated, close to the place I'd been knocked out.

"I thought you were in the house," Captain Spangler said.

"I took a walk," I explained.

"We're just finishing up here; stick around."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Gerrity, one of the technicians, was working over the washed-out bloodstain. He sifted powder from a shaker over the cement, covering a wide area, and then flicked the switch of a portable lamp which had a cord trailing into the open window of the house.

There was no light from the lamp, other than a dull glow almost too faint to be seen. The rays were ultraviolet,

and where they struck, the sifted powder glowed with a purple luminescence. Instantly, as though conjured out of nowhere, the irregular mark of the bloodstain came out, and squarely in its center was the mark of the woman's shoe.

"Good!" Captain Spangler said in approval. "Get some shots of that and then cover; we may need it for evidence."

The cameraman moved into position, focussing his lens. He'd have no trouble in taking the pictures he wanted, for the ultraviolet made clearer pictures than normal sunlight.

I caught Spangler's arm and drew him aside. "Berg's playing games," I said softly. "He knows a little bit he hasn't told."

"Okay!" Captain Spangler called to Berg, and the three of us walked a few paces away from the cameraman. "Lieutenant Oliver says you have something to tell me," he prompted the gateman.

Berg nodded and told the Captain what he had told me. He tacked on a few extras, but the stories were substantially the same. Berg was nervous and ill-at-ease; the Nazis had really kicked him around. But he managed to finish, and Captain Spangler nodded.

"This gets more complicated every minute," he said. "Hell, Pop, if I didn't know you, I'd swear you were nuts! Corpses just don't vanish from sidewalks. You got any ideas, Berg?"

"Oh, no, sir," the gateman said earnestly.

A frog jumped into the pond behind us, and the splash of water was abnormally loud. "That does it," the cameraman said, lowering his camera, and another frog jumped in with a plopping splash, as though to echo his words.

"Let's go in," Captain Spangler said, and we turned toward the house.

Three or four frogs flopped into the water, and Spangler flicked on his flashlight, turning the beam toward the lily pond. I was thinking how nice a meal of frog legs would be, and it came to me then that I hadn't eaten since noon.

A bubble broke in the circle of light,

pushing out of the water, moving the floating water lilies. Then another came, and another.

"What's going on?" I asked. "I thought frogs were making that noise."

Spangler and I walked to the edge of the pond, looking down. The water moved gently beneath the splash of light, lilies lying in their leaf boats. We could see little below the surface, for the water was a bit muddy. Then more bubbles broke, one after the other, and I bent forward.

"Look," I said, "some of those lilies are partially pulled under."

CAPTAIN SPANGLER thrust his flashlight close to the water, directly over the bubbles which still rose, and I caught a glimpse of something huge and blocky a few feet below the surface.

"It looks like a wheelbarrow," I said, getting to my feet. I took off my coat and rolled up my shirt sleeve. Then holding out one hand to Spangler for support, I got on my knees and pawed for the barrow.

I caught the wheel and tried to lift, but the weight was too much. I grunted, straining.

"It's probably nothing," Spangler said impatiently.

I half-nodded and loosed my hold. And then I went rigid, feeling the rough cloth on my fingertips. My hand explored the water, found cold flesh and puffy fingers.

"He's here," I said. "Jackson's underneath the wheelbarrow."

"Gerrity," Spangler snapped, "give Oliver a hand."

Gerrity came running, stripping away his coat. Both of us caught the barrow's wheel, and fighting inertia and dragging weight, managed to pull the barrow out of the water.

Jackson came with the wheelbarrow; he had no choice. Wire was around him, clamping him to the metal frame. We turned the wheelbarrow over, and water ran from Jackson's slack arm and stained the ground. Mud was on his clothes and

face, and his wide eyes glared whitely through the dirty mask.

Jackson sprawled, arms and legs dangling, and his throat was ruptured and torn where the arrow had been pulled free. He didn't look blocky and dangerous now; he just looked dead.

"The wheelbarrow must have settled, letting air escape," I said.

"Okay, get some pictures and get him loose. Find out what you can and report to me inside," Spangler said to Gerrity.

"How about me?" Berg asked, fearfully.

"Come along," I said, and followed Captain Spangler into the house.

We went directly to the library where Captain Spangler picked up the phone. He dialed swiftly, and his voice was harsh as he gave the story to Headquarters.

"Somebody's gone kill-crazy," he finished. "Get some more men out here. Yeah, I'll hold the fort. But make it snappy."

There was a knock at the door, and then one of Spangler's men came through.

"We found the shoe, Captain," he said. "It was hidden in a toilet tank. We arrested the owner."

"Well, bring her in," I said, and felt the ache run from my bruised head into my neck.

"It isn't a her, it's a him!" the detective said, and stepped aside to let the prisoner by.

"This is an outrage!" Juan Mercado said angrily, handcuffs glittering on his wrists as he walked into the room.

"Sit down, Mr. Mercado," Captain Spangler said shortly.

"I prefer to stand." Perspiration lay in thick beads on the Spaniard's face.

"Sit down," I said flatly, remembering how I'd been slugged in the garden.

He dropped onto the couch and his eyes ran about the room with a studied casualness. But I watched his hands; for they'll give away tension before anything else. They were tight, fingers locked.

Captain Spangler examined the oxford which the detective laid on the desk. It

was sodden, still dripping, and, as far as I could tell, had no blood on it. But the shape was right, neat and pointed and small. No wonder I had mistaken it for a woman's print in the blood outside.

"Let's hear it," I said at last. "What was your shoe doing in the toilet tank, and, to be more specific, why did you kill Miller and Jackson?"

IT WAS like lighting a fused stick of dynamite; words spewed from Mercado in a burst of sound I couldn't stop for a moment. He spoke in Spanish, hands gesturing in chained unison.

"In English!" I finally broke in. "Give it to us in English."

"Yes, *Señor*," Juan Mercado calmed down a bit. "I was saying that I am not guilty of murder. It is true that I hit you when you were bent over the bloodstain on the walk, and it is true that I hid the shoe, but I did not kill anybody."

"Hogwash!" I said sourly and touched the lumps on my head. "I suppose you go around slugging people just for the fun of it!"

"No, sir!" Mercado swallowed. "It was that I heard a sound and came outside to investigate. I found nothing but the blood. I stepped in it inadvertently and took off my shoes so that I would leave no footprints. I did not know anybody was dead, although it was not beyond my imagining. I went to get a pail and brush from beside the swimming pool, and when I returned, still in stocking feet, you were bending over the footprint I had left in the blood. I could not afford to be further investigated, and so I hit you and washed out the bloodstain. That is all."

"That's enough!" I said grimly and swung to the Captain. "Shall I take him in?" I finished.

"In a minute," Spangler said to me, and then turned to the shaking Spaniard. "You say you saw nothing?" he asked.

"No sir!" Juan Mercado was very emphatic, his dark face taut with strain. "I heard a loud slapping sound, like—like

water splashing, and I slipped from my room and went outside. Everything else is as I said."

"Oh!" Captain Spangler stabbed thoughtfully at the desk blotter with the needle-pointed letter opener. "Now, about Miller's death?" he finished questioningly.

"I know nothing, believe me."

"Miss Miller said that you were together. Is that true?"

"Well, no!" Mercado squirmed uneasily, his manacled hands going upward to loosen the bathrobe at his throat. "She tried to protect me."

"Protect?" I said. "Why should you need protection?"

"Well," Mercado licked his full lips. "Mr. Miller and I had quite an argument a couple of days ago; he objected to my marrying Betty."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, I guess it was because I had no money. He called me a fortune hunter."

"And are you?" Captain Spangler's tone was soft.

"Of course not," Mercado said indignantly.

Captain Spangler lifted an envelope from his inner pocket. "I have here a report on you from the Immigration Department, Mercado," he said. "It seems that you are to be returned to Spain on the charge that you are undesirable. It seems that you were suspect in one robbery of a host, along with a few more minor items."

"Yes, sir!" Juan Mercado said dismally.

I caught at an idea. "How is it, Mercado," I asked, "that the news of Jackson's death didn't surprise you?"

Juan Mercado drew in his breath, his gaze running from Berg in the corner to Captain Spangler and then to myself.

"All right," he admitted. "I saw you find his body in the pond. I watched from the hall window."

"And you maintain you had nothing to do with either death!"

"That's right." Mercado knotted his hands. "I think I was in my room when

Miller was killed; anyway, I was there when I heard the gateman shoot."

"And you can add nothing else?"

"No, sir!"

"Okay!" Captain Spangler said. "You're under arrest on suspicion of murder."

JUAN MERCADO sighed softly, and the line of his shoulders slumped. I almost felt sorry for him then, for I knew no man could be closer to the chair than Mercado at this moment. That footprint alone would send him up.

"Take him out to my car," Captain Spangler ordered the detective who had arrested Mercado. "Hold him there until I get free here; I've a few points to clear up."

"Yes, sir," the cop said, and herded the glumly silent Spaniard from the room.

"That does it," I said to the Captain. "Why he did the killings, I don't know, but a session down at Headquarters should clear that up."

"He's rugged," Captain Spangler admitted, "but I think he'll talk. Let's get the women down and wind this thing up."

I nodded, wondering what Betty Miller would say when she found out her boy friend had been arrested. Mercado might be a stinker, but it had been pretty obvious to me that she was in love with him.

"I'll get them for you, Captain," Berg offered, and the Captain nodded. Berg sneaked out of the room.

I could hear his steps diminishing up the stairs. The ache in my head was almost as violent as ever, and a slight nausea touched me, caused by both the beating I had taken and the lack of food. I had a quick drink from the whiskey bottle, filling a shot glass to the brim.

"Drinking on the job, eh!" Spangler said, but he was grinning.

"I need it," I said.

Grace Blaine came in then, walking softly in bedroom slippers. She wore no makeup now, and the lines of age were clear and defined. She looked fifteen

years older than she had before.

"What's on your mind this time?" she asked and headed straight for the liquor.

"In a moment, Miss Blaine," Captain Spangler said.

There were footsteps in the hall, and then Florence and Betty Miller were in the doorway. They wore robes, and Florence Miller had a net around her head.

"Sit down, please," Captain Spangler said.

Betty dropped to the couch, her eyes anxiously swinging from person to person. By contrast to Grace Blaine she lost five years and her beauty was a direct slap at the older woman's lined features.

"What is it, Captain?" Florence Miller said, and a tinge of anger was in her tone. "Your men woke me to search my closets, yet they would tell me nothing of what is going on and told me to remain in my room."

"Cops are lice," Grace Blaine said. "They don't need reasons."

The Captain ignored the secretary. "Herman Jackson was murdered a short while ago," he said flatly.

Florence Miller swayed with the impact of the shock, then collapsed into a chair.

GRACE BLAINE was white-faced, but her expression didn't change.

"I told him," she said. "I told him to keep his nose clean."

"Who—who did it?" Betty Miller whispered, and I saw the whiteness of her clenched hands.

Captain Spangler ignored the question and put forth one of his own. "Mrs. Miller," he said, "you were not bathing when your husband was killed. Why did you lie?"

"Speak up, dearie," Grace Blaine said nastily. "Bare your little soul."

"Miss Blaine," I said then, "when we want information from you, we'll ask for it. Until then, keep still."

"Gee, you scare me!" Grace Blaine said, but fell morosely silent.

"All right, I lied," Florence Miller ad-

mitted. "I was panicky, seeing the bow which had been used, for I knew it would be identified as mine. A lot of people knew that Walter and I were separating and that there was a great dislike between us. I lost my head and said I was in my room."

"Where were you?"

"In the garden. I had just finished dinner arrangements with the housekeeper and had stepped into the garden for a breath of air."

Betty Miller spoke then. "Where is Juan?" she said suddenly.

"He's all right," I said. "But, Miss Miller, I have a question or two for you. First, why did you say Mercado was with you, when he was not, when your stepfather was killed?"

"But—" she began.

"Mercado told us otherwise," I went on. "He admits that you weren't together."

Betty Miller cried softly then, making no sound, her young face crumpling, tears flooding. She held her fingers to her face, and her head rocked a bit.

"Then he did it!" she cried. "Oh, God, I wish I were dead!"

"Hush, baby," Florence Miller said, and dropping to the couch beside the girl, she held her tightly to her shoulder.

"Miss Miller," Captain Spangler said, "I don't like this questioning, but it is necessary. You must tell me everything you know; some of it may help Mercado."

"All right!" Betty Miller had regained her composure now, and she came free of her mother's arms and faced the Captain. "We weren't together when Walter was killed, even though I said so. I was afraid he had lost his head, and so I claimed he was with me. I don't know where he was."

"And later tonight, when Jackson was killed?"

"He was in the bathroom. I saw Lieutenant Oliver lying on the walk, although I didn't recognize him at the time. I knocked on Juan's door, and there was no answer. Then he came down the hall

from the bathroom, and both of us went down and discovered what had happened. He carried Lieutenant Oliver into the house and I called you at Headquarters."

Captain Spangler nodded, making notes on a desk pad. This cinched it, of course; Juan Mercado was in deeper than ever. We had motivation, which was the marrying of Betty Miller. Secondly, we had opportunity, evidence of which Betty Miller had just supplied. Then, for a clincher, we had the stained shoe and remains of a footprint in Jackson's blood. It all added up to the death chair for the Spaniard once we had his confession.

"I guess that's all," Captain Spangler said, but I broke in.

"Miss Blaine claims," I said, "that Jackson was in your room when your husband was killed, Mrs. Miller. Can you explain that?"

"So he—" Florence Miller's face was red with anger. "I wondered who was there," she said. "There was soot from the fireplace over everything."

"Soot?" I said, and glanced at the fireplace where I had caught Jackson lighting a fire just before he died.

"Yes!" Florence Miller nodded. "I thought a maid had been careless."

I TRIED to make sense out of it. That a man liked fires was all right, I supposed, but that he should light one in a room where he couldn't enjoy it was rather ridiculous. I turned to Grace Blaine. "When we first questioned you, you said that Mr. Miller was broke; yet Jackson seemed to think otherwise. In fact, he said that on Mr. Miller's death, most of his holdings would revert to Jackson in a partnership agreement. Perhaps you can clear up that point?"

Grace Blaine licked her full lips. "That's about the size of it," she said, "except for one little point. Under the terms of the agreement, if both men died within the same twenty-four hours, the agreement was canceled and the estates went to the heirs of each." Grace Blaine shrugged slowly. "That means Florence

will inherit whatever Walter left."

"And how about Jackson's heirs? Who are they?"

Grace Blaine laid the whiskey glass back on the table, and arrogance came into her shoulders and lift of her head.

"There's just one," she said. "His sister!"

"Sister!" Florence Miller said. "Why, I didn't know he had one."

"There are a lot of things you don't know, dearie," Grace Blaine said shortly.

"And where is this sister?" I asked.

"Here!" Grace Blaine said softly. "I'm her."

There was no sound for a moment. I caught the flicker of headlights through the window and knew that the Medical Examiner and Captain Spangler's men had arrived. I heard the sudden indrawn breath of Florence Miller and then the tinkle of glass as Grace Blaine poured another drink.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" I said.

"Nobody asked me," Grace Blaine said. "Anyway, Herman and I didn't think it was anybody's business. We've worked like this for years."

"How long have you been working together?"

"Sixteen years," Grace Blaine explained. "I wouldn't tell you a damned thing, except that it doesn't matter any longer. I helped him when he was just a punk, and I helped build him up. Walt was one, too, but Walt never got any place until the war when Herman took him in as a partner. Back in the Twenties and early Thirties they ran booze; then Herman went legit. He owned a brewery or two, and by using them as backing, he built up more businesses. When war came, he branched out even more, canning food, making gunpowder and ammunition, even buying in on a cement factory. He needed help and he got Walt Miller to come in as a small partner. That's about the size of it."

Florence Miller's face was white. "Then that's why you were always with Walter; that's why he always had to con-

sult you about the deals he worked on!"

"That's right," Grace Blaine agreed. "I was Papa's little watchdog, making certain that Walter Miller didn't get out of line, that he didn't spill his guts during the investigations."

I looked at Captain Spangler and shrugged. This was interesting, in a sort of way, I had to admit, but it made little difference to the case in hand. It cleared up a few points, but it didn't help or hinder a case against Juan Mercado and that, of course, was our objective of the moment.

"That will be about all," I said.

Betty Miller jumped from the couch, catching my arm. "You've arrested Juan?" she asked.

"That's right," I said wearily.

A door slammed, and then feet drummed echoes out of the hall floor. A cop burst in through the door, stood uncertainly for a moment in the bright light, and then came toward Captain Spangler.

"Hennessy's dead!" he said. "Somebody's beat his brains out, in your car." Hennessy was the cop who'd taken Juan Mercado out to the car under arrest.

"The other man," I snapped, "What about him?"

The cop shook his head. "There's no other man," he said. "Hennessy's lying dead in the seat, his handcuffs on the floor. He's alone."

"Let's go," Captain Spangler said, and we raced from the room.

HENNESSY was very dead, lying on the ground where the cops had placed him, and the Medical Examiner was just straightening, when we came out.

"Right side of skull crushed," he said. "Who the hell did it?"

Captain Spangler gave no heed. "Jenkins, Pratt, Carter," he barked. "Patrol the fence and gate. The killer's a Spaniard, six feet, dark. He's probably got Hennessy's gun, so be careful."

Three men melted into the darkness, making little sound. I had seen their

faces in the flashlight's glow, and I felt sorry for the cop-killer. Cops don't like guys who do things like that.

"His name was Juan Mercado," I explained to the M.E. and the other cops. "He got Doc Miller and his partner, Herman Jackson. He was under arrest."

The M.E. nodded. "I was just coming out about Jackson," he said, then looked at one of his assistants. "Take care of Hennesy, Bob," he finished. "I'll take a look at the other body."

Spangler was still giving orders. "—and search everything," he was just finishing. "I want that man brought in, alive if possible—but bring him in."

More cops streamed away, grim-faced, guns heavy in their hands.

Berg and the three women came from the house then, slowly and cautiously. Death had struck so many times in one night, it was no wonder there was no eagerness in them to see it again.

"Get back in the house," I ordered, "you're in danger out here."

"Juan?" Betty Miller said, and I nodded.

"Yes. Now do as I say."

Berg sidled close, gripping his shotgun, eyes wide and fearful in the wizened face.

"I'll help," he said. "I'm not afraid. I'll search the—the garage and my apartment."

"All right," I said, "but take it easy. The guy's kill-crazy. Keep your back to a wall. Report back to me."

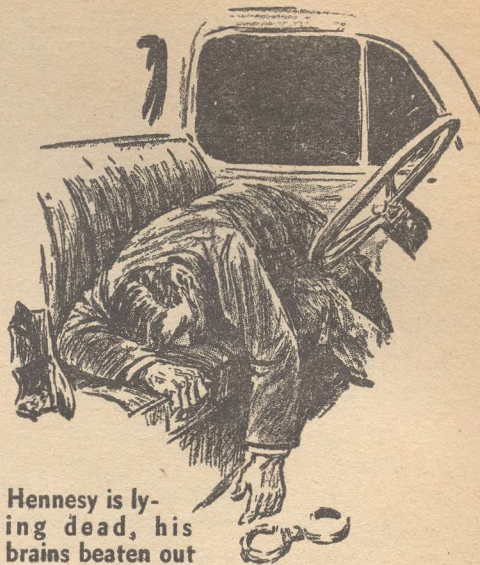
"Yes, sir," Berg said, and ran toward the back of the house.

"By God! By God! By God!" Captain Spangler was saying, looking down at Hennesy. They'd been friends, gone through Police School together.

"Jackson's out in back," I told the M.E.

"We'll search the house, starting at the basement," Spangler said. He beckoned to a cop. "You go with the M.E.," he ordered. "Mercado may start something outside."

We went inside. We left no corner unsearched. There were four of us, and no man was left uncovered for even a sec-



Hennesy is lying dead, his brains beaten out

ond. We went through the basement room by room, even looking inside the furnace, but found nothing.

We moved upward, floor by floor, covering everything so methodically that nobody could have remained hidden. The women were in the library and servants in the kitchen, but except for them, the house was empty. Hot and tired, we came back to the living room. Cops began making their reports about the out-buildings; all were clean.

"You think he got away?" I asked Spangler, and he shrugged.

"Could be," he said. "Let's put a call through."

He led the way into the library, going directly to the phone on the desk. Ten seconds after he had hung up, I knew squad car radios were carrying Mercado's description to a thousand cops.

I LIT a cigarette, feeling my nerves wrinkling and knotting with nerve strain. The room was crowded, what with the women and us four cops. Florence Miller sat in a far chair, face white and drawn, trying to calm the silent weeping of her daughter.

Grace Blaine, as usual, was nursing a drink. She looked sixty, her face a tired

mask, her eyes bitter and hard in the light. Even the gloss seemed gone from her hair.

Captain Spangler sat idly at the desk, making aimless marks on the blotter with the letter opener. He looked up when Berg entered the door.

"Nobody in the garage or apartment," the little gateman said.

"Thanks!" Spangler stabbed the letter opener into the desk, leaving it vibrating. "I'm going out," he said to me. "Watch these people."

"Yes, sir," I said, and watched him and the two cops leave. "Sit down," I said to Berg.

I sat in the chair Spangler had deserted, tiredness crawling over me. I was sick of the whole mess; I was hoping Mercado would be found plenty quick, so I could go home and get some sleep.

"How about a drink, Lieutenant?" Grace Blaine said.

"No, thanks!" My tone was short.

Berg made a swallowing sound. "I'm quitting the last of the week, Mrs. Miller," he said. "I can't—I mean, this is too—"

"All right, Berg," Florence Miller said. "I understand."

"They'll shoot him!" Betty Miller said then. "They'll kill him!"

This waiting was the hard thing to do. Men searched the night with drawn guns. Somewhere a killer hid like a hunted animal, his fangs six lead slugs in a murdered cop's gun; and here I sat, doing nothing. It was galling.

I chain-lit a cigarette and crushed out the old stub. Paper was on the desk, and because it helped to quiet my nerves, I caught up a pen and drafted a rough report for the Department.

My pen made the only sound in the room. The point caught and scratched on the smooth paper, and I changed pens, touching the imbedded letter opener with my hand. It quivered, light dancing from the round wooden handle.

I filled one page and started on a second. Two sheets of paper were stuck together, and I used the letter opener to

separate them. The needlelike blade broke the blobs of glue and I laid the opener aside, then picked it up again.

Two spots on the blade were not smooth, but were etched, as though with acid or a shot of short-circuited electricity. Somewhere I had seen the like before, but couldn't recall where. I dug my fingernail into the spots and blackness came off on my nail. Soot.

THE MEDICAL EXAMINER walked through the library doorway, coming from the back of the house. I could see the tiredness in him, too, and it struck me that cops and men who worked with cops were always tired. He came straight to the desk.

"Jackson's body is ready to go," he said. "Examination shows nothing more than you already know. Spangler's got a man in the pond, looking for the arrow which was torn out of his throat."

I cleaned my nail with the point of the letter opener. "Mercado's still loose, probably over the fence and running like hell."

The M.E. nodded and lit a cigar, smoke coiling momentarily around his bald head like a turban. He shrugged. "I wish they'd hurry; I'd like to pull out for home."

A thought hammered for expression in my mind. "Yes, sure, me, too," I said, and felt the thought wriggle into a hunch and then gradually solidify into knowledge. A memory stirred, and then another, and the two engendered a third. Little things kept piling up, one after the other. That letter opener—it was a *drop*, like the ones bootleggers used to use to open secret hiding places.

I looked at the fireplace where only dead ashes were, and then swung my gaze to Grace Blaine who sat in a drunken stupor to one side. She blinked owlishly, licking full lips. Berg watched with his steady patience, and Florence Miller had laid her head back on the couch and was resting, Betty Miller tight in her arms.

I knew then where Juan Mercado was.

I knew it as surely as I knew my own

name. Things had added up and spit out an answer; and if I worked fast, maybe things would break right. I had to hurry, and I couldn't take any unnecessary chances right now, for innocent people might be injured.

I thrust the letter opener into my side pocket and came from my chair. "Stay here, will you?" I asked the M.E. "I want to check with Spangler on how things are coming."

"Sure," the Medical Examiner said, and I left the room, going casually, but running, once I was out of the house.

The first chill of dawn was in the air and dew slapped wetly against my ankles. I shivered, thinking of all that had happened and drew my gun. I wouldn't need it for a time, maybe not at all, but I felt better with it in my hand.

I could see the flashlights probing the night. Cops were everywhere about the yard, but none were close at the moment. I thought of getting one to help; and then, because I knew there might be little time, I went ahead alone.

I came to a door and it was closed and locked. I went further and tried a window. It, too, was locked. I found a side door and, impatient, I wadded my hat around my hand and punched out the small pane above the knob. Reaching through, conscious of the tinkling of glass, I twisted the knob against the nightlatch and went through.

I had no flashlight and everything was a shapeless blurring, but I went ahead, hand outstretched for guidance. I found the stairs and went up them, close to the wall, not wanting any betraying creaks.

At the upper door I paused, gathering my breath, and then palmed the knob and went through. I heard the faint sound of breathing and knew my hunch had been right.

I saw nobody in the room, and so I went ahead, turning on lights as I went. My feet made soft sounds on the bare floor, and water dripped somewhere with a faint steady splash. I found no one in the far room. The second was empty, too.

I CAME back to the first room I'd entered. I walked in and then froze, staring at the gun muzzle which lined on my belt buckle.

"Drop it," the voice said. "Drop it or get your insides blown out."

My gun hit the floor; I'm no hero, no man is with the muzzle of a gun poking a blind black eye in his direction. "You've got no chance," I said. "Play it smart."

The killer laughed, without humor, without changing expression. "You figured it, but it isn't going to do you any good."

"You'll never get away," I said, and was cold with the sweat of panicky terror.

"How did you figure it?" the killer said. "How did you get so smart?"

I talked, I rattled on like a phonograph. I had a chance if I could stall long enough. One of the cops was sure to see light about the drawn curtains and then investigate. So I stalled, spilling everything I could think of.

"It adds," I said. "First, there was the threat mailed in an old envelope. The date was blurred, but the laboratory found out the real date. That meant the note was new. You probably took the envelope from the trash incinerator, wanting the thing to look authentic, postmark and all. The note was typed; and we'll probably find a typewriter somewhere around here which was used.

"You meant to kill Miller, the note was just a cover up. So you shot him with an arrow. You covered up beautifully. Then when you had the chance, you killed Jackson. Unfortunately, I walked into the setup, and you slugged me unconscious. When I came to, the body was gone; you'd dumped it into the pond. Why?"

"I thought you were dead. I wired Jackson's body to the wheelbarrow and dumped it into the pond. I figured they would think Jackson had killed his partner and you and then run away. I planned on getting rid of Jackson's body later."

I barely heard the words. Perspiration soaked my clothes, for death was present in the room. I read it in the killer's eyes, and I knew that, unless Spangler came soon, I'd never repeat what I was finding out.

I felt the weight of the needle-pointed letter opener in my pocket, and said, "You must have known about the fire-place; you must have found out about it?"

"I found out, but I was going to wait. I saw Miller work the gadget one night and I saw what he had. I figured it was mine, and I still figure it is. I earned it." The gun muzzle wavered. "How did you find out?"

"The pitted point," I said. "I remembered seeing things back in prohibition days. *Drops*, they were called in those days. Miller was a liquor boy; no wonder he used one."

Spangler, I prayed, get up here and help me!

But there was no sound except that of breathing in the room. The world was very far away. I felt muscles contract in my belly, as the trigger finger began to tighten, and my voice broke a bit as I spoke.

"I'm not smart," I said. "Spangler and the others are smarter than me. If I can figure this thing out, then they can, too. Be smart."

"No! I'll burn just as dead for one as a dozen."

"I knew Jackson had a suspicion," I said, talking desperately for a few more minutes' grace. "He was at an upstairs fireplace, and then I found him at the one in the library. He covered up there by apparently lighting a fire. He was looking for Miller's *drop*."

"To hell with this!" the murderer said impatiently. "Turn around."

I KNEW what was coming, and the muscles in my legs began to tighten. If I didn't move, I'd be dead but fast.

"I figured you out," I said, and my hand went toward the letter opener in my pocket sneaking higher second by

second. It was a poor weapon against the gun, but it was my only chance.

"You pulled the arrow from Jackson's throat," I went on. "You pulled it free. You didn't know that hunting arrows, with their broad tips, must be pushed through, not pulled out like target arrows."

"So that was it!" The gun tilted a bit, centering my chest.

"Yes!" Sweat trickled down my face. "I missed that angle at the time. You missed it entirely, for you'd never seen hunting arrows used."

My hand was almost at my pocket now. I intended to throw it and then dive for my gun. I knew I didn't have a chance, but I had to make the try.

"You're smart, Lieutenant." The voice was laughing at me. "This time I'll push the arrow on through."

I went for the pointed steel in my pocket. I slipped my fingers in and closed them, dropping at the same time. Then hell smashed at my chest, and I went falling to one side. I looked down, agony twisting a ball of fire in my brain, and saw the feathered shaft of the arrow which protruded high up on my chest.

There had been no noise, just a rustling *chug* that wouldn't have carried ten yards. Only the fact that I had dropped had kept the arrow from skewering me in the belly or heart.

I think I screamed; I don't remember. But even as I fell, I lunged forward and caught up my Special. I tugged at the trigger, aiming blindly, and the gun rocked in my hand with sharp blasting noises. The shotgun went off, lead slashing over my head, smashing plaster down in a white shower.

I didn't miss; I couldn't have. I emptied the gun, and all the slugs walked a line across the killer's chest. They blew his chest to pieces, hammering him about in a twisting fall and dropping him unslackly, without movement, without sound.

I sat down. I felt nausea tugging at my senses. I dropped my gun and leaned back against the wall and heard the

scraping of the arrow-head on the plaster. Blackness swirled and I wondered if I was dying.

Then feet pounded on the stairs. The door slammed open, rocking the killer's body. Hands caught at me, holding me upright. There were voices, but I only caught one word.

"Him!" the voice said incredulously.

"Yes," I answered. "Berg!"

Then I passed out.

I WAS sick. A fire raged in my chest, and only after a needle had been used on my arm was I able to breathe easily. Things were hazy, but I recognized the library and I could see the cops and the women who stood over the couch on which I lay. The rays of morning sun hit the couch.

"It missed your lung, Pop," Captain Spangler said. "Take it easy."

I sat up, grasping for support, fighting away the hands which would have held me down. I guess I grinned when I saw Juan Mercado's grim face.

"So I got there in time?" I said.

"Yes, Lieutenant," the Spaniard said. "I want you to know—"

"Forget it," I said, and looked around for Spangler. It looked as though he was a tree swaying in a heavy wind. Then he steadied, and I spoke to him.

"Berg did it," I said. "He admitted it. He had one barrel of the shotgun rigged as a spring gun. He cocked it with the cleaning rod, pushing the spring back until it caught."

"We found it," Spangler said. "There's a tricky trigger arrangement on the bottom of the barrel."

He lifted the long blue-black gun from a table. "I'll have the lab look it over," he said. "It looks like a crude version of the grenade-lofters used by the underground overseas. There's practically no sound." He twisted the gun about, running one finger into the barrel. "That's a high-temper spring, almost thirty inches long; it took every bit of my strength to ram it back with the cleaning rod and engage it on the trigger end."

"It's strong enough," I admitted, feeling the ache in my chest.

Spangler nodded. "It's like those toy games where a spring gun shoots arrows, only twenty times as powerful."

Mercado said, "I've seen divers use guns like it, spearing fish thirty feet down in the water." He shook his head. "This Berg was clever in his own twisted way."

"Plenty," I admitted. "He must have figured out everything pretty close."

"Yeah!" Captain Spangler laid the gun aside, "A strip of L-shaped metal engages the coiled-back spring. When the trigger is pulled, the L-end slips from the hole in the bottom of the barrel and the spring is released. The arrow is shot with terrific force. And since all power is applied in direction of flight, the arrow would have plenty of shock even at the end of its flight."

"There are marks over his workbench where he tried the gun out with the rod and arrows," I said. "I missed the idea the first time I looked."

"We got a brief report from the F.B.I.," Spangler said, "Berg was in a concentration camp but he's been over here for some time. He worked in one of Miller and Jackson's food canneries. He left, after getting his arm caught in the belt system. Signed a release, absolving the company."

"That's it," I said. "They gypped him out of compensation so he figured he was entitled to the money. Of course neither of the bosses would recognize one more underling from their factories. I guess those years in a concentration camp made him go off his balance. And I suppose the rumor that Miller and Jackson had been more interested in making big money than winning the war, so victims could get out of those torture camps, made him hate the two of them even more. So he planned the whole thing."

"He set the stage, using arrows, knowing we'd never think of a spring gun. We fell for everything he planned; and except that I remembered about the arrow

being torn from Jackson's throat, he'd never have been suspected, not with an arm that couldn't draw a bow."

I lay back against the couch for a moment, my head whirling like a kite. Grace Blaine handed me a drink; and for the first time I felt gratitude to her. I swallowed the whiskey, and in a moment my head cleared.

"Berg covered beautifully," I said. "He was so damned mousy he was barely suspected. I never thought of his firing just one shot when Miller was killed. And later, when he offered to search the garage and his apartment, well, I gave little thought to it. But when Hennessy was killed, it added up. He—"

Juan Mercado broke in. "He came to the car and knocked the cop down, after asking him to step out," Mercado said. "I was in a panic, and when he told me to hide in his apartment, I agreed." He spread wondering hands. "When we got to his apartment, he struck me down and tied me up while I was unconscious. I came to while you were talking. I was under the bed."

"You're lucky to be alive," Captain Spangler said.

"That's right," I said. "He meant to kill you, thus clearing himself. Then when I broke in, he tried to kill me. He would have done the job, then killed you and set the scene to look as though we'd knocked each other off. Oh, he was crafty as the devil."

I saw then the letter opener that Captain Spangler held in his hand. I reached out for it, taking it and turning it over and over in my fingers.

"Miller was crafty, too," I said. "He was afraid of being hooked on that Senate investigation, and so he made certain that he'd have no assets to trace. Berg found out about this letter opener and Jackson suspected."

"What are you talking about?" Captain Spangler asked.

I CAME to my feet, rocking loosely on legs that seemed to have no strength.

Then I went toward the fireplace, ignoring the Captain's orders to get back on the couch. I squatted at the fireplace and searched the bricked back.

I found the hole, just as I had known I would. Back in prohibition days things like this were common.

"A drop?" Captain Spangler said, and I nodded.

I thrust the needle point of the opener into the tiny hole. There was a tiny flare of sparks, and then contact was made, and electricity passing through the ice-pick-like key tripped the lock.

The entire back of the fireplace swung open like a door, revealing a steel-lined fireproof vault packed with two leather suitcases. I didn't have to look; I knew what would be in them. Stocks and cash and untraceable bonds, all the dirty money Miller had made during the war, ready for a quick getaway, safe from government investigations.

"That does it," I said to Florence Miller. "There's your husband's money."

There was talking then, lots of it, but I missed most, for things were blanking out in my head. Hands lifted me and carried me out, and the next I knew I was riding in the back seat of Captain Spangler's car.

"Everything okay, Captain?" I asked.

"Everything's okay, Pop," Captain Spangler said. "Everything's under control."

Things were going in circles again in my head, partly from shock, partly from the shots the M.E. had given me.

"Damn being a cop," I remember saying.

Then the car was pulling up to the curb before the hospital and he was helping me from the door. I saw Meg in the hospital door, and I stood straight and walked ahead of the Captain. I didn't want to scare her.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure, Meg, sure," I said. "I'm a cop, and cops die in bed."

Sure they do.
Sometimes!

Pesos de Oro



Steel sang, and the taut blades flashed. Vela shifted, fainted, parried Lavaca's savage blows

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

A POX upon a country which did not possess sufficient horses! Vela stood on one leg and swung the other across the back of the razor-spined burro, thus dismounting. He shook the dust from his cloak and replaced it and pulled the wrinkles from hose which betrayed the long months he had been in the interior, far from the costumers'

shops of a city. And while he did this, the muleteer made exorbitant demands for the rental of the animal he had just quitted. Vela fixed the fellow with a stern eye.

"Three *pesos de oro* for having been divided from breech to chin by this miserable brute? Does a headsman ask reward for the loving work he does upon

your neck? I owe you nothing. But for the good of your soul, I'll shortly burn a candle at St. Vibania's with a prayer that so long as you live, you'll not have to ride one of your own animals. That—when I should spit you without mercy for the three days of torture I have endured under pretext of passage down from the mountains! I tell you, were I not all but ready to sail home to Spain at last and thus in love with my fellow man, I would not be so generous!"

The muleteer looked at the rapier on Vela's thigh and since he was obviously acquainted with the queer justice found in king's cavaliers, he shrugged and contented himself with a barely audible grumble. Vela ignored this. He further straightened his costume and strode to the head of the street opening before him.

The colonies of New Granada were come upon peaceful days. Cortez and Pizarro were but memories—along with the bright full days in which a man could find adventure in the Indies. Here was Cartagena, queen of the colonies, and the outer city without fortifications, without even gates. It was time to go home—back to Galicia and Leon and Cordova, where cockerels still strutted the streets, aching for quarrel—where there were good blades yet to be crossed—where there were ladies so delicately fashioned and graciously gowned that a tall man could look down the neck of the haughtiest. The homeland—ah!

Two squares into the city, Vela turned onto a broad avenue which led to the high gates of the inner citadel, the headquarters of the Army of Spain. For all the long distance he traveled—for all the shabbiness of his gear and the emptiness of his pockets, he walked with light step. Three years of service, admirably rendered the crown, were finished. In the office of the commandant of the garrison he would find a packet containing something more than a year's pay in back wages. Almost a princely sum—more than sufficient to outfit him again in splendor and to buy him cabin passage

home. Here also he would find the new agent sent out by the crown to relieve him—no less a personage than Blas San Martin, heir to ducal title, a fortune, and possessor of the second blade in Spain. Vela felt sympathy for San Martin. He could afford it. Sword and man alike would rust in this inactive and sultry climate. But let San Martin learn this for himself. Let him learn it while Augustin Vela bent steel in the courts and alleyways of Madrid and Valladolid.

IT WAS hard upon evening. Dusk was rolling down from the hills inland. The gates of the citadel were closed. Vela halted before these and gave his name to the guard. The fellow quit his place to take the name into the corridors. Vela took an impatient turn before the gate. A figure, huddled beside a pillar, clawed at the hem of his cloak.

"Alms, Senor—the blessings of the poor for a small coin—"

Vela flicked the cloak away from grimy fingers and scarcely glanced at the crouching beggar.

"Peace and patience," he said lightly. "I return this way. And with gold pieces to fill my now empty purse. Try me when I come out—"

"Out, Senor?" the beggar murmured. "Believe me a friend. I am not sure you will come out. Into the alley, there—I'd have a word with you."

So this old game was yet played. Vela chuckled. This beggar had a strong firm voice. And for all his huddling, he owned a stout body which he could not conceal. So he thought that once he got the cavalier into the shadows of the alley he could have alms—a whole purse full of them. Vela was of half a mind to try the fellow, just to try his own steel. But at this moment the guard reappeared and swung up the bars of the gate.

"The commandant will see you immediately, Senor Vela," he said.

Vela laughed in the beggar's face. "Wait," he counseled. "A full purse is better than a thin one."

The beggar raised his hand—in denial

of dishonest purpose, likely. Vela brushed past him without listening and the gate closed behind him. He followed the guard into the head of a corridor, where a house servant led him up a flight of stairs to the door of a cabinet. Vela stepped through this into the presence of the commandant.

The officer sat at a wide low table, indifferently lighted by a guttering candle. The remains of a meal were at his elbow and traces of it greasy about his mouth. Vela perceived that the commandant of Cartagena was drunk. But drunkenness had not thawed the sly calculating chill in his small, closely set eyes. He pushed a flagon of Malaga wine away from him, spilling its contents over its rim.

"Ah, Senor Vela," he breathed. "I have sad news for you, I fear."

There was no sadness on the fat face and unctuousness was a thing Vela could not stomach. "I'll judge the sadness," he snapped.

The commandant spread pudgy hands. "The Cavalier San Martin—" he murmured. "I have here the log of the ship on which he had passage. A storm among the cays scarcely two days off our shore. Waves like mountains. And indiscreet insistence on being on deck at a dangerous time. A yard carried away by the wind—and the cavalier with it. Gone, Senor Vela. Lost in the night and the wind. A tragedy!"

Vela heard this stonily. Tragedy, yes. He had not known San Martin. But he well knew the dangers of crossing the Ocean Sea, even yet. And knowing his own nature, he could understand the recklessness of a shipbound horseman might keep him on deck when prudence demanded he remain below. A misfortune.

"And his dispatches," the commandant continued sorrowfully. "I fear they were lost with him, Senor. There has been no trace found among his effects."

"The devil with his dispatches!" Vela growled. "They were for him, his orders from the king. They were not for me. I

am relieved. I am for home—tonight, tomorrow. The crown can send out a new agent to take his place. I want one thing—the pay packet which should have come with him, addressed to me in your care, Excellency."

The commandant nodded. "You hurry me," he complained. "I come to that. There was no packet, either. I fear it went overboard with the cavalier."

VELA felt a sensation akin to a rapier point grating along his ribs. "*San-tiago!*" The word was wrung from him.

The commandant sipped at his Malaga and nodded. "It is regrettable. A telling blow. You are without funds for gear or passage. My heart bleeds for you. I well know how a man long in the colonies dreams of Castile. The fields, the towns, the women. And it takes so long to accumulate enough pay for such a return. We soldiers of the king are niggardly rewarded, in fact."

Vela eyed the fat man with distaste and distrust. The commandant smelled, even across the table. His gross body was rotting with the ills of the climate. And a Vela, one of a long line of Galician swordsmen whose pride and fortune for generations had been their ability at soldiering could not but retch that such a bloated pig should claim brotherhood in the profession of gentlemen. Vela rose.

"Shipmasters and ship clerks make errors in their logs. So do clerks and masters ashore. Thieves are about, even in honest offices. Should I discover I have been given a false answer here and that my monies are in fact ashore in Cartagena, it will go hard with you, Excellency. A private agent of the king is not without influence with the governor; a Vela is not without his steel—" Vela touched the hilt of his rapier.

The commandant shrugged tolerantly. "You let disappointment cloud your judgment," he suggested smoothly. "But I bear no ill will. A loan, perhaps, which I might be able to arrange with a certain merchant?"

"And from which you would, of course,

make no commission—" Vela suggested sourly.

The commandant flushed. "Keep a tongue in your head!" he snapped. "I could be a valuable friend. When you are convinced of this, you might send me word."

The fat man clapped his hands for a servant. The lackey appeared and led Vela back into the corridors. In a moment he was past the sentry at the gate. Vela glanced about for the beggar to whom he had made a promise of alms. The fellow was a few yards down the street. Vela swung toward him. And as he did so, a knot of shadows tumbled out of a dark doorway. A knot of shadows interlaced with the wicked tracery of drawn steel. Three—four—half a dozen.

Bitterness, disappointment, and the hunger in his empty belly fused into a wicked eagerness. Assassins, brigands—the devil, who cared? It was enough that they were enemies. His feet shifted for purchase on the rough cobbles of the paving. His blade whistled pleasantly as it came free of its scabbard, and he put its point neatly into the center of the vee at the open collar of the first man's tunic.

THE OTHERS came on over the body of the first man, a wicked ring of surrounding steel. These were hired dogs, better fit for swinging axes than the heavy blades in their hands. But combined, they put a man on his mettle, at that. *Parry, riposte, septime-high!*

Another went down, clutching at his belly with suddenly agonized hands. But the other four pressed in grimly. *Santiago!* What was this? He had thought these were companions of the beggar who had accosted him at the gate of the citadel. He would not go into the alley, so the alley had come to him. But not even hungry fools would battle so lustily for a man's purse. It was his life they were after. Vela began to frown. It was curious, too, that the gate was but yards behind him and yet the guard there, who must plainly see what was

afoot, gave no alarm. So very curious.

Vela swore roundly and put the slender point of his weapon into the soft hollow under a breastbone. One of the remaining dogs bellowed a loud alarm. Vela's consternation grew. Sins of the saints! What a place when the attacker cried aid instead of the attacked! But in a moment he understood. Some without steel, armed instead with pike poles and bludgeons, more men poured out of the shadows. More ruffians. And what had been a fair outlet for anger became a desperate stand.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vela saw the beggar who had been crouching down the street head toward him in a full run, the loose length of his filthy mantle upraised about his knees. So this was the beggar's work. The kill was at hand and the fellow was in for it. Vela worked to one side, hoping for one lunge at the dog. But when the beggar reached the fringe of the tangle, steel gleamed above his head and an uncommonly skilful blade attacked the brigands from the rear.

Vela moved in close to the fellow, not understanding and without time for questions. The two of them could work better arm to arm. Men piled up before them, neatly skewered. But the odds were much too heavy.

"Give ground!" the beggar grunted. "Back—back—"

Together they worked along the wall of the building at their backs, trying to make for the open part of the street. And somewhere within the citadel, alarms were sounding. Vela heard the creak of the gates as they swung open.

"Quick, slash and run for it!" the beggar muttered. "The garrison will be on us in a moment!"

"On us?" Vela lowered his point in astonishment. At the same instant, a shrewdly swung pikestaff rapped solidly against the side of his head above the ear. He staggered into the beggar who gripped him strongly and sprinted across the cobbles, dragging Vela with him. It was a close thing. A wide blade put a

rent in Vela's cloak and his head was ringing so that he didn't know the course they took or how he put one foot before the other. At a corner there was a breather with pursuit close behind them. The beggar renewed his grip on Vela's arm.

"You fool, I tried to warn you!" he growled. "I hope you can run as well as you fence. Keep with me!"

The beggar angled across a square, dodged into another narrow track, and ran down its length. Skirting a second square, he veered suddenly and pulled Vela through a studded door. Vela had a glimpse of an ironwork sign on the wall above the opening: *The Hawk and Dove*. An inn.

THERE was not overmuch trade within the place. Scatterings from the middle portion of the city. The beggar kicked the street door closed and flattened his back against it, panting. Vela rocked beside him, trying to clear his still ringing head. A man approached. The beggar spoke rapidly to him.

"Pedro, this is Gustin Vela, about whom I've spoken. Take care of him. He's in from a long road down from the mountains. There's devil's work afoot near the gate of the citadel. I've got to get back. Maybe some of the dogs are still about and I can track them to their den. Can we fight a snake until we know the hole into which it crawls?"

Swinging on Vela, the beggar gripped his arm again. "Stay here until I return. You'll be safe and you're among friends." The fellow pulled open the door and slid out into the night. The host of the inn led Vela to a table in an obscure corner and seated him.

"A roast of mutton?" he suggested quietly. Vela nodded and he moved away.

The singing in Vela's ears subsided. His vision cleared. He studied the interior of the Hawk and Dove. This public room was not large. A medium man could touch the dark smoked wood of the ceiling with the tip of his sword.

The furniture was without elegance, but it had a look of sturdy comfort. Tables were scattered about the floor with pleasant irregularity and there was no long taproom counter or bar. In its place was a cupboard in which stood gleaming rows of flagons. Flanking this, against the wall, were wine tuns—the actual casks in which the wine had been shipped—with vintage and vintner plainly labeled on the head of each. Honest merchandising, reminiscent of the best taverns in Spain and a guarantee that the wine of the Hawk and Dove was no watered pap or blinding poison, blended of cheap Madeira and native Indian *pulque*, such as Vela had encountered in too many colonial hostleries.

The host returned with a tall flagon in his hand and placed it before Vela. "Courtesy of my house, Senor. A Malaga imported by myself, direct from Spain. Fit wine for a cavalier. You have my word—"

Vela bowed gratitude. Music began to pulse at the upper end of the room. Strange music. In part Andalusian, in part Aztec or Toltec. Savage, tuned to the beat of a man's blood. A dancer parted the curtain over a doorway and mounted a small dais. She was dressed as a gypsy. Too brief a skirt for a Spanish dancer, but decorous enough, except for the length of leg showing. The girl had a body. Presently Vela took notice of her face. Vivid, almost reckless, but with softness and charm. She was small. She was young. Vela admired, but his taste in women ran to conflict and conquest; she seemed more a child than a challenge. Nevertheless, he watched her until the dance was finished.

When the curtain dropped, Vela scanned the rest of the room. Opposite, nearly as discreetly located as his own corner table, elegance was at supper. A thin, overdressed, pasty-faced gallant who all too obviously had lost both sword and buckler to the woman with him. The woman drew Vela's gaze, and he promptly forgot the little dancer.

It was hard to know for certain, since this one was seated, but Vela thought she was tall. The proper height for a tall man and long enough of limb to give grace to the full curves which her stays failed to conceal. A figure corseted out of convention, not out of need. Her head turned in Vela's direction. The face was beautiful, but with a set to it which he could not identify. Competence, perhaps—sureness. A beautiful face, a crown of jewel-netted hair, and the figure of a goddess. Vela caught her attention and bowed. She passed a dainty kerchief across her lips and smiled behind it. Vela grinned inwardly. Ah—when he had eaten!

THE HOST returned with a generous platter of roasted meat. Vela apologetically turned out the empty lining of his purse. The host grinned and shrugged.

"Money is of no matter, *Senor*," he said. "We do not talk of cost. You were well introduced to the Hawk and Dove."

"The man who brought me here, what is he called?"

The host's brows raised in surprise. "His name isn't known to you?"

Vela shook his head. The host shrugged. "He is called *El Gato*, here."

"The Cat!" Vela snorted. "You give scant answers!"

"We are cautious," the host agreed. "For reason. Certain of us do an importing business under this roof, merchants who pay no tribute to *Compania Importados*—the house which attempts to control all the trade of the colonies. Thus, we have enemies. Powerful enemies, *Senor*. We are careful."

"Your friend, *El Gato*, ordered me to wait for him here. Why should I?"

"To increase your fortune or the length of your life. The Cat is one of us."

Vela grumbled. Talk from a witches' kettle, without meaning.

The host drifted away. Vela sliced himself a fine roll of meat and attacked it. While he ate, the street door opened. A large, loosely jointed ruffian with a

commanding manner entered. He was followed by a dozen more of his own kind, hardy and armed. These scattered immediately through the crowd. The newcomer moved across the room toward the host. The two of them met near Vela's table.

The host, small, compact and fiery enough of eye, glared at the big man. "We have a quiet night here, *Lavaca*. What do you want?"

The ruffian grinned. "Not much, *Ortega*. Import fees on six tuns of Malaga, three hundred bolts of silks, linen, and sail cloth, and thirty-four hundred-weights of cutlery. It appears this cargo, by some curious accident, came into Cartagena assigned to you instead of the warehouses of *Compania Importados*."

The host stiffened. "That cargo was brought in at my orders for myself and friends who will pay tribute to the crown, but not to lawless merchants. Get out, *Lavaca*!"

The big man made sympathetic noises with his tongue against his teeth. "We were afraid that was the case," he said blandly. "It would be hard for our business if it was generally learned in the colony that private parties could make such imports. I am short of time. Send a lackey for the gold, at once. Three hundred pesos should cover the fees for this cargo. You can add another three hundred for a fine to improve your memory!"

The host slowly shook his head. Impatience showed on the face of the big man. Vela's eyes swung over the crowded room. Men were edging uneasily toward the door. Others were sitting with stony faces, watching and waiting. He saw the woman at the corner table. She seemed fascinated. She was leaning a little forward, her lips parted and her eyes gleaming. Her kerchief was caught up under her chin in one hand.

The big man facing the host spoke sharply. "You're not the first fool who thought himself as big as the Company," he snapped. "You know what happened

to the others, Ortega. The choice is yours—”

“Get out!” the host repeated quietly.

The big man shrugged. Vela thought his eyes touched the corner table where the woman with the golden hair sat. It was hard to know. Certainly Vela’s eyes were there. The woman seemed to sense Vela’s stare—or perhaps she was suddenly conscious of her own intensity in following the scene. She leaned back with practised languidness. In the movement, her kerchief escaped her. The dainty bit of cambric and lace fluttered to the floor. The big man in the center of the room thundered out an order to his scattered men.

“The wine tuns—and the storerooms, upstairs! Quick, you dogs, and make the lesson sting!”

EFFICIENTLY and betraying practice at such work, the lackeys who had filed in after the big man made a concerted rush for the wine tuns and the exposed stairway leading to a half-floor, raised above the level of the taproom, at the rear of the building. Ortega, the host of the Hawk and Dove, leaped up beside the dancing girl who had reappeared on the dais below the stairs.

“At them, little ones!” the host belowered with an astonishing tone of authority. “Do we cringe or do we make our own justice?”

With this last, Ortega leaped down from the dais, brandishing a kitchen knife nearly as large as a seaman’s cutlass. Vela saw him split the steel casque over a ruffian’s head. He saw, also, the dancing girl as she dented another skull with a lusty swing of a long-handled hearth skillet. Then the orderliness of the tavern was tumult, customers rising to their feet amid overturned tables and producing weapons which went to work as eagerly as the host’s own.

Vela was startled. But, also, he had wisdom. A wisdom bred of more tavern brawls than he cared to count at the moment. A man had to be sure of his friends. He could not take the mere

word of even so remarkable a beggar as the one who had been waiting outside the gates of the citadel of Cartagena. And besides, the host of the Hawk and Dove and his friends were acquitting themselves tolerably without assistance from a king’s agent who had come into their city to be relieved from just such work as this.

Gustin Vela put his elbows out a little to prevent the men milling near him from canting his table and spilling his meat to the floor and he eyed the struggle about him with approving eyes, noting a good stroke here and clumsiness there with the discerning eye of a professional.

Once he got a glimpse of the woman in the diagonal corner. Her gallant, obviously ill pleased with the sudden duty thrust upon him, had come to his feet with his blade in his hand and he stood at the corner of their table as a defense between his companion and the violence surging back and forth across the taproom. This was, in itself, somewhat curious, Vela thought. His experience with languid ladies was that they baited sportingly for a flaring of hot tempers and the run of blood, but that when their baiting bore fruit, they straightway grew faint and clamored shrilly to escape from the sight and sound of conflict. Thus it was the usual duty of an escort to see them to a safer place.

But this woman with the golden hair was languid no longer. Her whole body was tense, forward leaning. Her eyes were afire. She seemed in the grip of an almost sensuous pleasure, as though she, too, could view violence with the abstraction of one accustomed to it. Vela pondered this and wondered at her identity. But he did not let curiosity slow his appetite.

Once, when the vandals broke into a storeroom above and flung bolts of cloth down over the heads of those below, after first tying the free ends to the rail of the balcony, he was tempted to join the *mêlée*. A man who had recently

slept beside dim trails and swallowed the poor fare of mountain huts could not easily face the wanton destruction of such materials of elegance and good living. Too, when one of the great tuns of Malaga collapsed under repeated blows of an axe and the good wine flooded across the floor, he swore softly. But he was not finished with his meal.

He worked knife and finger with relish until a sudden sortie by Ortega and his friends carried the press of vandals back a little and an eddy of the fighting swirled toward the table where the woman with the golden hair sat. The man with the woman called out sharply and flung up his steel. But men in bitter fighting are little apt to heed mere words or the kind of swordsmanship the dandy with the pasty face displayed.

RELUCTANTLY, Vela rose from his seat. Leaving his poinard upright in his roast, he ran easily across the room. With a bow to the woman now shrinking uneasily behind her table, he flicked a man lightly. Stung, the fellow wheeled and Vela put his point through the turning shoulder. Howling, the fellow made way. Vela pressed forward. A ruffian with a pikestaff swung at his head. Vela ducked agilely. The pikestaff whistled above him and struck the gallant across the table on the upper arm. Even the wince of pain was foppish. The fool let his sword drop from his numbed fingers.

Vela made a flashing arc of his own blade, driving the man with the pikestaff and three others back, and he spoke sharply over his shoulder at the woman, "To the door—swiftly—with the Senor."

The woman glanced at Vela, but she obeyed. The thin dandy with her followed, clutching at his injured arm. Vela kept his blade at work until he felt street air against the back of his neck. He eased, then, and located the doorway himself. He stepped into the street, pulling the door closed.

An ornate sedan chair was on the far

curb, bearers waiting beside it. The woman with the golden hair was stepping into this. She saw him and smiled.

"Our gratitude, Senor," she said with a voice like low bells. "Francisco, a reward for the cavalier. . ."

Her companion, still favoring his arm and plainly without love for Vela, poked clumsily for the purse at his belt. Vela swung off his hat and bowed low.

"I have seen the Senorita," he said. "What reward exists beyond that for a cavalier?"

The woman's smile widened. "Senora," she corrected archly. "A pretty speech. We hear few such in Cartagena. And since you reward so easily, you may call on me that I may repay the debt again. At home, then—in an hour?"

Bold enough, but not graceless. A charming invitation. Here was a fair companion who could make an exciting thing of dalliance. But he was not to be hurried. He shook his head and gestured toward the inn. "Later than an hour, Senora, with your permission," he said, "I am not done here, I think. I am but half through my supper. . ."

Grinning, Vela replaced his hat and hauled the door of the inn open. A ruffian was struggling with Ortega, the host, just within the opening. Vela caught this fellow by the shoulder, spun him, and rapped his head against the jamb of the door. When the man went limp, Vela bent him so swiftly over his thigh that his body sailed out into the street. Another of the vandals was within reach from the doorway. Vela slashed at his shins with his blade. The man bent protectively. Vela rapped upward with the hilt of his weapon into the lowered face, caught the staggering body, and flung it also out onto the cobbles.

The woman with the golden hair, still but half into her chair, was staring at these and at Vela. He grinned recklessly. "My apologies if I have raised dust to your skirts, Senora. These keep me from my meat and I am hungry!"

Stepping through the door of the inn, Vela pulled it closed. Having begun

this, he had a desire to see it completed. And things were beginning to go badly with the host of the Hawk and Dove. Ortega and his companions were backed up against the cupboard beside the wine tuns, facing the best blades among the ruffians. It was time Galician steel repaid the courtesy with which Ortega had received a stunned and penniless cavalier into his house.

THE LEADER of the vandals who had attacked Ortega's inn was in the fore of the line pressing against the host and his companions. The big man had an epee, heavier and less limber than the rapiers in general use and accounted by some the more dangerous weapon because of this. The fellow lacked a true swordsman's art, but he was fiendishly clever with the stiff blade, for all of that. He engaged, disengaged, and parried Ortega's large kitchen knife with lightning speed, keeping Ortega desperately pressed and dodging constantly to avoid being skewered.

Gustin Vela had a sudden urge to cross steel with this Lavaca, to see if the man's enjoyment could last when he faced one who was near to his equal. To this end, Vela worked a little more rapidly than prudence recommended, perhaps. A flick of the tip of his weapon between a pair of striving shoulder blades or across the exposed nape of a neck or through the slack of a pair of breeches. Then, as the man ahead of him turned, a quick thrust, an occasional forced sidestep or parry, and a lunge. Vela stepped carefully, avoiding the bodies of those who fell in front of him and always protecting himself from flank attack.

Pedro Ortega saw him and beamed relief. Lavaca saw him and scowled. But the big man made no attempt to work closer to him. Vela slowly increased the tempo of his attack until his blade was a shimmer of light, a whispering sound, too swift for the eye to follow. Cheeks opened. Blood ran. Doublets were rent.

"One man for a bolt of cloth!" Vela shouted. "Two for a cask of wine. And



a round dozen for my supper. *Guala*, Senor, you are clumsy!"

Swinging his huge kitchen knife, Pedro Ortega took a vandal's head half from his trunk with a fine clean sweep and took in turn an inch or two from Lavaca's epee. Lavaca snarled as Ortega winced.

"Bleed, you fool!" he growled. "If I could give the orders, I'd quarter you where you stand. As it is, six hundred pesos will buy your life."

Ortega flattened against the cupboard behind him and swiped boldly at Lavaca. "Ha!" he shouted back. "Who gives Lavaca orders but his own greed? You want a tribute on all imports. You'll be paid in steel, here. Fall off!"

The big brigand snapped his blade along Ortega's cheek, opening swarthy skin. Ortega swore a soldier's oath and struck back with his huge knife. Vela

took two men with a single thrust, spitting them together like a pair of pigeons, and shouldered through the front rank of the vandals to face Lavaca across a little open space.

"And here's the paymaster, dog!" he shouted at the big man. Lavaca wheeled and stepped back from Ortega, giving himself a little additional space. His epee shifted and darted out toward Vela. Steel sang as the taut blades slid along each other. Vela feinted competently. The feint was met with equal skill and the epee disengaged to leap in low. Vela parried and for a moment he stood before Lavaca with their blades locked and their faces scant inches apart.

LAVACA growled a low oath. He backed, crouched, his eyes searching Vela for a weakness, an opening. In that moment, a man behind spoke sharply in Lavaca's ear. The big man took another backward step, straightened, and glanced out over the room. Vela did likewise. Under the impetus afforded by Vela's attack against the rear of the line of vandals, Ortega's friends had reformed and counterattacked, driving the ruffians back. Already some of them had been forced near the door. The room was littered with their companions, dragging themselves from table to table or lying on the floor. The attack on the Hawk and Dove had cost Pedro Ortega wine and cloth but it had cost Lavaca men—a lot of them.

Lavaca leaped in toward Vela. Their blades locked again. The big man leaned close to Vela. "Leave Cartagena tonight, you blundering fool!" he rasped. "If you don't, we will meet again—tomorrow!"

Jumping back, Lavaca turned and plowed in among his men. "Out of this!" he said sharply. "We've taught the dogs a lesson. We'll see how well they've learned it. If this business isn't finished, we can always come back—"

The street door was dragged open. Suddenly belly full of this and glad enough for Lavaca's order to retreat, the ruffians poured through it. Vela bent,

lifted a knitted cap from the head of a dead man on the floor, and carefully wiped the good Toledo steel of his blade. The host of the Hawk and Dove had dropped down onto a bench. The dancing girl had abandoned her skillet for an armful of clean linen and a basin of hot water, with which she appeared to be equally skillful. She knelt beside Ortega, looking to his many wounds. Others in the company of the Hawk and Dove were moving through the wreckage, dragging the dead toward the door and helping those with wounds to straightened table tops and benches.

The inn was a ruin out of which order would be long in coming. The girl kneeling beside Ortega looked up into the innkeeper's face. Bitterness roughened her husky voice. "So this is what it costs to claim the rights the king promised to all in the colonies!" she said as she pulled a strip of binding tight about Ortega's knotted calf. "This is the price of justice and bravery! We've been fools, father. The king's promise of freedom in trade is a lie!"

Ortega winced under the pull of the bandage. "Best not to let our El Gato hear that, *ninita*," he suggested.

The girl put steaming water to a cut on his cheek. "El Gato!" she snorted. "A fool in a beggar's cloak!"

VELA, busy with his poinard in making wrapping strips out of the linen squares the girl had brought out, thought her eyes softened as she spoke the name. The devil! This beggar who had accosted him at the citadel was a man of accomplishments. First, a good blade under his ragged cloak. And now a fine soft-eyed wench all a-flutter over him, for all the scorn in her voice.

He spoke to the girl. "This isn't the king's business. I can promise you that."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"More promises—and from you, now? What do you, a stranger, know of this? If it is not the king's business, then whose? Lavaca's? Ha! You think

that ugly burro could make his own friends in the governor's palace?" The girl rose from beside her father and crossed to a table where a man lay chewing at his lip and watching the slow run of blood from a wound in his arm. "A sharp sword and a thick arm are not enough to account for the work being done here. Lavaca is a lackey. I want to know his master!"

"We do what we can, daughter," Ortega said gently. "But enough of troubles which do not concern Senor Vela. He was brought here and commended to our hospitality by a friend. I fear his table has been overturned and his meal lost. Could you bring him more meat from the kitchen, *ninita*?"

The girl tossed her head. "Lavaca was thorough, this time. The kitchen was wrecked, also. There is no meat worth the eating."

Ortega spread his hands and looked apologetically at Vela.

"A man with empty pockets eats where he can, Senor," Vela said. "Guala! It is of no importance."

The host of the Hawk and Dove frowned. "But I'm doubly indebted to you, Senor!" he protested. "For your sword, when things went ill for us, and your courtesy to our guests at the corner table. It is not often my inn is favored by the presence of a lady and a gentleman of the blood. I could see Francisco Leon scratched somewhat without it causing me overmuch pain. Nephew to the governor, but he is also a fop and a fool. However, to have had the lovely Senora Davila suffer discomfort under my roof. . ."

Ortega's shrug was expressive. Vela thought of the woman with the golden hair. The recollection was pleasant. "A widow, I trust—this Senora Davila?" he asked.

Pedro Ortega nodded. "Her husband died this last season. A man of business, with connection in Spain and a reputation as an honest merchant. We all regret his death. The Senora is alone. A woman of wealth, of charm, of—"

"She is a wicked woman!" Luisa Ortega flung the challenge down the room from where she was still binding up assorted wounds among her father's friends. "Even if it takes a woman's eyes to see it. Why does a man call something which can be scraped from the face or shaken from the hair beauty? Beatriz Davila is no lady!"

"That—from the daughter of a tavern-keeper—a dancer too," Ortega said wryly.

"And what's so wicked in a dancer?" the girl cried. "At least she knows better and more honest tricks than a witch who has only the charms of wealth—silks and scent. You think I'd find it hard to change the beat of your pulse, Gustin Vela?"

The girl came down the room—undulating, provocative, challenging. Vela eyed her appreciatively and his breath whistled a little against his teeth. With youth, and such skills besides—*Por Dios!* He could be making a mistake in women! Pedro Ortega cut in uncomfortably.

"Mind your manners, Luisa. Your pardon, Senor. All this gets you no closer to a meal."

"On the contrary," Vela corrected. "You have done me yeoman service. I have an invitation from our widow. Who knows but that it might also embrace food? Certainly there must be cooks in the house of Davila, although I much regret, now, that I cannot take my meal here—" Vela grinned at Luisa.

Ortega frowned again. "It was ordered by the one who brought you here that you wait for his return."

Vela laughed easily. "A beggar is a beggar, Host. Do I look like a man who would trade a lady of charm for a bundle of rags?" Vela bowed to Luisa Ortega. "You will explain for me, Senorita? I have but gone for dinner—"

"What kind of a man thinks only of his stomach?" Luisa snapped. "I hope she poisons you! And I warn you, Senor, our beggar will think you an even greater fool than I do!"

Vela fluffed the plume of his hat. "A warning is leavening for adventure," he smiled. "I thank you for yours, Senorita—"

IT APPEARED that all Cartagena knew the house of Davila. Vela had no difficulty in finding the narrow street which led to it nor the house itself, finally. It was a pretentious place of two floors, with a walled garden to the rear, sitting atop a knoll separated from the eminence of the citadel by one of the poorer sections of the city. Back of the garden, streets tipped toward the harbor. In the distance were sheds and wharves, the rigging of ships, and a strip of sand where the Ocean Sea met the colonial shore.

Vela paused, eyeing the impressive doorway, overhung by a balcony at the second floor level. Momentarily he regretted that his clothing showed such hard usage and that circumstances made him come here with food so much on his mind. The devil! If it should prove to be a fact that the fat commandant of the garrison had appropriated his pay and thus reduced Gustin Vela to this coinless kind of courting, he'd slit the gross pig's nose before he skewered him!

While Vela stood in the shadows under the balcony, the door a yard or two to one side of him swung suddenly open. A cloak-wrapped figure emerged, followed by two others. The figure was that of a man of bulk and purpose, for he had a long and impatient stride. With his two companions at heel like well-trained dogs, the fellow passed close to Vela and Gustin had a glimpse of the features of the brigand called Lavaca.

When Lavaca was past, Vela stepped up to the door with a thoughtful air. A great negress answered his knock.

"Augustin Vela, agent of the king," Vela announced. "And if that is not enough, remind your mistress of the Hawk and Dove, little more than an hour ago—"

The door closed in his face. There was the sound of heavy footsteps, a pause,

and the footsteps returning. The door reopened. The negress grinned a toothy welcome. "Come in, Capitan. The Senora is in the garden."

Vela parted with hat and cloak and followed a sullen lackey down a long hall to a court at the rear. Here, under a canopy, Beatriz Davila sat at a small table loaded with expensive ware containing an extravagant meal. She looked up at his entrance and indicated a seat beside her.

"I expected you, Senor," she said. "You spoke of eating at the rascally inn from which you rescued me, but I thought the place in ruins and I doubted you'd fare well. Consequently, I have provided for you, here."

Vela bowed. "A woman who understands the needs of a man so well has no lack of slaves, Senora," he said. "Count me one, also."

Gustin Vela was practical enough to take all things in their proper course. Producing his knife, he began to eat with relish. Beatriz Davila watched him with open interest.

"I have taken the liberty of making inquiries through certain friends, Senor Vela," she told him quietly. "Would it surprise you to learn that I not only know your name but your connection with the crown and the fact that you have come to Cartagena to find a ship for Spain?"

"Surprise me?" Vela asked blandly. "No more than it did to see a brigand called Lavaca leaving this house as I reached it, Senora."

THE WOMAN'S lids came down over her eyes. "These are troubled times. Perhaps you do not understand. Lavaca is head of the band of brigands calling themselves *Compania Importados*. You may have heard that my husband left me a small trading house. It must operate for me to continue to live. And as at Hawk and Dove, demands are made on my trade. I am a woman and helpless. I must pay the fees demanded. Lavaca came to collect tonight for a cargo I

received just this week from Spain."

Vela eyed the pleasant garden beyond the court. He smiled. Lifting a glass of wine, he nodded to the widow. "To your wisdom, Senora," he proposed. "Certainly you fare better than Pedro Ortega and his daughter."

"You charge me with a lack of courage?" Beatriz Davila asked with a sudden flash of fire.

"On the contrary. The toast was to your wisdom," Vela countered. "You remain in business while the Hawk and Dove does not. But, *Guala!* must we talk of trade when the night breeze is warm?"

The woman slid along the bench on which they sat until she was close beside Vela. She smiled at him and shook her head. "No, not of trade, Senor. But I would give you a warning in return for the service you did me at that inn. I have heard of the tragic loss of Blas San Martin on the crossing. I have heard of the loss of San Martin's papers and the monies due you. And I see by the set of your chin that you distrust our fat commandant. You make a mistake in that. The wise thing is to accept the truth and set sail for Spain, immediately. Doubtless you can secure replacement of your pay, once you are in Cadiz."

Vela nodded. "Doubtless," he agreed. "But passage to Spain is no light matter and a man with empty pockets can buy little. My one hope is to see the governor."

"Believe me, friend Gustin," the woman said earnestly, "no hope lies there. Old Hernandez Leon is kept in the castle by gout and his nephew, who was with me at the Hawk and Dove, is more than half the ruler of Cartagena. It is Francisco you would see, not the old man. And he would do nothing for you. I am barely able to trade with him for the small favors I require for myself. But the ship *Blanca* sails with the morning tide. If you will take passage on her without fail, I could manage a loan of sufficient size to buy you the crossing. Once in

Spain, with your fortunes mended, you could send me repayment."

VELA had finished eating. He stretched his boots far out in front of him and sighed with deep comfort. It was with an effort that he recalled the grossness of the commandant at the citadel and the fat man's incivility. It was with an effort that he remembered a beggar to whom he owed a little something—certainly the courtesy of seeing the fellow once again. And it was with effort that he brought to mind the ruin of the Hawk and Dove, the gentility and hardy courage of Pedro Ortega, and the bitter imprecations which Luisa Ortega had heaped upon the justice of the King whom Augustin Vela was pledged to defend with his life's blood.

Spain beckoned as alluringly as before. But there were these small matters which required attention first. He shook his head with an honest enough regret. "I risk a name for ingratitude. But I cannot, unfortunately, leave this city so soon as the morning tide."

There was finality in his tone. The woman appeared to sense it. She shrugged. "If you have finished your meal, Senor—" she suggested.

Vela rose and followed her across the court to a small sitting room. She gestured toward a decanter of wine on a low table. Vela poured himself a generous glass. The woman sat down at a small writing table and dipped a quill. Vela watched her disinterestedly while she wrote a scant few words on a piece of paper, sanded it, creased it through the middle, and waxed it closed with a dainty seal heated in the flame of a candle. Rising, she rejoined Vela and made a signal to a servant in a hallway beyond the doorway. When the servant had taken the sealed packet from her, she laughed deprecatingly.

"A woman does not appreciate a man in a household until she is without one, Senor," she explained. "The duties of home and business are sometimes strangely mixed."

With her hand upon Vela's forearm, the widow led the way out into the garden. The air was heavy with the warm smell of the restless sea. A giant *copa de oro* ran from trellis to trellis along the enclosing wall, its great gold flowers spilling beauty and fragrance across the gray stones. White shell pathways spoke softly underfoot. Strange honeyed flowers from deep within the jungles inland grew here, tamed and seemingly existing only as complement to the woman who walked among them.

Beatriz Davila's dress of heavy China silk rustled in the night silence and a scent more heady than that of the most exotic blossoms in the garden clung to her. Vela breathed deeply. Truly his clan was a fortunate one. After mountains and burro trails, this!

THE HOUR was late when Gustin Vela took his leave from his hostess in the upper hall of the house. She clung momentarily to his arm, her eyes searching his face. "You will not heed my warning? You won't sail with the *Blanca*?"

"Not with the morning tide, Senora. *Pues no!* Am I not to have opportunity to return here at least once again?"

"Of course," the woman murmured softly. "Often, Senor—if you can manage it."

Turning, he ran down the stairs. The negress at the door let him out into the night. Vela grinned. With luck he would find the Ortegas not yet abed at the Hawk and Dove. He could bandy words and perhaps an embrace or two with the fiery Luisa before the dying hearth-glow in the tavern. He could take his choice of two women in Cartagena.

Pausing in the middle of the narrow street before the Davila house, he looked up. His hostess had come out onto the balcony above. He bowed again to her. She made a graceful gesture with her hand. A vestige of breeze or the carelessness of her fingers made her kerchief escape her. It fluttered out over

the rail. Vela stepped under it, reaching upward. In this instant, a shadow along the wall at his back moved. He tried to turn, but he was too slow. A sweeping pikestaff bit through the plumed crown of his hat. His knees loosened. He staggered and sprawled onto the pavement.

Other shadows leaped from other recesses to join the first. Hands seized him and hauled him roughly upright. He heard a harsh voice bark an order.

"A man of my age could catch the ague, waiting in this chill! Get his sword, one of you. When you're through the gates, clap iron onto him and into a cell. I'll see him in the morning."

A figure moved in front of Vela. A wide, gross, waddling figure. By the reek of sour wine, alone, he would have recognized the commandant of the garrison of Cartagena.

VELA saw the commandant of the garrison step into a chair a few doors up the street. Groaning bearers lifted the chair and the man was gone. Tipping his head upward, Vela glanced at the balcony of the house he had just quitted. He thought of the falling kerchief he had not been able to catch. A pretty signal—he was a fool!

Then one of his escorts prodded him roughly and he moved along the cobbles. Two doors distant from the Davila house, he saw a figure back into the shadows. He thought the blow on his head must have sharpened his sight instead of dulling it—or it had stunned him into hallucinations. He was certain he had recognized the shadow in the darkness as the beggar who had left him at the Hawk and Dove.

He was escorted by a rough-handed squad. When the soldiers had plumbed his purse and found it empty, they eased their disappointment with a series of buffets and kicks which left Vela breathless, even more unsteady on his feet, and shaken with a fury he scarcely had the sense to control. He was hustled along the poor streets lying between the Davila house and the citadel. At the gate

of the fortress, a password was exchanged with the sentry. After this, he was thrust into a downward slanting corridor and at its bottom tossed into a windowless cell in the roots of the building.

One of the guards, more careless than the others or especially fancying this kind of work, came in with leg irons. He made the mistake of closing the door behind him. Before the fellow could gain enough breath to cry for aid, Vela had exacted a fair payment for the abuse and indignities he had suffered on the way through the city. The rest tumbled in and he was pinned to the floor. Leg irons were clamped about his ankles and manacles about his wrists. In addition, his arms were chained up to a staple in the wall far enough above his head to keep him standing on tip-toe.

His guards laughed at the efficiency of their work and when one of them made a further suggestion, some of them scurried off to put it into effect. A kind of large tin hood, with a funnel attached, was drawn up outside of the cell. The small end of the funnel was thrust into the tiny opening in the door which was the cell's sole source of air. A fire was kindled under the hood in the corridor and the smoke from it led through the funnel into the cell.

Strange wood burned in the fire—aromatic stuff from the brush on the hills, perhaps. A smarting stinging smoke poured in on Vela, working on the meal he had eaten at the Davila house until he felt a rising nauseous gorge. His belly cried for relief. His lungs ached. His eyes smarted until he couldn't see. But the smoke continued to pour in.

It seemed an interminable time before he heard a commotion in the corridor and the commandant's thick harsh voice. "*Hola, dogs! Where have you put the Cavalier Vela?*"

"Here, Excellency."

The commandant exploded in a series of sultry oaths. "You smoke him with-

out orders?" he cried. "This will cost the lot of you forty lashes apiece in the morning! Snuff that fire. Get that stench-maker away from the gate. You, there, turn the lock."

Vela heard a key at work. He was conscious that the door opened. The commandant came into the cell.

He coughed and snorted noisily. "Work of the Devil! Augustin Vela in chains! Unhang him at once, you fools. Mother of Mercy! Can you hear me, Senor Vela?"

Gustin braced himself and answered as steadily as he could. "Perfectly, Excellency," he agreed.

The commandant moved close to him and the guards eased the intolerable burden of his irons. "*Que lastima!*" the commandant cried. "That a servant of the king should be so treated under the roof of my command!"

"Then my arrest was—an accident?" Vela suggested.

The commandant was careful with his answer. "Accident, Senor? Regrettably, no. A complaint from down in the city forced me to act. The complaint of a Senor Ortega, an innkeeper I understand. Some sort of riot which destroyed his tavern and in which you had a part. The yapping of a cur, no doubt, Senor, but my duty under the law is irksome. I must hold you to colonial court under the charges. Not like a felon, however. Here, guards! Move Senor Vela immediately to the grandee's room. See to his comfort. And you, Senor, be so kind as to accept the apologies of a man torn by duty."

THE FAT MAN backed from the cell. Guards seized Vela's arms and led him, yet half blinded and choking, along the corridor. He staggered. He retched like a sickened puppy. But anger was in him, hot and high.

The commandant was a greasy liar. Preposterous that Pedro Ortega could have complained against the man who had saved his companions and himself from the savagery of Lavaca and his

brigands! And as to being held for the colonial court—ha! This was a thing of which Vela had heard before. Once in a brace of years, a weary judge of the crown traveled the colonies. To wait for him was to die in your cell. The commandant was whitewashing himself of his apparent and obvious connection with this arrest. But he had failed. Vela would remember him long.

The new quarters into which he was thrust had a tiny window which admitted outer air. There was straw on the boards of the bed in the corner. A pitcher of water stood on a battered stand. The grandee's room! Vela dropped onto the bed when the cell door had slammed closed, and he swore. Not blasphemy, but the honest convictions of a man cuckolded by luck, spun out in heartening and magnificent syllables. And part of it was self-blame.

Vela could see his own mistakes as plainly as if they were written on the opposite wall in words of fire. A woman! There was the root of evil. What mistake could a man make that did not begin with a woman? Luisa Ortega's warning had sprouted wicked teeth. *Santiago!*

The widow Davila. The woman with the golden hair, the bold eyes, and the body out of a hermit's dream. She had cajoled him. Her voice had been silver and honey. She had made certain that he did not see the governor—or the governor's nephew—or anyone. He had refused to leave Cartagena on the morning tide. This was his answer.

Black thought led to blacker. The woman was a lethal tool in the hands of those who employed Lavaca's steel and his cutthroats. Cartagena wanted no king's agent, even en route to home. Devilry was afoot which could not bear looking into. Blas San Martin was at the bottom of the sea and now Gustin Vela was within the citadel. Neither could now help the little ones of the city—the little ones in whom the Lion of Aragon placed all his hopes for a great empire on these shores.

The night pressed in at the small window of the cell while the corrosive of self-condemnation ate deeply into Gustin Vela's vanity. Vela paced the confines of his cell, promising the devil's own due to the commandant, should he ever be summoned before the fat man. And like an echo of the hot blood pounding through his veins was a prayer that he would once again encounter Beatriz Davila before the flame of his candle guttered out.

THE NIGHT was interminable. Vela lost count of time. His body was stiffening from the buffeting he had taken and he was still miserable with the sickness caused by the stifling smoke in the lower cell. Day might have been close. Perhaps it was but barely past the middle of the night. He didn't know. Sounds roused him.

Stealthy footfalls in the corridor beyond the gate of his cell. After an agonizingly long time, the sound of a key inserted quietly in the lock. The creak of the door as it swung back. Masked men were in the torchlit corridor. Perhaps a dozen of them. The regular guards had vanished. One of the men in the doorway was slight of build, round and too small for the disguise to be effective. Vela saw a strand of golden hair escaping from the cap which covered this small figure's head. His lips flattened. Senora Davila, moving as easily in her soldier's disguise as she had in her China silk gown, crossed swiftly to Vela, signaling silence.

"It has cost much to arrange this, Gustin," she said hurriedly. "You should have taken my advice. As it is, do as you are told, without question. Follow these men. A way has been bought for you out of the citadel. A message has been sent out to the *Blanca*, in the harbor. You should be aboard the ship and under way before there is alarm here. I stay to see to that."

Vela was dazed. This was the woman he had cursed as the root of his misfortunes. Yet here she was giving him

One small barred window, some straw
in the corner—the grandee's room!



that freedom the affably lying and shallowly regretful commandant had stolen from him. The woman was close in the poor light. He caught her, drew her to him. He bent in the half darkness and his lips crossed hers. It was no casual thing, but the kind of a kiss a Galician learns about the time he graduates from a beginner's foil to an untipped blade.

Beatriz Davila clung to him for a long moment, her breath coming swiftly. Then she thrust him away. "You said earlier tonight that you would remember Cartagena forever. I shall remember you, Gustin Vela. Now, quickly—to the ship. One day, perhaps, you will return. I will think of that."

Vela stepped into the corridor. The men who had come with the widow closed in about him, forming a hollow square of defense around him with almost drilled precision. They moved down the passageway. Vela had a glimpse of the woman in garrison uniform beside his cell door, then a turn hid her from view. At the end of the corridor, one of those with him slipped ahead, signaled the way clear, and they moved through a door into an inner court. The way

was across this, down a shorter passage, and so to the outer gate.

To Vela's surprise, the sentry there lowered his pike and swung the grating open. As the little company passed through, the sentry touched the rim of his helmet. "We have seen you often this week, Senora," he murmured softly.

There was no answer to this and the party was through the gate. As he moved on down the darkened streets with his masked companions, Vela thought about the sentry's comment. He could no longer doubt the metal of Beatriz Davila's regard for him. She had revealed its color tonight plainly enough for the most doubtful mind. But it was curious that a woman who had been in a tavern in midafternoon with the nephew of the governor should be recognized as a frequent night caller at the citadel where the commandant's quarters were. More plainly than before, Vela believed he could understand the reason why Pedro Ortega and his daughter were willing to fight the trade pirates for whom Lavaca and his brigands worked. It cost too much in pride and night work to do business, otherwise.

Almost at the waterfront, a man in the rear guard of Vela's party swore suddenly. Vela turned. The fellow was grappling with a man whom he had apparently found loitering in the lee of some wall. As Vela looked, the man tore away and sprinted up the street while Vela's masked companion shouted imprecations at him. Vela was frowning as the party moved on. The beggar from the gates of the citadel, it seemed, was everywhere in Cartagena tonight!

GUSTIN'S companions conducted him to the poorest section of the harbor front. A small boat waited, nose into the sand. Four seamen waited at the oars. Vela climbed in and settled himself on a thwart. One of the masked men ashore spoke to the sailors.

"Quietly, you dogs," he warned. "And remind your captain he has his orders. If he fails to carry them out, he'd be unwise to call at Cartagena again."

One of the seamen nodded. The masked men pushed the boat off. The oars dipped and the boat lined out for the low lights of a ship in the roadstead. This was not the manner in which Vela had intended to quit Cartagena. There were certain things left undone—notably the matter of the commandant of the garrison and the courtesy he owed the beggar from the gates of the citadel—a moment's conversation, at least, in which he could thank the fellow. But he was away from the colonies, cleared for Spain. Once in the homeland, he'd speedily repair his fortunes. And there was little doubt further unpleasantness would have been in store for him had he lingered ashore, here.

The matter of the curious beggar, the Ortegas and the vandalism of Lavaca, Vela put from his mind. At sea, he could do Pedro Ortega and his daughter no service. The crown would shortly send out another agent to replace San Martin. Lavaca and the score at the Hawk and Dove would be this agent's game. So, also, Vela realized with a touch of envy, might be Luisa Ortega—

if a colonial rustic did not charm her, meanwhile. But a man could not claim all the lovely women in the world as his own.

The boat pulled to the ship. Decks were astir above with preparations for sailing. The captain, a squat smiling man, offered a hand of surprising strength as Vela came over the rail.

"We've been waiting for you, *Senor*. The *Blanca* seldom has such profitable freight."

Vela nodded. "My friends are generous. I regret causing you delay or inconvenience."

"A small matter, if any at all," the captain said pleasantly. "Now you're aboard, you'll be scant more trouble, I think."

Were it not for the pleasantry of the tone, Vela would not have cared for this blandness, but his time in the citadel ashore had left him feeling grimy with the suffering sweat of a thousand prisoners of the past and he needed the privacy of his cabin. He was escorted below.

THE quarters were fitting for a cavalier, but in poor repair, as was most of the ship. The lock was gone from the door and Vela saw that Beatriz Davila, in all her planning for this escape, had failed to take into consideration the needs of a gentleman facing some fortnights at sea. There was no change of clothing, no gear of any kind in the cabin. He frowned, supposing he would have to make shift from the ship's sea chest.

Stretching out on the bunk against the wall, he closed his eyes, thinking sleep would serve him better than clothing, now. But he had hardly done so when a soft knock sounded on the door. He opened it. One of the seamen who had rowed him out to the ship ducked in. The fellow held a sealed packet in his hand.

"We waited overlong for you, *Senor*," he said hurriedly. "I risk my neck in delivering this, but I was well paid. I

left the others at the boat and stepped into a tavern on the water. A ragged fellow followed me and gave me orders to deliver this to the cavalier I would shortly be rowing out to my ship."

Vela took the packet. It bore no address and it had been sealed with a thumb-nail. There was no other marking. "This one in rags," he asked sharply, "he was tall, lean, swift on his feet?"

The seaman nodded uneasily. "A curious beggar, for a fact, Worship—"

A curious beggar. Those had been his own words—his own thoughts. He scowled at the seaman. "I was expecting this. You have yourself admitted you were well paid. Be off. And if you mention a word of this above decks, I'll have your tongue in tomorrow's broth!"

The seaman ducked his head and backed out of the cabin. Vela braced himself against the unfastened door and ripped open the packet. A folded piece of heavy paper fell out. He opened it. Scraps of vellum, which had once been torn into tiny pieces, had been painstakingly fitted back together and pasted onto it. The vellum was headed with the crest of Spain and under it was a paragraph of writing. Vela read slowly and with care:

To Sr. Blas San Martin, Courier and Agent:

Our friend, Gustin Vela, will be waiting your relief and the monies you carry for him at Cartagena. This will be sword work. Gustin is known to us. He will want his share. We commend you to him and these will be our orders for him to join you in destroying the merchant rogues of Cartagena, dealt with elsewhere in these dispatches.

Vaya con Dios,
REX

Vela looked at the last word again. "Go with God. Rex" The King. The familiar royal signature. The full implications of the torn scraps of paper slowly revolved through Vela's mind, taking their place in the pattern of events to which he had been subjected since his arrival in Cartagena.

So this was no little thing afoot in

Cartagena. It involved tampering with crown dispatches, the pay monies of honest crown agents—and quite likely the murder at sea of a cavalier highly respected in Spain—Blas San Martin. It went beyond mere vandalism. It was, in effect, a bold attempt to create a merchant empire in the shadow of the fair and open way of life which the crown desired for this New Spain. Therefore, it was a thing of such size that a Vela, however dear the idea of return to Spain might be to him, still could not quit these shores until these several mysteries were unraveled and he could report the trade of the colony again in the hands of those for whom it was intended.

This realization had impact when Vela reached it. San Martin was dead. He was himself without funds and momentarily without weapons, since he had been stripped before being cast into his cell at the citadel. This was no easy thing. He did not know where he had friends, for certain. Possibly at the Hawk and Dove. Perhaps the beggar—though this was but guesswork. On Beatriz Davila he could count, but she was so immersed in her own troubles and had been taxed so heavily to manage his escape from the citadel that he was most reluctant to call further on her slender resources. Still, the work had to be done, and with whatever means were at hand.

ROLLING the packet into a small tube, Vela thrust it deep under his tunic and considered his next step. The ship under him was already canted a little. Her anchor was up, then; the wind was in her sails. If he was to remain on these shores, he must be about. The captain had a pleasant smile—but strong fingers. One courier of the king had already died by drowning—

Pulling open the door of his cabin, Vela moved along the between-decks passage toward the forward companion-way. As he moved, he tried the doors lining the passage. Each opened easily,

revealing cabins in the litter of unpacking. At the foot of the companionway, he opened the last door. It obviously led into the captain's quarters. In an antechamber just within the opening, stood a cupboard of the right size and height. Stepping in, he opened this. Bright steel met his eyes. Cutlasses, for the most part, but there was one fine rapier with baldric and matching poinard. Lifting this from its hook, Vela strapped the harness of the baldric to him and retreated hurriedly into the passageway. It remained empty. Turning to the companionway, he climbed the ladder to the deck. The captain of the *Blanca* was on the raised deck, astern, aft of the wheel. Moving briskly, Vela climbed to him. The captain turned, eyed him without disclosing whether he noticed the weapons now dangling ready at Vela's side or not. Vela avoided delay.

"I came aboard in a curious fashion, *Capitan*," he murmured. "It struck me that I might leave your ship as curiously. Since I knew nothing in advance of the plans which brought me aboard, it is possible that they have not been completely executed, as yet."

The captain used the smile with which he had greeted Vela's arrival, again. His eyes dipped a little, making a point of the baldric, with its rapier and poinard. "I was warned you were a man who could move swiftly, *Senor*," he said. "I had not thought as swift as this, however. There is a talk due between us. I admit it. But plans call for its delay until we are some miles at sea. You'll be reasonable about it?"

"About being drowned like an unwanted cat?" Vela guessed. "What kind of a man do you measure your fools against?"

The captain sighed, as though this was a most distasteful matter. "This close to shore, I'll have to weight you with shot so you'll not come to the surface and drift in to the sand—" he muttered. Vela took a step back.

"Give me leave to go over the rail as I am and you'll avoid trouble—"

The captain laughed. "One man does not make any ship trouble, *Senor*," he said. "Not a ship on which I am master, certainly. I regret this—"

As he spoke, the captain moved swiftly. One short arm dropped to his belt, and the competent fingers snatched a broad-bladed knife scabbarded there. The knife came up, back and forward in a smooth casting motion. As the steel left his fingers, the captain clapped his hand to the hilt of the heavy sword at his belt and flung it clear. Vela saw the spinning knife in midair and ducked agilely. The blade passed within its own thickness of his shoulder and thudded into the deck somewhere behind him.

Vela lunged far under the seaman's sword and thrust half a foot of his newly acquired steel into the center of the captain's round belly. The man grasped his wound with both hands, howling with hurt. Vela wheeled, slapping the flat of his blade across the bridge of the helmsman's nose, effectively blinding him for a moment. And thus, with the raised afterdeck momentarily all his own, he took half a dozen light running steps, and arched out over the rail at the stern in a fine high dive.

THE water was cursed cold and the night as dark as the inside of a miser's purse. Vela went deep and surfaced slowly, in his mind the fear that the *Blanca* might have a stout crossbowman or two who could man her rails. But when he had shaken the long hang of his hair back onto his shoulders and so could see, he discovered the ship was in a good wind with considerable sail set, for she was plowing on through the darkness with her lights already dimmed and the commotion on her deck fading rapidly.

With the ship gone, there was only to regain shore. Still hung with the baldric and weapon he had stolen from the captain's cabin aboard the *Blanca*, Vela made poor work of it in the water. A boot filled and he lost it. He sucked for air and drew water, instead. And a

great deal of thrashing about brought the distant lights of the shoreline no closer to him. A pox on the service of the king! Did a man have to have mermen among his ancestors to prosecute his duty?

Spitting and hacking like a cat in a watering trough, he tried to line on one of the lights ashore and make for it, but the waterfront of Cartagena appeared to be perversely receding from him, and presently a desperation born of the water and the darkness had become as grim a foeman as any he had ever faced behind crossed swords.

In this pass, a voice out of the night hailed Vela softly. One of the low, ungainly, tiny craft used by natives in still water along the coast appeared. Its occupant brought it neatly alongside Vela. A hand with a good grip seized the slack of his tunic. He felt himself lifted from the water and dragged ingloriously into the doubtful craft. Water ran from his nostrils. The chill of the night wind over the water cut through his wet clothing. He looked at the stolid face of the native boatman.

"*Gracias, amigo,*" he offered. The Indian made no answer to his thanks and Vela found so much pleasure in breathing air unmixed with water that he lay in the bottom of the boat without moving. Presently the nose of the craft grated on sand. Vela rose to his feet and stepped from the boat, a sorry figure, all hanging awry and dripping. Limping because of his bootless foot, he crossed the strip of sand to a low shed back of the water.

A familiar figure stepped out from this. "Art not the best swimmer I've ever seen, Gustin Vela." The voice also was familiar. Vela stared at the tall beggar before him.

"The devil!" he murmured. The beggar shook his head and laughed.

"Not quite, my friend. The name is San Martin—Blas San Martin. It's known to you?" The Indian came up from his boat. While Vela struggled with the identity of his companion, San

Martin dropped two pieces of gold into the Indian's hand. Turning, then, he took Vela's arm. "You look worse than I," he continued. "We'll get you into a dry tunic. But mind you, I'll watch you close. I've had time enough trying to catch you!"

FEELING like a hobgoblin astray from a corn patch, Vela moved through the city with his companion. There was a surety in the man which made it impossible to doubt that he was, in fact, Blas San Martin, the cavalier supposedly lost at sea. There was little doubt that he had been tipped heels-over the rail of the ship on which he was passenger to Cartagena. Probably no great distance from shore. And likely some fisher, afloat on the water, had picked him up and brought him on to shore.

There was little doubt, also, that this company of trade pirates the king had ordered San Martin to investigate was rooted deep in the official life of the colony. They had anticipated San Martin's errand and so had attempted to dispose of him at sea. They had known of Vela's monies and had appropriated them. And they had laid hands upon San Martin's dispatches.

Supposedly a dead man, San Martin had been forced to subterfuge. His disguise as a beggar had been shrewdly come upon, since it had fooled a fellow cavalier who should have known the man's mettle in any dress. San Martin had made friends at back doors and somehow gotten the torn scraps of his own dispatch.

The man, seeing him carried out to the *Blanca*, had sent the torn document out to him, knowing Gustin Vela could sail on no ship, once his curiosity had been so piqued. The business of being ordered to wait at the Hawk and Dove for the beggar's return had been an attempt to make himself known under proper circumstances. So, also, was the fact that he had been waiting outside the Davila house and again, later, on

the streets near the waterfront. Out of it all was one amusing thing. San Martin had made sound friends of Pedro Ortega and those who stood with him. So sound that Ortega and his companions had refused to reveal his identity, even to the man he was to relieve. Out of this refusal had come El Gato. What a name for the champion of half of Spain!

Midway up an alley, San Martin turned in at a low door. Only when the door closed behind did Vela realize he had been returned to the Hawk and Dove by a rear way. This was a private room, in back. Beyond it, through an open door, he could see the taproom, badly scarred by the visit of Lavaca's ruffians, but restored now to a semblance of order. A goodly company was at the tables. Stout lads, with honest faces, and among them here and there, a gray-beard for wisdom. Honest tradesmen, girt for battle. Not a tried company, but an earnest one, gathered to strike at the thieves who were taxing them out of business.

Summoned by the sound of the alley door, Pedro Ortega came in from the taproom. Grave concern was on his face. He eyed Vela dully.

"So you finally found the Senor—" he said to San Martin.

"The devil, yes!" the cavalier growled. "I had a time of it. Gustin lives up to his name. Mark you, since I've been gone I've seen him mincing off after a woman, be arrested, shortly buy himself out of the citadel with no money in his purse, escorted aboard a ship like a grandee, and escape it like a reckless felon. Be grateful, Ortega, that we have him here."

"He's with us?" the innkeeper asked wearily.

"With us—ha!" San Martin snorted. "Is the lightning asleep when thunder rolls? Bring clothes. And send our pretty one for a bottle of Malaga—with bite to it. Then we'll talk."

Ortega shook his head sadly. "Too late for talk," he said. "We're done, comrade. While you were gone, the

devils prized open a window. They took Luisa and left this."

HE EXTENDED a crumpled note. Vela read over San Martin's shoulder.

For ransom, a wench named Ortega. To be released in exchange for the surrender of a beggar named El Gato, the closing of the Hawk and Dove, and payment of one hundred pesos de oro fine by the following interested merchants. Failing these demands, the wench will be returned at dawn for burial.

Compania Importados

To this was appended a long list of names which Vela judged comprised most of the company now assembled in the outer room of the tavern. San Martin lifted bleak eyes to Ortega.

"They strike where the hurt is!" he murmured. The innkeeper nodded grimly.

Vela leaned forward. "It's not dawn," he said quietly. "How far have plans gone?"

The two men began to speak without enthusiasm. San Martin had done splendid work for a stranger in the colony. He had recognized the size and force of Compania Importados immediately. He had spent money to corrupt a guard at the citadel. The torn scraps of his dispatch had come from the unlighted hearth in the office of the commandant. He had learned first news of his supposed death had been released by the governor's nephew, Francisco Leon. And before the attack on the Hawk and Dove he had learned that the brigand, Lavaca, was the mailed fist with which Compania Importados dealt with those who protested his fees and licenses.

So there was fruit on three trees. Regrettably, no one in Cartagena could put his finger upon the commandant or young Leon or Lavaca and say positively that this was the root which fed the others. If the wrong one was crowded first, the right one would be warned. And the gathering in the Hawk and Dove was so small that no risk could

be taken with odds. The surest move was to send to Spain for a force of uncorrupted soldiers with which to work. But dawn was too close to permit aid from the homeland.

Vela listened with care to the picture San Martin and Ortega painted. A plan began to form in his mind. He asked questions. "Can we get to the nephew of the governor without assaulting the palace?"

"By the same route the commandant came on you, earlier tonight," San Martin agreed wickedly. "Young Leon also languishes over the widow Davila."

Vela nodded. "Good. Calling on a lady, he'll not have a large company with him. A dozen good men should persuade him his business actually lies here. Now, the commandant of the garrison. The fat pig must leave his walls on occasion without his entire command as escort?"

"The same bait, perhaps," San Martin said thoughtfully. "I have a rogue in his household who will know what kind of message summons his excellency usually to the widow's house. For a price the fellow would see such a message delivered. But the commandant rides a chair. That means bearers. No dozen men would take him."

"Two dozen, then," Vela amended. "What matter, so long as he is dragged here? So now we are left with Lavaca."

"And my daughter's life—" Ortega said bitterly.

"One guarantees the other," Vela answered.

"Lavaca should be easiest taken of all," the innkeeper said slowly. "Cavalier San Martin has already tracked him to his quarters. He could be taken coming or going to them. But not with what remains of our force. A dozen to the Davila house after Leon. Two dozen after the commandant outside the walls of the citadel. We have scarcely more men than that and we need to leave a party here to guard these doors and serve as reserves. Your plan is good, Gustin Vela. But we lack the men."

VELA grinned. He looked at both men with him at the table. "Who knows better than myself that wooing can be made to pay handsome dividends—the wooing you mocked me for a little time ago, at that. And I can give you proof, even here in the colonies, comrades. If the two of you, dividing your men between you as you see fit, can manage young Leon and the commandant, I will manage Lavaca and his brigands—with no men of yours."

"You seem sure," San Martin ventured.

"I am," Vela agreed. "You recall the hardy lads who lifted me out of the citadel tonight and carried me down the street under your nose?"

San Martin nodded.

"They served a charming mistress, not myself. I think she will be agreeable again."

Ortega looked uneasy. "The taking of these three rogues is but part of our errand," he said stubbornly. He tapped the message on the table before them. "Dawn is close and Luisa—"

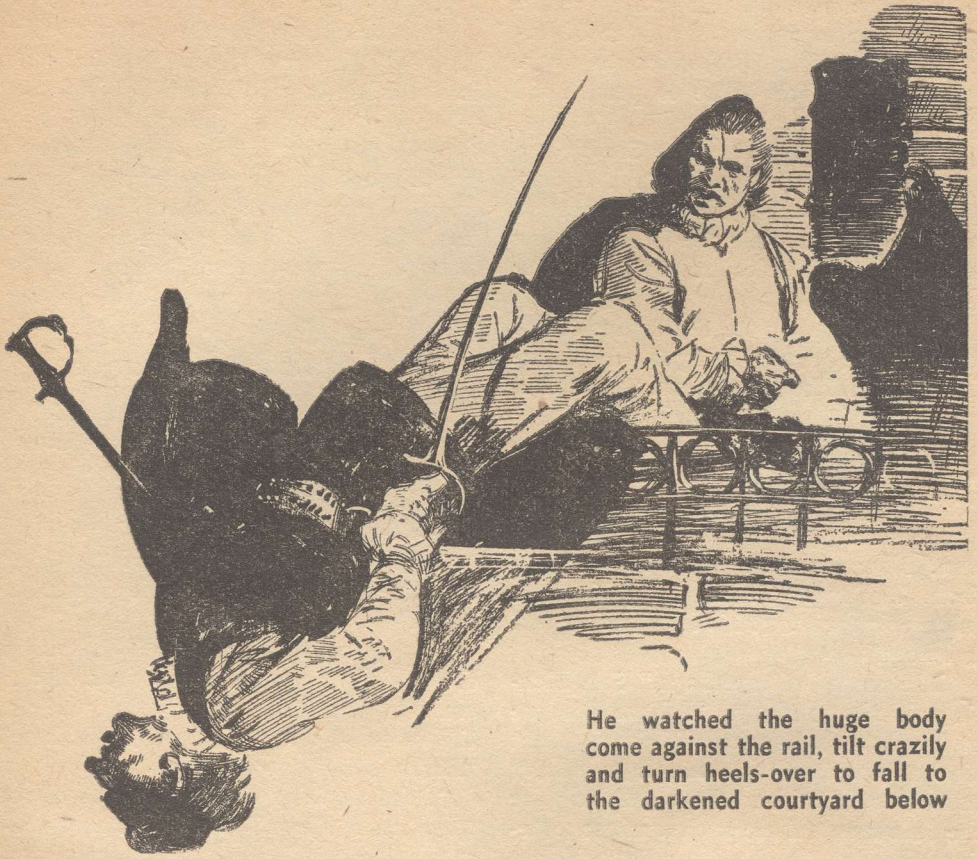
"I am thinking of Luisa. Each of us, when each has his men, will put persuasion to bear. A man will part with a lot of talk for say a broken finger. And when one of us has learned where Luisa is held, word will be sent to the others. We will attack from three directions. With faith in Our Lady, we can't fail."

San Martin swore. Ortega looked uneasy.

Vela rose impatiently. "We are short on time. It's agreed? Leon and the commandant are for you two. I will take Lavaca. A little bone-twisting will solve the rest of it. A swift business, and quiet. Before the city awakens we should have Luisa with us and Compania Importados by the heels."

"The Davila woman—" Ortega rumbled. "There is scant wisdom in trusting even a maiden. But to trust a widow!"

"I tell you, she's in this with us," Vela urged. "She sings the same song you do, Ortega. She'll give me what help I ask—if only for a chance to sink a blade into



He watched the huge body come against the rail, tilt crazily and turn heels-over to fall to the darkened courtyard below

Compania Importados—those brigands!”

The innkeeper shrugged unhappily. “We are short of men,” he said. “So much is certain. I can turn up no better plan than yours, Senor.”

San Martin gripped Vela’s hand with an equal show of reluctance. “It is scarcely more than an hour until dawn. We’ll need haste, *amigo*.”

VELA made haste, but he whistled his way through the dark streets. He was content with his portion. He was concerned over Luisa Ortega, more concerned than he cared to admit to the girl’s father or San Martin. A pox on the little devil for worming herself into a man’s attention when he did not desire it! One romance at a time was enough for even a Vela. But if his plan worked well, he would have Lavaca—and through him, the others—so soon by

the heels that the girl could be in little grave danger. Meanwhile, he accomplished a double purpose. He would see Beatriz again, under circumstances which should show him off to advantage, and he should incur a debt at Luisa Ortega’s hands which might be of value, should the widow presently pall on him.

San Martin, with a soldier’s passion for the arrangement of details, had urged Vela idle away half of the hour allotted him before he made his call, thus permitting the necessary messages to be delivered to Francisco Leon and the commandant and enabling the whole attack to operate simultaneously. But Vela could not see the waste of time which could otherwise be spent with Beatriz Davila. *Guala!* Was every moment of a man’s life devoted to duty?

Arriving in the proper street, he rapped loudly on the door of the house

with the overhanging balcony. He had noted lights on the second floor. He was prepared for the swift answer to his summons. Instead of the negress he expected at the portal, however, a lackey with a crushed nose and a missing ear opened the door. And this lackey betrayed surprise at his presence. Vela prevented the door from being jammed closed by sliding a foot into the opening. The lackey swore and reached for a short pike in a rack beside him. Vela thought he would have to treat summarily with the fellow, but a voice on the stairs set the pike back on the floor and the doorman stepped sullenly aside to let Vela enter.

The woman was halfway down the stairs, the ironwork of the railing a delicate tracery in front of her. She was in her shift, with some kind of a loose robe flung over it. If she had been beautiful on the terrace and in the garden, she was a vision, now, suffering no ill from the obvious fact that she had been roused from her bed.

Vela swept off his hat and bowed low. "Spain is too far distant from you, Senora. And I owe you too much. I have returned to make payment."

Beatriz Davila seemed to pale a little. The devil, did she fear him? Preposterous thought!

"Payment?" she murmured, her voice a little unsteady with incredulity.

"*Seguro*," Vela agreed blandly. "I have the means to hang by the scruff these thieves who beggar you. I need a little aid. If we could have a few words—it is a simple thing."

The woman turned on the stairs and gestured to an apartment above her. "Since it is a simple thing, if you'll wait in my cabinet, Gustin—I'll not be long."

She vanished. Vela climbed the stairs and let himself into the room she had indicated. After a short wait the widow entered the room. She was still in her shift, a sheath of diaphanous white from shoulder to toe, but she had replaced the wrapper with a thing of lace and silk and net which made sculpture of her tall

body. She crossed to him, her arms lifted a little. He grinned and took the offering. This—when San Martin had urged him to idle on the street. It was fortunate the good Blas was not as clumsy with his sword as he was with women.

"So I spent my gold to no avail, Gustin," Beatriz said when she had stepped back. "Do you think I can buy you out of the citadel and put you on a ship for Spain again tomorrow?"

"Tonight I am not sure I wish to leave Cartagena," he said. "To say nothing of my dislike of the ships you choose for me."

"You had trouble aboard the *Blanca*?" she asked quickly.

"No. But I believe the captain had a seizure of steel cramp in the belly. I fear your enemies and mine tried to use your good offices to do me in."

"You spoke of hanging thieves by the scruff—" she suggested, changing the course of his thoughts without effort.

VELA nodded. Dropping down onto the bench beside her, he spoke rapidly. An outline of the situation at the Hawk and Dove. The capture of Luisa Ortega by the agents of *Compania Importados*. The plan by which San Martin and Ortega and himself hoped to net the three men who among them held the secret of the identity of the head of the company. Beatriz listened carefully. She asked one sharp question when Luisa Ortega's name was mentioned. Vela answered offhand and was not sure she cared for his answer. He was also startled by the fact that she showed no surprise at the mention of Blas San Martin whom she, with the rest of the city, must certainly think dead.

"Personally," he wound up his hurried argument, "I count Lavaca our man. He has the face of an idiot, but a scheming mind hides under any disguise. San Martin holds out for young Leon—outright folly. A man who holds no better a sword than the governor's nephew could not control this piracy. Ortega looks at the commandant. My

first suspicion lay there, but no longer. The man drinks overmuch—he thinks too much of his fat body. This is not the work of a drunken pig. It is Lavaca, almost certainly. I need your help to get him. I need the little ones you brought to the citadel to free me. And I'll need them later to help free Luisa."

Beatriz Davila looked long at him. Her eyes were veiled, languid. Her hand moved slowly to his arm. The candle-light against the coming dawn was soft. The scent in her hair was like wind on a flame. "Art a dangerous enemy, Gustin—" she breathed.

"And an ardent friend—" he reminded her.

"To me?" she asked slowly. "Or to the little dancer from the Hawk and Dove?"

There was an odd note in her voice. It rang a tiny warning bell in Vela, checking his amorousness as a dash of iced water might have done. He blinked at Beatriz. Her lazy smile did not change.

"You would have left me for Spain, Gustin. I saw you off onto your ship. But now you have returned. Do you hold me so big a fool that I should think you have done this for me?"

Vela temporized, "A man is putty in the hands of a woman."

"You do not go far enough, comrade," Beatriz Davila said quietly. "A city, a colony of the king, is putty in the hands of a woman—if she knows her weapons." Her smile broadened. It became a scornful lethal thing. "How can there be so many fools in one city? Gathering together, masking in beggars' cloaks and whispering in the back rooms of a low tavern. Building big plans. Setting clever traps. And for me! When they have already been trapped, themselves."

THE WOMAN turned toward a hanging. She nodded. It parted. The huge negress who had earlier admitted Vela to the house, stepped out from the wall, thrusting Luisa Ortega before her. The girl's lithe body showed bruise marks at the shoulder and the calf of her leg. Her

dancing dress was awry. Her hair was a tangle. Her cheek was scratched. And the devil was in her eyes. Her hands were trussed high behind her, but it was evident she had exacted penalty for her capture.

"How brave are the Cavalier San Martin and this wench's father apt to be when I throw her body down on their heads? Let the water-blooded Leon and the fat commandant sing any song they like, the yelping dogs of Cartagena will head for their kennels when Beatriz Davila uses her lash!"

Vela stared at the girl from the Hawk and Dove. He stared at the woman he had courted. Here were the beauties between whom he had once thought he could take his choice. One was still as she had been before—a girl—desirable, even in distress. But the other was now revealed as the lodestone of *Compania Importados*. The high priestess of thievery and the devil in Cartagena. A goddess of evil genius who used soldier and statesman and agent of the king as the implements of empire. There was shock in Vela, incredulity. Not at the woman's duplicity, but at his own judgment, which had been so greatly warped by body, gown, and eyes. Incredulity that he had so misjudged beauty and his own desire. He took a forward step, one hand a little upraised toward Luisa Ortega. The savagery in the smile on Beatriz Davila's face increased.

"Man is a curious creature. A man of your stamp. Facing death, he still thinks of a woman. And such a man is rare, Gustin Vela. I give you a chance you do not deserve. I have power in Cartagena. Tomorrow I will have more. But I am not a man. Lend me your cloak, Gustin, and I'll share what I have with you. I can be a better woman for a man than a tavern wench. And the King will not always frown on what I have done here. With a fortune in our grasp, honor will follow. Riches brought home from across the Ocean Sea are to be respected without inquiry into the methods by which they were acquired.

How many of the noblest ducal titles were forged in the dark of night?"

The woman paused, watching Vela narrowly. He did not move. She laughed softly.

"It listens well, doesn't it?" she prodded. "A fine house, well served. The title of Excellency, attached to your name. Endless nights in my company could have charm of their own, Senor. Think. Consider. But swiftly. You have little time."

She was almost mocking. With his eyes still on Luisa Ortega, who in turn watched him as a bitter and distrustful child watches an elder whom she does not know, he slowly shook his head.

"It listens too well, *querida*," he agreed easily. "Or my blood is too thin. True, I hunger for good living. But it is a curse of the clan of Vela that its men prefer to die by violence, rather than by gout!"

BEATRIZ DAVILA drew a kerchief from her sleeve. Her face mirrored a regret which did not soften its chill savagery. Beautiful, desirable almost beyond the point of resistance, she stood motionless for a moment. Her magnificent shoulders moved in a shrug. "You're a fool, Gustin," she murmured. And the kerchief slipped from her fingers.

Vela moved, then. A forward bound which brought him out into the room to Luisa Ortega's side, his rapier in his hand. He cuffed the huge negress to one side and his steel moved so swiftly that it sang. Before the fluttering kerchief quite touched the carpet, it was impaled on the point of his weapon. Vela lifted it, bowed with flawless mocking courtesy, and presented the point to the woman.

"Your kerchief, Senora," he smiled. "It has seen a tavern wrecked and me carried off to the citadel. A charming signal. But this time it must fail!"

With a flick of his wrist, he flung the cambric square into the woman's face and wheeled toward the hanging from behind which Luisa Ortega had ap-

peared. The girl cried out as he turned. Armed and burly figures tumbled into the room. Behind him, Beatriz Davila cried out sharply.

"You wanted Lavaca, Gustin. You'll have him! Here, dogs—a gold chain to the two of you who spit this Vela and his wench for me!"

Lavaca was the first man through the curtained doorway. A neat ambush. San Martin and Pedro Ortega, with their two parties of men, were on fool's errands in their attempt to pick up young Leon and the fat commandant. These two were but tools. The heart of devilry was here, in this room.

Four other men were with Lavaca. They came past him, flanking out right and left. Vela thrust Luisa behind him and watched all five at once, the eyes of his mind turned inward. He didn't like what he saw. These were sour odds for him to best. Not only for his own life and that of the girl at his back, but for his own honor and the safety of Cartagena. If he died in this house, all New Granada and half of Spain would laugh at the tale of how Gustin Vela had chosen the wrong woman when he had a choice and how a widow already a little past her prime had proved herself more of a master at fence than a Galician champion.

Lavaca's epee was handled with the skill of the devil and the man obviously was determined to win at least one chain of gold by striking steel into the body of the helpless girl crouching at Vela's shoulder. Handling the man was thus a double task. Because he was defending both himself and Luisa, Vela's skill was overtaxed. Lavaca touched Vela's wrist and drew blood a fraction of an inch from a main artery. One of his heel dogs lunged in at one side and brought blood out through the hose on Vela's calf. Gustin felt neither wound, his mind engrossed in one thing. He'd show this woman and the brigands in her hire what a man born to steel could do with a wench worth fighting for at his back.

In a lightning search for the skill of

the masters, Vela denuded both French and Italian schools of fence of their most wicked tricks. He paraded them with a blinding speed which made a living shaft of light of his blade. In scant seconds he had put a foot of his rapier into the body of the most troublesome of Lavaca's companions twice in such rapid succession that the two strikes seemed as one. In the first minute he had opened Lavaca's cheek from mouth to temple to expose the molars in one side of the man's jaw. In a quarter of an hour he had taken out the eye of another brigand, skewered the groin of a second, and touched the remaining one so many times that the fellow stood to one side, canted against the wall with lowered blade, staring at the life running in a dozen rivulets from him. But he had not been able to close with Lavaca and only a kindly saint had enabled him to keep the big man's steel from Luisa.

THE CHIEF of the brigands was a demon possessed. So, also, was Beatriz Davila. She cried for blood, and when a stroke went against her men, she seized loose oddments of furniture and cast them at Vela. Sometime during the fight, Vela felt the girl behind him straighten. He risked a glance over his shoulder. By some incredible contortion known to a dancer, Luisa Ortega had slipped her bonds. She darted out from behind Vela with the spindle of a small stand gripped in one hand. He heard Beatriz scream angrily.

The tumult on the upper floor seemed to have roused the rest of the house. Vela could hear running feet on the stairs. He shouted a hoarse order to Luisa, saw her obey, and he began giving ground before Lavaca. Tricked into believing his opponent was falling back from an attack too strong to bear, Lavaca pressed forward. With Luisa ahead of him, Vela worked from Beatriz Davila's cabinet into a small passage which let onto the balcony across the front of the house.

And he moved just in time. As Lavaca followed him into the passage,

the lackeys and gardeners attracted from the lower floor and grounds by the noise above poured into the room. Slowly, deliberately, cutting at the man pressing after him, Vela moved to the balcony door, which Luisa had already opened. Her voice came from outside.

"It's clear. Quickly, Gustin—"

He stepped through, into the pleasant coolness of the outer air. For a moment he thought Lavaca and himself would have the privacy he desired to end this. But windows at each end of the balcony burst open and the house company piled through them with an oddment of weapons. Vela locked blades momentarily with Lavaca.

"The devil take your black heart!" he panted at the fellow. "You've got an arm, with a blade! I'd be forced to tell Satan himself the same if I faced him!"

Lavaca snarled. As the closest of the servants came up, he wrenched his steel free. Two servants, swinging bludgeons, closed in on Vela, crowding him for room, hampering movements of arm and body. Luisa, struggling in the grasp of others who had come from behind, cried out again in warning. But the cry was too late. The brigand chief had seen his opportunity. He lunged. Vela attempted a parry, but it was hampered.

He felt the point of his opponent's epee grate along the bones of his ribs, even as he tilted his own point upward. He felt the power of Lavaca's thrust, the savagery of it. But he felt something else—the satisfying, cushioning spring of his own weapon as its point found a target. Lavaca was pressed close against him for a moment. When the man reeled back, the rapier was torn from Vela's hand. He stared at the hilt of the weapon, strangely affixed to the breast of Lavaca's tunic. He watched the huge brigand's body come against the balcony rail, tilt crazily, and turn heels-over to fall toward the pavement below.

In the same instant, a shout rose on the street, "Hold tight, Gustin—for the love of God!"

It was San Martin's voice. It was

echoed by others. Vela tried to see beyond the railing, but his eyes had darkened. He hung to the rail, aware that a small pair of arms had encircled him and that there was great steadiness in them.

TH**ERE** was pandemonium on the street, in the house, finally on the balcony. Hands seized him and steered back within the walls. He was set upon Beatriz Davila's own couch in her cabinet, a room now as completely ruined as had been the taproom of the Hawk and Dove. Dawn sunlight was at work at the windows. There were many faces, men from the town. There was Pedro Ortega, making half-hearted attempts to revive the sprawled and stunned figure of the mistress of the house, spilled down on her own carpet with the evidence of a few stout blows from a stand-spindle about her head. There was San Martin. He had Francisco Leon and the jelly-bellied commandant of the citadel, each in irons. They had white and incredulous faces. They had been tricked by a woman with a soft voice and golden hair.

Blas San Martin was at his shoulder shaking it. "*Hombre!*" the cavalier swore. "If I didn't think you still had bite, for all the mauling you've taken, I'd be of a notion to have a try at pinking you, myself! What a comrade! *Santiago!*"

Vela braced himself. The devil, was the man angry? He tried to grin. "I did not do so badly."

"Badly, he boasts!" San Martin snorted. "*Guala!* You cheat a friend smoothly. You make a plan and send comrades on a chase to the moon after two weak-kneed fools who sing out their folly before they so much as see naked steel. While you, by my own Saint Martin, go off to tend to the real business."

There was laughter. After this was much talk of the gratitude of the merchants—of the city. Gratitude of a whole colony. Rich were the rewards in the air. But Vela heard little of them. He was grinning into San Martin's face,

his own arm about the waist of Luisa Ortega, and savoring the look of envy which the cavalier from Spain made no attempt to conceal. He tipped his head toward Beatriz Davila, now up from the carpet, her clothing rearranged, and docile enough in the arrest clamped upon her by the fat commandant the moment he was released from his own irons.

"Ask Senora Davila, good Blas, if this little devil in a dancing dress is not too much of a woman for a man less experienced than myself. She swings a bludgeon like a brigand—"

Luisa, working on Vela's wounds, pinched him sharply. He winced and laughed. San Martin made a gallant but somewhat sour attempt at geniality.

"Cartagena will set you up a rich man," he said. "I will myself request the crown for a permanent appointment for you here. All New Granada is yours, Gustin."

Vela shook his head. "A modest man has modest needs. Three hundred *pesos de oro*, which are pay monies due me rightfully. The efforts of some good friend to find me a clean ship that sails soon for Spain. And perhaps a feast before sailing, so that a Vela's bride will remember her wedding day."

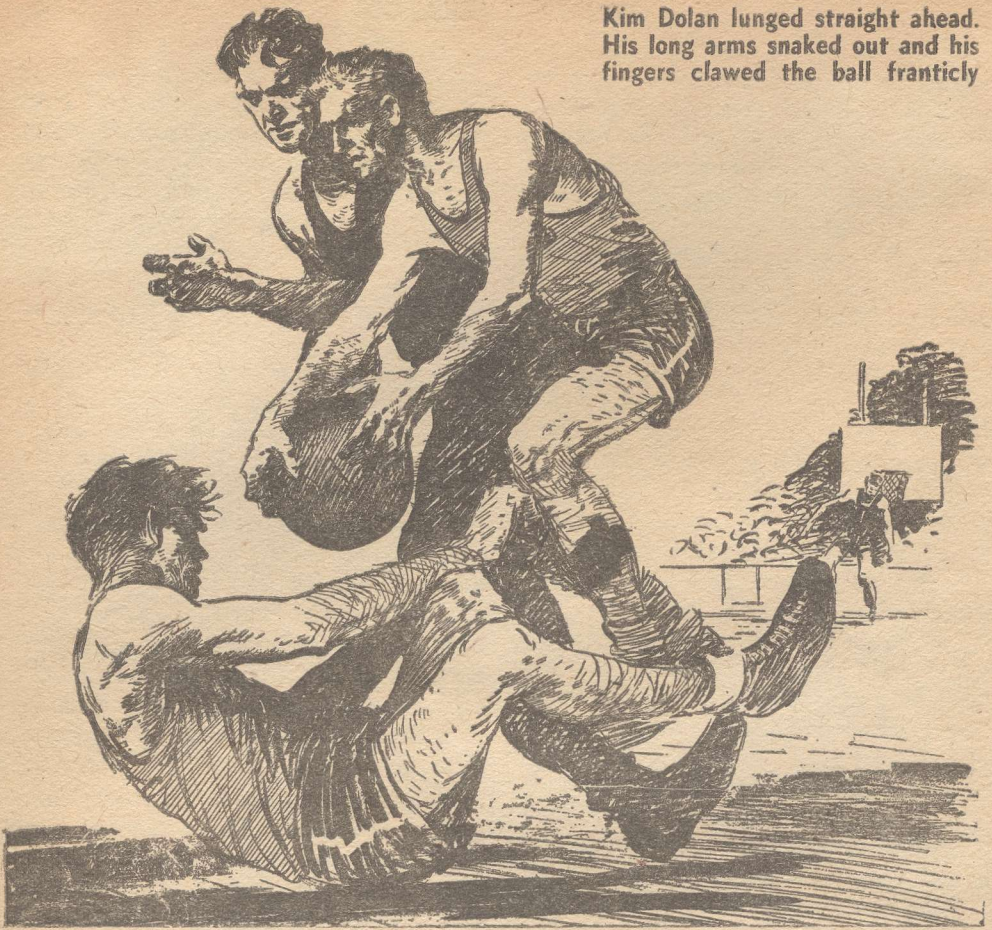
"You'd trade a fortune and position for a sea voyage with a woman?" San Martin asked. Vela nodded.

"Aye—even without the sea voyage—for this woman." And he pinched Luisa as hard as she had pinched him. For a married man, he thought, self-defense must begin at the beginning.

Answers to WHAT'S HIS NAME?

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. Babe Ruth | 11. John L. Sullivan |
| 2. Lou Gehrig | 12. Ty Cobb |
| 3. Tony Galento | 13. Sammy Baugh |
| 4. Maxie Rosenbloom | 14. Bill Dickey, Babe Ruth,
Lou Gehrig |
| 5. Primo Carnera | 15. Leo Durocher |
| 6. Red Grange | 16. Alonzo Stagg |
| 7. Jack Dempsey | 17. Tommy Harmon |
| 8. Mickey Walker | 18. Bob Feller |
| 9. Jim Corbett | 19. Tony Lazzeri |
| 10. Jim Londos | 20. James J. Braddock |

Kim Dolan lunged straight ahead. His long arms snaked out and his fingers clawed the ball frantically



FALL GUY

By Duane Yarnell

KIM DOLAN was rocking on his heels. Perspiration dripped from his closely cropped blond head, glistened on his big rangy body. Kim had put everything into this basketball game, a piece of his soul, a chunk of his heart. But it had not been enough. . .

With only seconds to go, the visiting Indians were leading Kim's Central City Meteors by a 51 to 50 margin. The end was in sight and now the Indians had begun to stall.

The Indian team was drawn back near the center line, a team that twisted and

spun, coiled and writhed, as the ball passed from one man to another. It was beautiful basketball! And it was winning a game for the Indians.

The Central City Coliseum was vibrating with a fervent frenzied plea. "Break it up! Break it up!"

Kim Dolan glanced anxiously at the clock. Thirty seconds. Kim knew that he could wait no longer. He inched toward the cluster of enemy players, his gray eyes squinting against the salt-sting that was like fire on his eyeballs.

As an enemy guard flipped the ball to

one of his forwards, Kim Dolan lunged straight ahead. Kim's long arms snaked out and his fingers clawed at the ball. Kim touched it, deflected it, but could not hold it.

But the Indian smoothness was disrupted. Two enemy forwards dived for the ball but it eluded them and rolled out of bounds across the sideline.

A whistle blasted and the Coliseum began to reverberate again as the Meteors took possession of the ball. Kim Dolan picked himself up off the floor and made a quick motion to the referee.

"Time out!" Kim panted.

Again Kim glanced at the clock. Nineteen seconds. Still time enough to make the final two points that could give the Meteors a stunning upset over one of the greatest teams in basketball.

Kim flopped to the floor and his tired mates dropped down around him. Kim was groggy, but the bedlam in the Coliseum beat down on him, filled him with excitement.

Ten thousand fans were screaming encouragement at the Meteors. Cushions were flying. Programs, torn to confetti size, filtered down from the upper balcony like a fast falling snow.

A fan screamed, "Come on, you Meteors! Come on Kim!"

Babe York, a dumpy little Meteor guard, grinned at Kim and said, "You hear that, Kim? I told you they'd forget. They're pulling for you, boy."

Kim said, "Yeah." He said it dreamily as if he could not quite believe what he was hearing. The wild shouting was like hot coffee on a chilly day.

CENTRAL CITY was a town that took its basketball seriously. Four years ago on a basketball court Kim Dolan had brought disgrace on himself, on his town. From that night until now, Central City had never forgiven him, nor had they allowed him to forget.

But tonight, Kim had brought his four-year self-imposed basketball exile to an end. The Central City fans had turned out to boo him, to laugh him from

the court. But Kim's slashing brand of play had slowly won them over and now, because the town was basketball crazy, many of the fans were pulling for Kim to win. It left Kim a bit dazed. But he wasn't complaining. . .

Again the whistle shrilled. The Meteors jumped up and began to jockey for position. Babe York threw the ball to his fellow guard, Al Newman.

As Al Newman dribbled down the sideline, Kim Dolan, in the center slot, raced down to the free throw circle. Forwards Dan Barritt and Chris Allen were flanking him on either side.

"Shoot!" the crowd screamed. "Shoot!"

But Al Newman couldn't find an opening. Al flipped the ball quickly to Kim, but Kim's guard ragged him all the way. Kim whirled and tried to sink a push shot, but enemy hands were above him, waiting to bat the ball away. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, Kim saw Babe York driving for the corner. In mid-air, Kim gave the ball a little shove and Babe took it on the dead run.

The dumpy little guard had half a step advantage on the Indian forward who was tailing him. Babe dribbled three times, then lifted a layup shot. The frenzied crowd noise was shrill as the ball hit the rim, rolled around once, twice, teetered, then fell away from the basket.

Kim Dolan had pulled back to guard post. He felt helpless. Above the backboard, the clock was ticking away. A hurried glance gave Kim the bad news. Five seconds! Too late for Kim to join that flurry of players beneath the basket. Arms were driving upward, Meteors and Indians alike as the desperate players fought to get possession of that ball. Swiftly, one hand reached higher than the rest. Dan Barritt's hand. Dan was in no position to shoot, but he yelled a prayerful "Kim!" The ball came floating out of the melee. It came back to where Kim was standing, just inside the center line.

Kim Dolan took the ball. There was no time to dribble. No time, even, to tell

himself that he was a dead duck if he missed. Kim went into his crouch. His wrists came up, then the ball flicked away from them in a steep lazy arch.

Splat!

That was the timer's gun, but few people heard it. The ball was frozen up against the steel girders. Then, abruptly, it began to drop. It came almost straight down. The ball didn't touch the rim, but when it hit the bottom of the net cords with a little cracking sound, the Central City fans went out of their minds.

They stormed the floor, shoving the bewildered Indians aside to get to their own Meteors. Slowly, Kim pushed his way toward the sideline. His back was raw from the pounding and his arm was aching from the handshakes. But Kim Dolan wasn't complaining. Tonight, on this floor, Kim had begun to wipe out the stigma that had branded him these past four years. One victory didn't mean a winning season. But it was a beginning . . .

"Kim! How about a word for the radio audience?" Kim didn't see the announcer, but he saw an arm come out of the crowd, an arm that held a portable mike.

"This is just the beginning," Kim drawled. "When we wangled a franchise in the National Semi-Pro League, a lot of wisecracks said Central City was too small a town to support it. Maybe they'll change their tune when the Meteors win the league title!"

It was brash, it was cocky, but the radio audience loved it. Now, the face of the announcer emerged behind the mike. "That's a big order, Kim. Have you forgotten Greg Vincent and his defending champs, the Redline Expressmen?"

KIM'S EYES went bleak and anger welled up within him. Kim hadn't forgotten Greg Vincent, nor was it likely that he could ever forget the man. But this was neither the time nor the place for Kim to revive dormant memories.

So Kim said, "In a few weeks, we meet the Redliners in this gym. I wouldn't advise anyone to miss that game."

Kim turned away. He walked along the row of boxes near the sideline and saw the girl watching him. She was standing up, waving a slender arm to catch Kim's eye.

Anne Latham was a tall olive-skinned girl with wide luminous eyes and soft dark hair. She had a small animated face, an uptilted nose, a wide red mouth. Anne smiled at Kim and the smile made him feel warm all over.

"You did it!" Her voice had a nice husky texture. "But you had me worried for a while, Kim."

Kim laughed softly. "We were in no hurry," he said lightly. "Win 'em in the last two seconds and send the crowd home happy. Simple!"

"You can save that line for your memoirs," Anne chided. "What you meant to say was that you were slightly worried yourself."

"Petrified is the word," Kim admitted.

They were skirting the edges of a feeling deep beneath the surface. But they were not fooling each other. Beneath that light banter was a hard core of uneasiness. Tonight, Kim had come a long way, but there was still much to be accomplished.

"What happened, Anne? I thought you were bringing your father to see the game."

Anne Latham flushed. "I thought he was coming, too, Kim. But at the last minute, he decided there were other things to do." The girl glanced around the Coliseum as if amazed at the wild victory celebration that was taking place. "I'm sorry Dad didn't come tonight. I wish he could have seen all this."

Kim was disappointed and he made no effort to hide it. "Sometimes," he muttered, "I get the feeling that I'm only kidding myself. As far as John Latham is concerned, I'm still the guy who made the biggest mistake that's ever been made in this town. . ."

"Give Dad a little more time," Anne

urged. "I think he's beginning to sense that he's wrong about you, Kim. He'll eventually come around to your way of thinking." But even as the girl spoke, her dusty eyes were clouded and Kim knew that she was whistling in the dark.

Suddenly, Anne wrinkled her nose at him and some of his gloominess was dispelled. "I'll wait for you to get dressed," she said. "Then we can drown our troubles in cokes. . ."

"Since you're twisting my arm," he said, "I'll be there." He felt better as he moved away. Anne Latham always affected him this way. . .

INSIDE the Meteor dressing room, the team was having itself a time. Kim liked what he saw, the roughhousing and the spirited horseplay. Tonight the Meteors had become giant-killers.

When the team saw Kim, they grew quiet. Kim said, "You guys are bushed. I wish I could tell you to take the day off tomorrow. But we've got that load of freight going out to Kansas City. You know how it is."

Dan Barritt grinned. "The more business your outfit does, the more you can pay us. We'll be there, Kim."

Later, as Kim undressed, the warm feeling began to flood through him again. When he went into the shower, he could hear the fans upstairs in the Coliseum. They were still celebrating. Kim smiled to himself. Central City was a rip-roaring basketball town. . .

It was a thing nobody had ever been able to explain. In professional football, Green Bay was that kind of town. In baseball, it was the borough of Brooklyn. And in Central City, it was basketball, for the town was basketball crazy.

It had always been that way. In Central City, kids were handed a basketball almost as quickly as they learned to walk. There were grade school teams, high school teams, church teams and town teams. There were many small factories in Central City and there was one large one, the Latham Shoe Factory, owned by Anne's father, John Latham.

Even the factories boasted teams.

In Central City, there had been many basketball greats, but the greatest had been Kim Dolan. Yet no one could say that Kim Dolan had come up the easy way.

Product of the teeming crowded factory district, raised by a brawling drunken father, Kim's early life had not been an easy one. Riley Dolan's frequent escapades, while in his cups, often landed his name on police blotters and in the papers. Kim was often bewildered, often ashamed. But never disloyal to his old man. Kim always had the hope that if he worked hard enough, he might get his father to mend his ways. But the old man never did. . .

It was tough on Kim. All through school, kids spoke brazenly of Riley Dolan's antics. Kim was sensitive to those taunts, so he soon adopted a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude in self-defense. It was easier to fight than to bear up under the ribbing he was forced to take.

KIM WAS from the wrong side of town, but there was one thing he could do and that was play basketball. A stormy petrel, sure. But a good man on the court. After High School, State offered Kim a basketball scholarship. But soon after Kim reported, the State coaching staff began wondering if he was worth all the headaches he caused them.

There was the time that Kim was picked as a pledge for a fraternity, only to have the pledge withdrawn. Kim didn't mind so much until he heard why. A student from Central City had kept the fraternity brothers laughing for two hours while recalling the drunken sprees of Kim's old man. It took half a dozen cops to keep Kim from wrecking that fraternity house.

He got away with it that time because he had become one of the greatest centers in basketball. After that, there were still more times that he got away with it. The word went around the conference that the best way to get Kim's goat was

to make a crack about his old man. Kim tried not to pay any attention, but there was that chip on his shoulder.

Finally, he went berserk one night at a crack he didn't like. He clipped an opposing guard and was banished from an important game. Luckily, State managed to squeeze through for a narrow win. But the coach was furious.

"Make one more mistake," the coach warned, "and it's curtains for you, Kim! I've stood about all I'm going to stand. . ."

It was Anne Latham, from Kim's home town, who finally taught him to control himself. It was an odd combination, the daughter of the most important family in town and the son of a bum. But it was one of those things and Kim did not try to question it.

"Get the chip off your shoulder," Anne warned. "Meet people half way and they'll forget about your early life. I'm trying to help you Kim because I'm interested in you!"

He knew, then, that he hadn't been dreaming. He might be afraid to believe the things that Anne said to him—but he couldn't disbelieve the look in her eyes. So he got the chip off his shoulder.

Kim roared through his last year at State, made the All-America team. Kim's old man died that year and it had a sobering effect upon him. He'd tried to make something of his old man's life, but he had failed. Now, he was on his own and he would not fail himself. He knew that his coach was still skeptical of him. But Kim wasn't worried. He felt he had conquered himself.

Kim got his biggest thrill when, at the end of the season, he led his team into the finals for the national title at the Colosseum in New York.

Gradually, he had begun to live down his past. Even Anne's father, John Latham, had become converted to Kim's cause. Just before the New York trip, Anne said, "Dad used to worry about you, Kim, but he's changed his mind. Wait until you see him in New York. You're in for quite a surprise."

IT WAS a surprise, all right. On the day of that final game, John Latham hired a special train to take Central City's rooters to New York. When the train arrived in the city, John Latham led the procession to the Colosseum. He carried a banner that read: **KIM DOLAN—CENTRAL CITY'S FAVORITE SON!**

That night, just before the game, Kim sat in his hotel room pondering his good fortune. He heard a knock at the door and when he opened it, he recognized Greg Vincent, the center who had been his understudy at State.

Greg Vincent was in love with Anne Latham, too. But she had very plainly shown her preference for Kim. Greg had been decent about it. His father operated a truck line, the Redline Express, just a few blocks from the State campus. Thanks to Greg, Kim had been earning extra money as a part-time mechanic with the Redline outfit. At one time there had been nasty gossip on campus about Greg. He had come close to being kicked out of his fraternity for doctoring the ballots to get himself elected Secretary, they said. But it had died down, the brothers clamming up about one of their own.

Greg came inside and sat down. He was a big guy with a dark, good-looking face and speculative eyes. He said, "It's funny how things work out, Kim. You got Anne and you get to play in the big game. Here I am with a chance to inherit a lot of dough—I'd give a lot of it to be in your shoes when you step out onto the court tonight."

Puzzled, Kim said, "You'll get your chance next year when you're a Senior."

Greg gave Kim a funny look. "It'll be too late, then. Here's the pitch, Kim. My father is down on me. A long time ago, the old gent was a pretty good center at State. He puts a lot of stock in basketball guys. I've kept hoping that something would happen so I'd get a chance to play tonight. If I could only convince him that I'm not such a weakling as he thinks. . ."

Kim didn't get it. "Why worry about it, Greg? You'll have a full season next year and. . ."

"It'll be too late," Greg muttered. "He's a pretty sick guy, Kim. If he knew I'd played tonight—" He was watching Kim closely and Kim had an uneasy feeling that he didn't want to hear the rest of it. But Greg changed tack. "If I should inherit the business, Kim, there'd be a swell job for you. You're a real mechanic and I could use you. . ."

"Just a minute," Kim said, his eyes narrowing. "Bring it out into the open, Greg. If you're hinting that I sit on the bench while you show off for your father, you're off the beam!"

Greg stared at Kim a long time, then chuckled hollowly. "I was only commenting, Kim, not suggesting anything. You know me better than that."

Greg Vincent became so convincing that Kim began to wonder if he'd made a bad mistake. And when Greg offered to overlook Kim's outburst, Kim was willing enough to let it go at that.

Kim put on his hat and they walked toward the Colosseum. Just before they reached the entrance, Greg turned into a fountain. "I'll buy you a quick coke, Kim."

"Okay," Kim said.

They went inside and sat down. But the place was busy. Greg got up and went to the counter and pretty soon he came back with two glasses. "They were all out of coke," he said, "so I got grapefruit juice." They drank hurriedly, then got up and went into the Colosseum.

It wasn't until Kim started warming up that he began to feel funny. He was lightheaded and he felt a faint trace of nausea. He began to miss baskets and he couldn't think straight. He was conscious of the way the coach was watching him. He tried to pull himself together. Maybe, after the game got under way, he'd begin to feel better.

But it didn't turn out that way. Kim was in the game less than five minutes. He grew dizzier and sicker as the seconds ticked away. He began to weave notice-

ably. He took several shots, but missed them all. Then, without warning, Kim tripped and sprawled on his face, with not a soul around him.

The coach came out and helped Kim off the floor. Kim was reeling, but he still noticed the drooping pennants in the Central City rooting section. Grimly, he told himself that he'd be back in the game before long.

The coach took Kim to the dressing room. For the first time, Kim saw that the coach was angry. "After all the promises you've made," the coach yelled. "And then you turn up drunk!"

"Not drunk," Kim said thickly. He was jumbling at his locker. The door came open and for an instant Kim just stared at the bottle in the top of his locker.

It was a gin bottle and it was almost empty. Kim felt the prickle of gooseflesh and he was unable to believe his eyes. Before he could protest, the coach roared at him. "I've been afraid of you since I learned about your old man! Well, I asked for it and I've got no one but myself to blame!" Angrily, the coach turned and stalked out.

Kim Dolan tried to follow, but the floor tilted beneath his feet. He knew that he'd never make it. Somehow, he managed to stagger into the next room, managed to flop across a rubbing table.

With Kim out of the lineup, State was overwhelmed, despite the heroic work of Greg Vincent who racked up 17 points. When it was over, an enraged team descended upon Kim in the dressing room.

Kim had begun to feel better and he knew, now, that he'd been wrong about the food-poisoning. The bottle meant a frameup. He had been drunk. Kim had never touched a drink in his life. He'd seen what it did to his father. Figured maybe he'd inherit the same weakness, so he stayed away from alcohol. He thought of the offer Greg had made him, of Greg's swift denial, once he'd seen how Kim had taken it. He thought of the grapefruit juice they'd had, you couldn't taste anything but the acid bitterness of

the fruit. Of how he'd left the dressing room, with Greg standing by his locker. So, when the team ripped into Kim, he flared right back at them.

"It was a frameup!" he shouted. "I—"

"Shut up, Dolan!" It was the coach's voice, cutting through the clamor, hitting Kim in the face like a slap. "You've let us down a lot of times before and I'm sick of alibis. You're fired from the team—and from school!"

Kim tried another protest. But the damage had been done. He had been a stormy petrel for too long and they had come to expect almost anything from him. Every time Kim opened his mouth, the whole team shouted back at him. He had a story to tell and he decided it was best to wait until tempers had quieted down, until he could reason with them.

But the waiting didn't help. The tabloids came out and they had a field day. By the time Kim talked to his coach, the harm had been done. Kim told his story, but the coach refused to believe any part of it. The coach was in a sour mood, having lost an important game. It was easier to blame Kim than to think that perhaps *he* might have been wrong in condemning Kim. So Kim, realizing that the deck was stacked against him, decided to keep quiet. There was nothing else for him to do.

Kim left school and returned to Central City. As far as the town was concerned, Central City became a closed corporation. Kim made a job for himself. He knew the trucking business from his experience with the Redline Express. He bought a small truck with money from a small life insurance policy his father had had, named his outfit the Meteor Fast Freighters.

It was tough going from the start and Kim might have given up if it hadn't been for Anne Latham. Over John Latham's angry protests, Anne retained her faith in Kim. She was willing to wait until Kim could reestablish himself in the town that had turned its back on him.

They wanted to get married, Kim and Anne, but there were too many things

against it right then. Kim wasn't trying to earn a fortune first. It was just a question of waiting until the town believed in him again. Kim knew what it meant to be at odds with people. When he married Anne he wanted to be able to visit Anne's family without feeling tense. He wanted them to accept him. He wanted the townspeople's respect. It was tough, waiting for that day to come. But to Kim, it seemed the only solution.

Kim worked hard to win back the good-will of the town. New business came slowly. But gradually, Kim added more equipment and after four years Meteor Fast Freight trucks were operating on many of the big highways.

Then Kim saw his chance to reestablish himself in the eyes of his town. In a nearby city, Greg Vincent had taken over the Redline Express and he had immediately taken out a franchise in the National Semi-Pro Basketball League. Greg hired the best basketeers in the business and they had won the national title the first year. The nationwide publicity had made business boom for the Redline outfit.

That was when Kim had got the idea of bringing a franchise to Central City. He knew that Central City could support bigtime basketball. Rabid fans couldn't hold grudges forever.

So Kim had hired a group of ex-collegiate basketeers. He'd given them jobs with his company and he'd promised them a share of the profits when business prospered.

NOW, AS Kim stood in the shower following the surprise win over the Indians, he knew that his plan was bearing fruit. Tonight he had broken through the ring of hostility that had surrounded him. There were many small factories in Central City, factories that had been doing business with Greg Vincent's Redline Express. But tomorrow, and in the days that followed, some of that business would be transferred to Kim, for he had given Central City a taste of bigtime basketball.

"Shut up, Dolan! I'm sick of alibis. You're fired from the team and from school!" the coach's voice lashed



That was the crux of Kim's plan. Once Kim started cutting into Greg Vincent's business, the Redline owner would strike back. Greg was ruthless. He couldn't bear to play second fiddle to anyone. He'd proven that once. So when Greg

countered with another below-the-belt blow, Kim would be waiting for him. Kim wanted to catch Greg in just one trap. Then, using that as leverage, Kim would pry the rest of the truth from Greg, the real truth of what had hap-

pened that night in New York. . .

Kim Dolan's brash prediction that Central City would someday boast a league-winning team had irritated Central City fans at first. They remembered too well the times that Kim had disappointed them before. Particularly, they remembered that night at the Colosseum.

But the victory of Kim's Meteors in the season opener brought a wave of publicity that gratified Central City factory owners as well as the Chamber of Commerce. The mood of the town changed. In the week that followed, Kim received trucking orders from firms that had once ignored him. The increase was not great but it indicated a trend. Kim's problem was to hold what he had gained—and get still more business, particularly from Greg Vincent's customers.

The local Coliseum was filled to capacity when the Omaha Bears came to town for the second game of the season. The fans gave Kim's Meteors a nice welcome as they came onto the floor that night. But Kim noted a certain reserve in the crowd's enthusiasm. Tonight's fans wanted to believe in the Meteors, but they had come here to be shown that last week's win had not been a fluke.

Kim watched his men go through their warmup paces and he liked what he saw. Tony Tucker, a sub guard, was coming along fast. Joe Barker, a replacement at forward, was hitting his shots well. Working as part-time drivers and mechanics for the Meteor Fast Freighters was a tough job for basketball players. But it kept Kim's team in shape.

When the Bears came out, Kim was awed by their size. The entire starting lineup towered several inches over six feet, and when they raced in for setups, they didn't just shoot the ball. They reached over the rim of the basket and dunked it.

A WHISTLE shrilled and Kim walked out to the center circle. He shook hands with the towering Morton. Then the ball went up between them and they went after it.

Kim was only a couple of inches over six feet, but he was a jumping jack. He timed his leap, getting away a split second before Morton. Kim punched the ball away from the surprised Morton and Babe York took it near the sideline.

Babe started to dribble, giving the Meteors time to get set. But once the Meteors were ready, the fireworks began. Babe cut for the center, bounced a pass to Kim.

Kim took it with his foot in the edge of the free throw circle. He feinted left, then circled to his right. It was a whirling pivot shot, but Morton's hand snaked up and pulled it down. Kim scowled as he tried to get the ball away. But Morton flipped it to one of his guards and as Kim dropped back on defense, he knew why Morton had made the All-American team in college. Morton was a slick cookie. He could steal a glass eye from a blind man.

The Bear guards brought the ball down fast. Kim set himself back of Morton in the free throw lane. The pass came sharply in toward center. Morton took it as Kim lunged out to meet him.

But Morton got the ball away fast. His right wrist flicked upward and the ball caught the corner of the backboard with plenty of side English. It smacked the bottom of the net cords and the Bears had broken the ice.

Babe York tossed the ball to Al Newman and again the Meteor guards gave the forward line enough time to get set. Kim was churning all over the center of the court, but the big Morton followed him like a shadow.

The ball came to Kim. He feinted, then whirled, but Morton was waiting. Desperately, Kim passed back out to Babe York. Now, it began all over again. Babe and Al Newman exchanged passes. Then Dan Barritt broke free to take a pass in the corner. But when the pass arrived, so had the opposing Bear guard. Dan was forced to pass back out to the guards again.

For a full minute, the Meteors tried to break through for a setup. But the

Bear defense was airtight. In desperation, Babe cocked his wrists and fired a long one.

The ball was short. Morton went up and took the ball off the backboard. He pivoted in mid-air, sent the ball zinging down the sideline toward one of his streaking forwards.

The gamble paid off. The Bear forward had a two step advantage and he banked in an easy layup shot. Now, the visitors were leading 4 to 0 and the fans were getting restless.

But it was a restlessness that was to grow much worse. Kim's team, in an effort to break through for a score, hurried a couple of shots that went for Bear recoveries. And in less than thirty seconds, the Bears had rung up two more quick baskets. Trailing by eight points, Kim called for time.

Kim gathered his team around him. "These guys haven't got any more than we've got," he began.

"Thanks for the reassurance," Dan Barritt growled. "For a minute, I was beginning to get worried."

Kim studied Dan for signs of a white feather, but it wasn't there and Kim relaxed. Dan Barritt was just sore at himself, just cracking wise to take some of the sting out of his feelings.

Kim said, "These babies are big, but I think they'll tire. So let's forget about the score and just run 'em off their feet. When we run 'em down, we'll close the gap fast."

THEY went back into the ball game. But this time Kim's guards didn't wait for the forward wall to get set. Al Newman took Babe's pass and flipped it halfway up the court to Kim.

Kim was moving fast. He dribbled all the way to the free throw lane, then whipped the ball to Dan Barritt who was coming in from the side. Dan had to shoot fast and he rimmed the basket. But Kim was trailing him and as the ball tilted out of the basket, Kim tipped it back inside. A big 2 went up on the Meteor side of the scoreboard and now

the Central City fans came to life.

When the Bears took the ball under the basket, the Meteors didn't fall back. They dogged the Bears all the way. The pass came in toward Morton who was legging it for his own goal. But Kim leaped up and snared it with one hand. He completed the pivot motion and sent a one-hander flying for the hoop. The ball found a home. Now it was Bears, 8; Meteors, 4.

That however, was as close as the Meteors came to closing the gap during the first half. Kim substituted freely. He'd work his front line until they were ready to slow down, then he'd bring in new men from the bench. Kim's strategy didn't show on the scoreboard, but the visitors were beginning to tire. In the second half, the Meteors would make their real threat.

At the end of the half, the Bears were out in front 29 to 24. The towering visitors came back rested for the second half, and for ten minutes they held the Meteors at bay.

But Kim's firewagon brand of basketball began to pay off as the game moved into the dying minutes. It started with Kim getting away from Morton to ring up a quick basket. Morton fouled Kim and an instant later, Kim racked up the free toss.

Seconds later, the Bear coach gave Morton his first rest of the game. Morton's substitute was no match for Kim and in rapid order, Kim broke through for a short layup shot, then followed it with a twisting one-hander from the sideline. The Bear lead was cut to 41 to 40 and the desperate Bear coach sent in an entire new team to try to stem the Meteor attack.

But Kim's lads were clicking. They had worn the Bear giants down to size and now, with the big boys resting on the bench, the Meteors went to town.

Dan Barritt worked in for a setup and Babe York added another. By the time the Bear varsity could be rushed back onto the floor, the Meteors were leading 44 to 41.

Kim called time. In the huddle, he said, "We could stall the final two minutes, but I think we've got those babies on the run. Let's give the crowd something to talk about."

The Bears put the ball into play and they worked down fast. The ball came to Morton and he whirled to make the shot. Kim leaped for the ball, but he missed and his hand landed on Morton's shoulder. The ball dropped through, and before the dazed Meteors knew what had happened, Morton had racked up a free toss. It was 44 to 44 and the clock was ticking away the seconds.

Al Newman passed in to Babe York. Eight basketeers were slamming down the court, jockeying for position. Morton was at Kim's shoulder, but when Kim looked back, he saw the ball flying toward him. He leaped high, pulled it down. Morton reached for the ball, but hooked Kim's shoulder. Somewhere, the whistle blasted and Kim was given a free toss.

Kim took his time. He could hear the hush come over the crowd, a hush that was bottling itself for the explosion that would follow if Kim connected.

Kim bounced the ball once, sighted, then whipped his wrists upward. The ball had plenty of backspin. It hit the top of the backboard, plunged straight down through the netting. It was 45 to 44 now, and the Meteors were out in front again. The clock said less than a minute.

The Bears made one final attempt. A desperation pass went to Morton and the big center spun and tossed for the hoop. But the ball rolled out and Babe York gobbled it. Babe pitched the ball to the far end of the court where Dan Barritt was waiting, not another man within ten yards. Dan whipped the ball through the hoop and the Bear hearts were broken. Seconds later, the gun went off and the Meteors had won another, 47 to 44.

WHEN Kim reached the office next morning, he found a photographer waiting. The man said, "When they send

me to a hick town like this, there's got to be a reason. No offense, friend. All I want is some pictures of your team at work in the trucking business. Also, I've called the Mayor and a few other guys. Maybe you can dig up a babe for back-ground shots."

Kim knew exactly the girl to call. He phoned Anne, told her what he wanted. She agreed to be there in an hour. Actually, she was there much sooner and when she walked into Kim's office, he was waiting for her.

She was wearing the kind of dress that would look well in a picture magazine, a lacy off-the-shoulder blouse and a gay peasant skirt with yards and yards of flare. Her dark eyes were radiant and there was a youthful eagerness about her that made his chest ache with happiness.

"Kim," the girl said, "I can't wait to tell you this. Dad was home when you called. I told him why I was coming over here and he was pretty impressed. Our talk wasn't a long one, but it was very satisfactory. He's softening, Kim. He's beginning to realize that he's wronged you."

Kim didn't say anything. He didn't have to. They were alone in the office, well away from the street, from the people in the back shop. He looked at her and his temples began to pound and he put his arms around her and kissed her.

At last, when Anne drew away to examine her lipstick, he noticed the bright happy flush upon her cheeks. "It's been a long wait," he said unsteadily. "But it's almost over, Anne. All this publicity will mean more business for the company. Things are finally working out for us."

"How much longer?"

He grinned at her. "Only a few weeks, probably." He thought it over and was satisfied that he was right. "The only thing that has ever worried me was that after we were married, there'd be a strain between you and your family."

He took her arm and within him there was a feeling of deep contentment. He took her to the back room and soon the

place was a beehive of activity. It was a busy morning. Between picture shots and the ringing telephone, Kim had his hands full. Half the town's curious had swarmed into the place to watch the photographer in action. In the process of answering the telephone and talking to the curious factory owners, Kim picked up enough extra business to keep his trucks busy for the next week.

When it was over and the crowd had disappeared, Kim and Anne went back to the front office. Kim phoned the drug store for sandwiches and malts and when he sat back and looked at Anne's lovely dark eyes, he felt giddy.

WHILE he was watching her, the door opened and a man looked in at Kim. He was a big man, tall, dark-eyed and young. His mouth was too wide, too flat, even when it smiled. He came into the office and closed the door and there was arrogance in his eyes.

"Whatever you're selling," Kim said, "I don't want any."

Greg Vincent smiled, said hello to Anne, and sat on the edge of Kim's desk. He said, "I'm thinking of expanding my outfit. The Redline Express Company could use your trucks and I'm willing to pay you twenty thousand for your business, as well as assume your debts."

Kim whistled softly and he found grim satisfaction in Greg's proposal. Twenty thousand was a generous offer. Too generous. Kim said, "I knew we were cutting into your business. I didn't know we were hurting you that much. But it's still no dice!"

"Thirty thousand," Greg said, reddening.

Kim scowled. "Your idea is sound. You know I'm becoming a real competitor. With me out of the way, you could monopolize the territory. You could boost rates and with no competition you'd clean up. But I'm not interested."

Greg stood up and his eyes narrowed. "You're making an awful mistake."

Kim leaped up and his eyes blazed. "Is that a threat?"

"I never threaten," Greg said, backing toward the door. "I only advise. I'll be seeing you around, Dolan."

The moment Greg left, Anne looked at Kim out of puzzled eyes. "Sometimes," she said huskily, "I can't understand you, Kim. You've pretty well convinced people that they were wrong about you. Even my father is beginning to soften toward you. Then you get an offer of thirty thousand dollars which is a lot more than your business is worth. Why did you turn it down?"

Kim said, "Greg's worried and I want to keep him that way. Now that he knows he can't buy my business, he'll try to force me out. I've waited a long time for him to make this move."

Angry tears welled in the girl's dusky eyes. "Kim, have I been wrong about you? I didn't mind waiting around as long as I thought you were only trying to reestablish yourself. But you don't seem as worried about your reputation as you do about getting revenge for something that you still can't be sure that Greg Vincent did to you. People believe in you again, Kim. You're on top of the world and now you get a chance to make thirty thousand clear profit. We could be happy for a lot of years on that, Kim."

He was bewildered. Coloring, he said, "Look, baby, it isn't the money. I've got Greg where I want him. He'll pull something raw and I'll catch him red-handed. I—"

"That's just the point!" Anne cried. "You know he's ruthless! You say he's responsible for that episode in New York. I've waited four years for that to blow over, Kim. So suppose he does something like that again? It might mean four more years. No, Kim—"

"I thought you understood pretty well what I was after," Kim said bleakly. "If I sold out now, I'd be a gutless creature who let himself be shoved around by Greg Vincent. You don't want a man. You're looking for a lapdog!"

The instant Kim spoke, he regretted it. He saw the hurt look in Anne's eyes change to anger and his own temper

bristled to match her mood. He watched her get up, watched her walk quickly to the door. Even then he might have called her back. But he didn't. Greg Vincent's visit had unnerved him and Anne's outburst hadn't helped his peace of mind any.

SHAKILY, Kim got up and went through the office door. In the large room in the rear, Dan Barritt and Chris Allen were changing a tire on a transport truck. Over in a corner Monk Marvin, Kim's chief mechanic, was tinkering with the distributor on a ton and a half truck.

As Kim approached, a greasy, wrinkled face came out from beneath the hood. Small green eyes blinked at Kim. Monk Marvin fiddled with the lobe of his ear and his eyes were curious.

"You look like you just lost your best friend," Monk said.

Kim winced and he wondered how accurately Monk had called the turn. But he forced thoughts of Anne from his mind. "Monk," he said, "I just had a visit from the boss of Redline Express. From now on, keep your eyes open. Don't let anyone get close to the trucks while they're in the shop."

Monk shrugged. "You must be expecting trouble."

"That's the devil of it," Kim muttered. "I don't know *what* to expect. But since trucks are more vulnerable than a winning basketball team, we've got to keep our eyes peeled. And Monk, while you're at it, cut up a few short lengths of gas pipe and see that each driver gets one. You never can tell."

Monk whistled softly as Kim walked away.

The trouble that Kim had anticipated from Greg Vincent did not materialize. Business continued to boom and Kim slapped a mortgage on his business to pay for the purchase of four more second-hand transport trucks.

Meanwhile, Kim's Meteors journeyed to Tulsa where they humbled the Rockets 69 to 38. A week later, in Kansas

City, the Meteors rung up a 53 to 51 victory over the Oilers.

With four wins and no losses, the Meteors returned to Central City in a deadlock with the Redliners. Central City had produced many great basketballers, but to find themselves suddenly thrust into the national basketball limelight was a new and wonderful sensation.

On the day that Kim returned, the magazine carrying the picture story of the rise of Kim's Meteors hit the newsstands. Within an hour, the entire order was sold out.

A few hours later, a delegation from the Mayor's office called upon Kim and he saw at once that they were in an effusive mood. "Greatest publicity the town has ever had," the beaming Mayor told Kim. "We want you to know that we're solidly behind you!"

Without knowing exactly when or how it had happened, Kim Dolan began to feel like one of the town's more substantial citizens. It was rather a strange sensation. But Kim had to admit that he liked it. There was just one thing wrong. He hadn't seen Anne and it was worrying him. Soon he would have to swallow his pride.

WITH the game against the Redliners coming up, Kim began to drive his team harder. The teams would meet twice during the season, but Kim knew the advantage would lie with the club that won the first contest.

By day, Kim and his crew worked hard to cope with the flood of new trucking orders. But, tired as they were, they managed to spend at least two hours a night in practice sessions. Kim was more than satisfied with the team's improvement.

As the big game approached, the weather turned foul. The temperature dropped below freezing and heavy snows began to fall. But the enthusiasm of Central City basketball fans continued to burn at fever heat despite the temperature drop.

The Redliners came to town the night

before the game. News photographers and sports reporters had also begun to arrive. During the night, the weather took a turn for the better. And when Kim awakened next morning, the sun was shining and it had begun to thaw.

Kim hurried to his office. Although it was early, a man was standing outside Kim's door when he arrived. The man was John Latham who hadn't spoken a word to Kim since that night in the Colosseum four long years before.

John Latham was a big man, graying a little at the temples. He had Anne's square determined chin, Anne's dark snapping eyes. John Latham nodded briefly at Kim, then followed him into the office.

"This weather," Latham said, "has disrupted our shipping schedule. I may as well come to the point. I had several thousand pairs of shoes for overseas relief shipment. Unless I can get them to Bradley Junction in time to catch the eastbound train, I'm afraid they'll miss the relief ship that's due to sail from New York a couple of days from now."

"What's the matter with the Redline Express people? They've been handling your business for a long time."

John Latham flushed and his expression softened. "Kim, during the past weeks I've been doing a lot of thinking. Perhaps I've been too harsh on you. True, you were once quite a hothead. You made one big mistake, but you seem to be living it down."

Kim started to deny that mistake, then thought better of it.

"The fact is, Kim, that the Redline Express Company refused to guarantee to make that shipment because of bad roads when I called them yesterday. But the sun is out today and—well, instead of calling them again, I thought I'd talk to you." The old man's eyes began to twinkle. "It's a very important shipment, Kim, and after the way Anne recommended you I'm convinced you can do the job for me."

Kim didn't know why, but he was suddenly elated. He hadn't seen Anne since

the day she'd walked out of his office. Yet her father had left the distinct impression that she thought highly of him.

Kim lifted the phone, called the Highway Patrol. He spoke a few minutes, then hung up. "The road to Bradley Junction is still closed, but if this thaw keeps up, the road will be open by noon. The Patrol agreed to let my truck through the blockade, since it's an emergency shipment, provided I'm willing to assume the risk. I am. When can we load up?"

"Immediately," John Latham said.

Kim took a deep breath, then decided to say it. "There's just one thing I want understood. This deal has nothing to do with Anne, nor with any change of heart that you might have had toward me. As far as I'm concerned, it's strictly business."

John Latham looked at Kim a long time and when he nodded there was a new look in his eyes. A look of respect.

WHEN the man left, Kim went back to the shop. Only one transport truck was in the shop and that was one of the secondhand trucks that Kim had just purchased.

Kim looked at Monk Marvin. "I've got a rush order from the Latham Shoe Company," he said. "Have you been able to give that transport a thorough check, Monk?"

Monk Marvin scratched his head. "Not as much as I'd like to. But if it ain't too long a trip, she'll pull it."

"Just to Bradley Junction and back," Kim said.

Monk shrugged. "It's a cinch, then. Shall I gas her up?"

"Right," Kim said. "And throw on a couple of spare tires, just in case."

Kim went back to the office. His schedule for the day was completely disrupted. All of Kim's regular drivers were now out on the road. Kim had given five of his key players the day off, hoping to save them for tonight's game. Now, due to the importance of the Latham order, he found that he would need some of

them after all. Reluctantly, he picked up the phone, called Dan Barritt at the hotel.

Kim said, "I wanted you guys to get some rest, Dan. But an important deal has come up. Do you feel like making a short trip?"

"It'll keep my mind off tonight's game," Dan said.

"You're the best spare driver I've got," Kim said. "You can be back by four this afternoon, even if you take it easy. Chris is a good mechanic and so is Tony. Bring them both along, just in case something should go wrong."

"Be right over," Dan promised.

It wasn't until Kim watched the truck depart, later that morning, that he began to feel uneasy. The strip of highway between Central City and Bradley Junction was a pretty desolate one. Still, even by creeping along, Kim knew his three basketeers could be back in plenty of time for the game.

An hour later, the wind changed and the skies grew overcast. Soon, snow began to fall again. All that day Kim watched the gray skies and tried not to worry. The snow was powdery now, the kind that packed down hard and made the highways treacherously slick. He checked the Highway Patrol office. The Bradley Junction road was still closed.

Four o'clock passed. Four-thirty. Five. John Latham called to ask if the truck had returned. He sounded fretful. Kim told him not to worry. At five-thirty, Kim called long distance.

"I want to talk to Bradley Junction," Kim said.

"Sorry," the operator told him. "There's a sleet storm in the vicinity of Bradley Junction. Phone service is temporarily disrupted. Shall I place your call later, if service—"

"Forget it," Kim groaned, hanging up.

He waited until six o'clock. He felt as if every nerve in his body had broken through his skin's surface and someone was rubbing him down with sandpaper.

Kim called the Highway Patrol again. He got Jerry Allison on the wire. "Jerry,

what do you know about my truck?"

"We let it through the blockade, Kim," the man said. "Hasn't it come back yet?"

"No," Kim said dully. He thought a minute. "Look, Jerry—could you send a car out to look for me. It's a lot to ask, but—"

"I'll go myself," Jerry sighed. "But I'm gonna hate to miss that ball game tonight."

Kim thought of the three men who would be missing from his lineup. He started to say that it wouldn't be much of a game, then decided not to borrow trouble. He thanked Jerry Allison and hung up.

Kim sent out for a light meal. Seven o'clock passed. Seven-thirty. Finally, he put on his coat and headed for the Coliseum.

THE COLISEUM was jammed to the rafters when Kim's Meteors prepared to face off against the Redliners. The local fans had been openly speculative all during the warmup session, noting that Kim had only seven men on the floor. But Kim had maintained a tight-lipped silence. Until the last instant, he'd continued to hope. But now the hope had gone out of him.

He gathered his men around him. Both Dan Barritt and Chris were missing from their starting assignments. Tony Tucker, a substitute guard was also with the truck.

Kim said, "With Chris and Dan gone, we've lost our scoring punch. Our only chance is to play tight defensive basketball and pray that those guys turn up."

They stared grimly at Kim. They weren't blaming him, exactly. They weren't out-and-out pros. They were hired to work as well as to play basketball. Kim had been justified in asking the three men to make the trip. Still, the Meteors weren't too happy. They'd counted a lot on tonight.

A whistle shrilled and Kim turned and walked slowly to the center circle. Greg Vincent, his mouth faintly twisted,

dark eyes slightly arrogant, spoke softly.

"What's the matter, chum? You seem a little short handed."

It was the way Greg Vincent said it, the inflection in his voice, the way his mouth lifted at the corners. *Suddenly, blindingly, Kim would have bet his last dollar that Greg Vincent knew a lot more about Kim's missing players than he was admitting.* Greg's attitude was not that of a man who was curious about the missing players. It was the attitude of a man who knew what had happened to them.

The referee came between them, flipped the ball into the air. Kim got the tap and slapped the ball to Joe Barker, a sub forward. Joe dribbled cautiously, waiting for his team to get set.

But Pete Doyle, moving in from the blind side, stole the ball from Joe. He flipped a pass to Greg Vincent who was driving for the basket. Joe Barker raced in to guard Greg, but as Greg got the ball away, Joe collided with him. The referee blasted his whistle, even as the shot went through the basket.

Kim was furious as Greg lined up for the free throw. Greg's slick dodge had worked. He'd held his shot until the last instant. Then, as he'd got the shot away, he'd leaned toward Joe, making it look as if Joe had committed the foul. It was a smooth maneuver and the referee missed it completely. An instant later, Greg racked up the free shot and it was 3 to 0 in favor of the Redliners.

But the Meteors swarmed back and within fifteen seconds, Kim banked in a layup shot to make it 2 to 3. But the Redliners pulled the string. Nick Kovitz connected with a long lazy field goal for the Redliners. Greg added another—and again drew a free throw when Joe Barker committed his second foul.

KIM CALLED ³⁰⁰time. "Joe," he warned, "if I lose you, I won't have another forward to send in. Don't play Greg so close. He's deliberately drawing fouls in an effort to get you benched."

But Kim's warning failed to stop Joe's

run of bad luck. Before the first half was ten minutes gone, he was motioned out by the referee. Greg's slick maneuvering was responsible for the final foul that sent Joe Barker to the bench. Greg was an old hand at the game and Joe was a rookie. Each time a foul occurred, Greg was smart enough to screen the ref out of view with his body. As Joe walked to the bench, the crowd stood up and began to chant: "We want Dan Barritt! We want Chris Allen!" Grimly, Kim tried to shut out the sound.

Kim carried a complement of four forwards. With two men gone, another banished on fouls, his only recourse was to call Tom Elwell into the game. Tom was a fine guard, but he was far from being an offensive man, yet Kim had no other choice.

When Elwell came in, the crowd began to understand and a low rumble went through the Coliseum. Kim Dolan knew that the town had counted heavily upon a win. So he had his choice. He could play defensive basketball and try to keep the score down. Or he could shoot the works now and forget what might happen to the Meteors when the second half entered the dying minutes and the Meteors were dead on their feet. Quickly, Kim decided that an all-out offensive would leave a better taste in the crowd's mouth.

Kim Dolan went to work. He began to play like a man inspired. And Kim's driving game infected the rest of his mates. They became a red hot outfit. They played over their heads. They flipped dizzy long ones from far out on the court. They scored with one-handers, with setups. They scored from the free throw line and from the corners. For eight minutes they played like a team gone wild. With two minutes of the first half remaining, the Meteors were leading 19 to 15.

And then the reaction set in. Bill Davis went racing in for a shot, but the ball went wild. The Redliners recovered and five seconds later, Greg Vincent broke away from Kim to score an easy setup.

Babe York made a wild pass from under his own basket. Nick Kovitz intercepted it for the Redliners and dropped a beauty from the corner. The score was tied, now, 19 to 19.

The Meteors were rocking on their heels. And before the first half ended, the visitors scored twice more. A tired team of Meteors staggered off the court. But the Coliseum crowd stood up and gave them a tremendous ovation for the game battle they had put up.

During the rest period, Kim's tired club stretched out on benches and rested. Nobody wasted breath trying to speak. There was nothing that anyone could say.

A few minutes before the intermission ended, Kim heard a shuffling in the hallway outside. The door opened and Dan Barritt walked in, a uniformed Highway Patrolman behind him. Dan's clothing was badly disheveled and his face was covered with grime. One eye was black and there was a long scratch across his face. He took a limping step toward Kim.

"Brace yourself for a blow, Kim," Dan said grimly.

KIM'S stomach muscles tightened. "What happened?" He demanded hoarsely.

"We were doing okay," Dan Barritt recounted, "until we hit Dead Man's Turn. We were just creeping down the steep grade when the left front wheel came off. There wasn't anything we could do, Kim. The truck swerved against the guard rail and bounced off. But we hit another slick patch and I saw we were going to hit the rail again. The three of us had to jump . . ."

"What about Chris and Tony?" Kim asked huskily.

Dan Barritt shrugged. "The transport went over the guard rail and rolled down into the creek bed. The gas tank exploded. Chris and Tony got pretty badly burned trying to get to the fire extinguisher. But it didn't work. Somebody's bought a lot of shoes that will never be

delivered now. I'm sorry, Kim. If it hadn't been for that front wheel coming off, we'd have made it in a breeze."

Kim felt the hair prickling on the back of his neck. At the moment, he wasn't thinking about his lost truck. He was thinking about something else.

"Did you get a chance to examine that wheel?" he demanded.

Dan said, "Yeah. And so did the Highway Patrol when they got there. The bolts hadn't been tampered with. It looked like the wheel just hadn't been bolted on tight enough. The taps worked loose and the wheel stayed on until we had to make that sharp turn to the right. Then the weight of the truck forced the wheel off." Dan saw the expression in Kim's eyes. "Say, Kim, you don't think . . ."

"I don't know what to think!" Kim said grimly. He was remembering again the way Greg Vincent had looked at him, just before the game began.

Before Kim could carry the thought further, the buzzer sounded summoning the team back onto the court. Dan Barritt saw the look in Kim's eyes and he shook his head.

"My ankle won't be any good for at least four or five days, Kim. And Chris and Tony are over at the hospital, getting their hands bandaged. None of us can be of any help to you tonight."

Kim sighed. "Well, off we go to the slaughter."

Kim called the turn. For five minutes, the Meteors held the Redliners on even terms. But then the tired locals fell apart. The pace had been too terrific.

It wasn't a pleasant thing to remember. Greg Vincent and Nick Kovitz hit a hot streak. Time and again they raced past the ragged Meteor defense for scores. The Meteors were powerless against such an onslaught. The game turned into a rout. As the score began to pile up, the crowd grew silent, then sullen. And finally they began to boo the Meteors. They had come out tonight hoping to see a Meteor win. But they were being disappointed.

In the final two minutes, Kim Dolan put on a one-man finish that netted five points. But it was a futile effort. When the final gun sounded, the Redliners were the undisputed leaders of the league. The score was 61 to 39.

As Kim walked off the court he saw Anne, standing beside her father. Kim approached them, not trusting himself to look at the girl.

Quickly, graphically, Kim told John Latham what had happened. He didn't alibi. He said, "I'm sorry it happened. But as quickly as the insurance adjustor makes the survey, I'll send a check to cover your loss."

"Check?" John Latham asked dazedly. "What good is a check?" The man's shoulders were sagging and his eyes were disappointed. "Money will never replace all that critical leather."

Kim said, huskily, "I wish I could say more. But I can't."

John Latham stared at Kim, then shrugged wearily. "It was an unfortunate accident," he muttered. Curiously, the shoe executive was not angry. But he could not hide his keen disappointment in Kim.

Kim Dolan had run out of things to say. He nodded stiffly, then turned away, still not trusting himself to look at Anne.

AHEAD of him, Kim saw Greg Vincent picking up his warmup suit. Kim gave in to an impulse.

Reaching Greg's side, Kim spoke softly. "Well, how do you like it, now that I've taken some of Latham's business away from you?"

Greg grinned. "It'll be the last job you'll ever get and you know it—" Suddenly, Greg reddened. He broke off in mid-sentence, began to flounder for words.

Anger swelled inside Kim. He had to fight himself to keep from hitting Greg. *Kim's apparently off-handed remark had drawn the admission from Greg that he knew of the job John Latham had given him.*

"How can you be so sure that I'm not lying to you about a job from Latham?" Kim asked angrily.

Greg Vincent recovered his equilibrium. "What I meant to say was that I only assumed that you were telling the truth." Amused eyes stared back at Kim. "But after John Latham sees the kind of lousy service he gets from other truck lines, naturally he'll be ready to come back to us. Do you follow me?"

"I follow you," Kim muttered. "And if you aren't careful, I'll be ahead of you."

Angrily, Kim turned away. Today, his business had been dealt a damaging blow. Tonight, his team had met a stinging defeat. There was no longer any doubt in his mind, now. Two times Greg Vincent had outwitted him. But Kim was not yet ready to throw in the sponge. Sometime, a week from now, a month from now, or a year—it really didn't matter—Greg Vincent would make still another effort to drive Kim out of business. That Greg was, in some manner, involved in today's accident, Kim hadn't the slightest doubt. Somehow, he had to catch Greg in the act. Or go under . . .

THE FOLLOWING morning, Kim found a story in the Central City *Morning Telegraph*. The story was about Kim:

Here is a story that I hate to write. It's the story of Kim Dolan who, despite his many shortcomings, is essentially a pretty decent guy.

I've followed Kim's career for years. He was a stormy petrel, a hothead—but a great basketeer. He made many friends, many enemies. He blew hot and he blew cold. But always, I kept telling myself that someday, Kim would find himself. Regretfully, I admit that I was wrong.

Remember how Kim faced his big test in New York? Remember how, tanked up on grog, he staggered from the floor while thousands of horrified fans watched?

It was a mistake. I think Kim knew it. He made a weak attempt to blame someone else, but when he saw how things were, he decided to take it like a man. So Kim returned to Central City and from that day until now, he didn't offer a single alibi.

It took courage to come back to this

town. But in spite of some peculiar inner weaknesses, Kim is a very paradoxical gent. He brought Central City a bigtime basketball franchise. He made us believe in him again.

Once again, I watched the Meteors develop into a winning team. Once again, I told myself that Kim had found the range. But I was wrong. Last night, the blowup came. At the very threshold of success, Kim's Meteors stumbled and staggered and fell apart when the chips were down.

I don't know much about the trucking business. But I have an idea that a man in his right mind would never send three basketball players onto an icy highway on the day of an important game. Why did Kim do it? Today, I doubt if he really knows. Why did he get drunk that night in the Colosseum? Both questions are as hard to answer.

This is the hard part. I admire Kim's courage, but I'm forced to admit that he's a pretty unsubstantial citizen. An in-and-outer. But all of Central City owes Kim a debt of thanks. Kim, alone, was farsighted enough to prove that Central City could support bigtime basketball. We shouldn't try to take that away from him.

But Kim, obviously, just isn't the man to lead our team. Next year, perhaps some substantial factory owner will take over Kim's franchise. Some man with common sense, with mature judgement. A man who can give Central City a winning team, a team upon which loyal fans can depend. After all of this, I still like Kim Dolan. . . .

Kim's anger flared, but subsided almost as quickly. The public, given only those facts that were obvious to the eyes, must naturally fall in with that kind of thinking.

When Kim reached his office, he found his entire team waiting. Dan Barritt's ankle was no better. Chris Allen's burns were worse than had been feared and Tony Tucker's injuries would keep him out for at least two or three games.

Kim tried to grin. "Well, how do you feel about the trucking business now?"

"It'd be a good business if it wasn't for the rats in it," Dan Barritt said.

Kim's eyebrows went up. "I'm listening, Dan."

Dan Barritt said, "I spent a lot of time thinking last night. You know, Kim, a guy might have driven a hundred miles on a straight road and that wheel would never have come off. But if someone

wanted to raise the devil with your business, he couldn't have picked a better time. Any guy who knows the road between here and Bradley Junction would know that an unbolted wheel would certainly come off the minute the truck made that sharp downhill curve at Dead Man's Turn. Of course, I'll admit that a lot of my hunch is hindsight. It was Monk here who gave me the idea."

Monk was standing over by the door. He came forward and his small darting eyes were troubled. Monk said, "Kim, I didn't think much about it yesterday. But you remember how I backed the truck out into the alley when Dan, Chris and Tony went across the street for a quick cup of coffee? Well, I came inside for a few minutes. When I went back, there was a guy outside. He was standin' right by the left front wheel. He acted surprised as the devil and finally he stammered out to me do we need any help? When I said we didn't he beat it. But fast. Funny thing, though. He didn't look like a mechanic. I got a hunch he was out there on business, but it wasn't to look for a job."

Kim's pulses jumped. Quickly, he asked for a description. But when it came, he had to admit that it would have fit at least three men in that very room.

So Kim said, "Keep your eyes peeled, Monk. If the guy comes back, part his hair with a gas pipe and then call me . . ."

SUDDENLY, the telephone rang. Kim picked it up and talked for a moment. When he hung up, his face bore a worried scowl. "That was the Metalcraft people. They're canceling all their freight shipments with us. No reason given of course. Nice, huh?"

Kim's players looked away from him. A bad night on a basketball court. A burned truck, thousands of pairs of burned shoes that could not be replaced. An editorial against Kim. It made sense.

Within Kim Dolan determination crystallized. He banged his fist down

onto the desk top. "We're not licked yet! Even if we lose every bit of business we've got, I'm keeping this basketball team together! We meet the Redliners once more and we've still got a chance at a tie—or a win, if they get beaten in the meantime. As long as we're a threat, Greg Vincent will be worried. And when that guy worries, he can't let nature take its course. He has to stack the deck. And when he does . . ."

"We're with you, Kim," Dan Barritt promised.

There was a new attitude in the ranks of the Meteor Fast Freighters as the days went by. They kept strictly to themselves. They ignored the sports columns that referred to them as flashes-in-the-pan. There was a new grimness in the way they went about their secret practice sessions.

Each day brought a gradual lessening of business. It wasn't a great decline. But it was a steady one. And it was eating into Kim's thinning bankroll.

The Meteors defeated the hapless St. Louis Sentinels by a close score, despite the loss of Kim's three injured men.

Next, the Meteors went to Denver. There against stronger opposition, Kim took the brakes off. Dan Barritt's ankle held up for the entire last half and the Meteors eked out a 39 to 36 win.

Just before the Meteors took off for a game with the Carson Indians, Kim picked up a paper and let out a whoop of joy. The night before, the Indians had won an overtime game from Greg Vincent's Redliners. The league was deadlocked again. It was the Redliners and the Meteors out there in front and the teams were driving down the stretch.

Thus, the game against the Indians assumed great importance. Conquerors of the peerless Redliners, the Indians were waiting for Kim's club to arrive, waiting for a chance to knock off still another club to put themselves even closer to the league lead.

Kim's club was back at full strength again and he soon had every reason to be grateful for it. It was a ball game. It

was a shooting match. It was a gloves-off exhibition of sheer basketball wizardry and when the final gun went off, the crowd sat back exhausted. For the count was knotted at 57 apiece. And the overtime period was coming up.

The rest period passed swiftly. Soon, the whistle sounded and the crowd got quiet as Kim stepped into the center ring against the Indian jumper. Kim put everything into his leap, but was out-jumped. An Indian left forward recovered the ball.

The Indians took their time. The guards, standing well out from the free throw circle, passed the ball and watched for an opening. Swiftly, the ball came in to the center. Kim dogged the man in front of him. The Indian didn't have a prayer at a pivot shot. In desperation, he flipped the ball back over his head while going away from the basket.

IT WAS horseshoes. It was four leaf clovers. It was four aces and the joker. The ball dropped through the hoop without even ruffling the netting and now the Indians were in front 59 to 57.

Al Newman tossed the ball in to Babe York. Babe pitched down the center, where Kim took the ball on the dead run, half a step in front of his opposing guard.

Kim cut sharply between two empty players and broke into the clear. He drew a bead on the goal and leaped toward it. But a knee hit him in the back. The ball went wild and Kim hit the floor on his back. He could smell the skin burning on his shoulder blades as he scooted along the waxed surface.

But the referee was waving at the offending Indian player and when he handed Kim the ball, his "Two shots, son!" was the sweetest music Kim had ever heard.

Kim took his time. He measured the distance, then uncocked his wrists. The ball was on the money, high and sweet and through for a perfect point. It was 59 to 58, now, with the Meteors trailing.

Kim's next shot hit the rim and

bounced out. An Indian guard recovered and began to dribble around in circles.

Kim had the answer for that one. With a one-point lead, the Indians were going into their stalling act. Time, again, was running out. So Kim kept his men in the forecourt. They rushed the Indians.

Suddenly, Kim saw the ball flying toward his opposing center. Kim leaped, got his hands on it, wrestled for possession. A whistle shrilled and Kim squared off for the jump.

Kim controlled the tip. And this time, Chris Allen grabbed it over in the left hand corner. Chris was covered, but he managed to bounce a pass to Kim who made a whirling one-handed shot.

The ball rimmed the basket, bounced away. Dan Barritt leaped high, tipped the ball back to Kim. Kim fired frantically, but an Indian forward leaped high, tilted the ball aside.

From the rising scream that was rocking the arena, Kim knew that the end was just seconds away. He saw Dan Barritt leap frenziedly, saw Dan's long hand corral the ball. Dan was hogtied, but he flipped the ball to Kim again.

Even as Kim took the pass out in front of the goal, he saw the timer's gun come up. He took it on the dead run, six steps from home. The Indian center was dogging his footsteps, but Kim turned on his last fast burst. He went half a step out in front. Two men converged upon him from the flanks, even as he left his feet. He got the ball away, as the two bodies crashed into him.

The gun cracked through the crowd noise. But, as Kim fell he saw the ball drop through the hoop for the two pointer that gave them the ball game. The referee handed Kim the ball for a free toss, but it was only a formality. Kim was pretty well shaken up. He missed the basket by a country mile, but it did not matter. The Meteors had won another. They had won it the hard way.

WHEN the Meteors returned to Central City, they were still in a first place tie. But when Kim arrived at the

office next morning, Monk Marvin had some news for him.

"Somebody broke into the shop last night," Monk said laconically.

"How?" Kim demanded.

Monk took Kim over to a side window, pointed to a small panel of broken glass. "Someone knocked the window in," Monk explained. "After that, it was easy to unlatch the frame and crawl in. I didn't notice it until just a little while ago. I was pretty busy getting the trucks ready to hit the road."

Kim said, "Is anything missing?"

"Not that I've noticed," Monk admitted.

Kim was about to call the cops, then decided against it. He studied the window awhile, then turned and went back to the front office. He checked his schedule and found that six trucks had gone out earlier that morning. He had an uneasy feeling about something.

By the end of the day, Kim's uneasiness bore fruit. Six drivers had gone on the road and six drivers had called back, from various points in the state. In each instance, something had gone wrong with their trucks.

Two tires had gone out on one truck. Both tires had picked up nails. The driver was tied up, with his cargo, until he could get another tire. Another driver reported a stoppage in the fuel line. On another truck, the brakes had gone bad.

Kim was angry when he hung up after the last call. Every accident was one that could have happened normally. But six had happened in a single day! And in each case, it would take considerable time to get the trucks rolling again. Meanwhile, cargoes were tied up, important merchandise that was in great demand by equipment-hungry purchasers.

The situation was serious, but the big blow didn't fall until a few days later. Due to some of the losses incurred, Kim called in his local insurance adjustor. Kim laid his cards on the line. He admitted that he thought he was being sabotaged.

The insurance man was every bit as frank. He said, "Kim, we paid the loss on that shipment of shoes. But we can't stand many more losses—not when they come six at a time. Everything that has happened has looked normal enough, even to a claim adjustor. Suppose you are a victim of sabotage. I've got so little to go on that my insurance detectives might never uncover the guilty party—and in the meantime, we'd be paying out regular losses."

Kim's expression was bleak. "Okay, Sam. Get to the point."

"Under the provisions of our contract," the man said, "we can cancel your insurance on written notice. I'm giving you that notice now. Sorry, Kim, but that's how it is." A moment later, after filling out the proper form, the insurance man said, "No hard feelings, I hope. How about having lunch with me? The Business Men's Club is throwing a big dutch lunch."

"I'm afraid," Kim muttered, "that I'd be a wet blanket."

"Okay, Kim. I'll see you around."

SHORTLY after lunch, Kim's phone began to ring. The first caller, a local produce man, informed Kim that he would no longer be needing Kim's trucks.

An odd coincidence, Kim thought, remembering the morning visit from the insurance man. Kim said, "By the way, did you bump into Sam Hollingsworth at the dutch luncheon today?"

"Come to think of it," the man admitted, "I did."

"And he told you about canceling my insurance?"

"Well, Kim, now that you mention it . . ."

"So long," Kim said.

Now, it was no longer coincidence.

The news of the insurance cancellation swept the town like a prairie fire. By the end of the day, Kim's phone was smoking. And Kim's business was a shambles.

In desperation, Kim called several other insurance firms. But they pointed

to his long record of accidents and they made it plain that they could not write a policy for him unless he was willing to pay a fantastic rate. At the moment, Kim couldn't afford it, so he ended up without insurance.

Kim went back to the shop. To his regular mechanics, he said, "I'm practically broke. Everything I own is in hock for the new trucks I bought. Since none of you guys want your pay in IOU's, you'll probably want to look for other jobs. I've got enough mechanics among my basketball men to carry on."

They came up to the office and Kim paid them off. But when Monk Marvin stepped up, Monk said, "Forget it, Kim. I'll take your IOU's until you can pay in cash. I've still got a lot of faith in this business."

Kim said, "You've got a wife and two kids, Monk."

"We can get along a little while," Monk said.

Kim nodded. "Thanks, Monk. I appreciate it . . ."

TWO NIGHTS later, Kim's Meteors met the Kansas City Oilers before a house that was only half filled. The Meteors played sluggish basketball until the final three minutes. Then Kim took things into his own hands.

Calling time out, Kim nodded toward the scoreboard. "We're the Meteors," Kim said, "and we're trailing 37 to 40."

They looked away from Kim and their eyes grew troubled. But they did not say anything. When time was called, Kim took the ball out of bounds at the sideline. He tossed in to Dan Barritt, but Dan dropped the ball and an Oiler forward recovered.

Thoroughly vexed now, Kim darted in from the rear and stole the ball again. He whirled and dribbled for the sideline. No one was open. So Kim cocked his arms and let fly from thirty feet away.

The ball arched cleanly and it settled through the hoop. Now, the Oiler margin was cut to 40 to 39. Employing a fast breaking offense, the Oilers worked the

ball back to the payoff zone. But when the pass came to Kim's opposing center, Kim leaped out and snagged it.

Kim exploded between the two enemy guards before they could turn around. He heard them slapping along at his heels, but he never took his eye off the goal. Closing the gap fast, he lifted the ball over the rim. Someone shoved him from behind as he scored, but it served no purpose, other than to give Kim an additional free toss.

Taking careful aim, Kim dropped the charity shot and now the Meteors were leading 42 to 40 with only seconds left. But Kim Dolan hadn't yet run out his string. He took still another race against the clock when he intercepted an enemy pass. He went driving in under the basket, pivoted, then banked the ball through the hoop.

The shot broke the hearts of the Oilers. Moments later, the game ended with the Meteors in front 44 to 40. But Kim wasn't happy. He knew that his team could have won by at least fifteen more points.

Later, in the dressing room, Kim was aware of the change that had come over the Meteors. There was no banter, no horseplay. And none of them would look Kim in the eye. Kim had something on his chest and although he realized that this was a poor time to say it, he had no other choice.

"We're in a tough spot," he told them. "You know that most of my money is tied up in equipment and with business practically at a standstill, I won't even have enough to pay your salaries much longer. But I've got an ace up my sleeve. All we've got to do is keep winning. Once we win the league title, we'll be able to cash in on all the publicity that it'll bring us. I may have to cut the size of your paychecks for the next few weeks—but you'll get it back, with interest, as soon as business picks up. The important thing is to keep winning! And we'll never win the rest of them if we play the way we did tonight."

When Kim finished, he looked around

him. A few of the Meteors nodded, as if they understood Kim's financial predicament. But they were none too enthusiastic. He felt faintly disturbed, but decided that they'd all feel better about it when they'd had time to think it over.

It wasn't until the next morning, after he reached the office, that Kim got the big jolt. There was a short sports jotting in the morning paper that completely explained the team's attitude. Kim read:

... and don't be too surprised if Kim Dolan's basketball team blows up in his face, even before the season ends. Despite their first place deadlock, the Meteors are seeing the handwriting on the wall. Rumor has it that the Meteor Fast Freighters will fold, shortly, due to lack of business. Without jobs, the Meteor basketeers will be out in the cold. So watch for a Meteor breakup soon. . . .

KIM LET the paper flutter from his fingers. Now he knew what had been eating his team. Last night, even as Kim had been talking to them, they had already known that they were ready to walk out on him.

In a way, Kim couldn't blame them. They had to look ahead. They had decided that Kim's business was jinxed and that there was no future in it for any of them. They had seen so many things happen to Kim's business that they were convinced that Kim could not raise the working capital to pull the business out of the hole.

Bitterly, Kim thought things out. He had been maneuvered into this position by Greg Vincent. He knew that if he could raise enough money to pay salaries through the rest of the season, he could still beat Greg at his own game. But where would the money come from? Kim was in hock up to his ears. The town was down on him and there wasn't a chance of a business pick-up until the Meteors won the title. The big problem now was to keep the team together until the title was in the bag.

Kim sat there a long time, staring straight ahead. The front door opened. Kim looked up. The girl in the doorway

kicked snow off her boots, then unzipped her parka. He watched the parka fall away from her face, away from her dark tousled hair.

"The last time I walked out of here," Anne Latham said tremulously, "I slammed the door. I came back to apologize."

Her eyes were misty and there was no denying the meaning in them. Kim felt his chest go tight, felt his temples begin to pound wildly. Before he could say anything, the girl came across the office and sat down opposite Kim's desk.

"Kim," Anne said huskily, "I once told you that I was willing to wait until you could establish yourself in this town. Then you turned down Greg Vincent's offer and I decided you were more interested in getting revenge from Greg than in marrying me. So I walked out."

Kim looked at the girl and a tremor went through him. His mouth twisted as he said, "You were right about one thing, Anne. You warned me that if I tried to compete with Greg, I might wind up behind the eight ball." Kim shrugged. "Well—it happened. You knew when to quit backing the wrong horse. You got out before the nag started stumbling."

Kim's tone was heavy with defeat. The girl stared at him as if she could not believe what she had heard. Then she spoke softly, compassion in her voice. "I was wrong, Kim. I ran out on you because I thought I was tired of waiting. Believe me, Kim, I was wrong. I'll wait a lifetime for you if necessary. I know all the trouble you've been having hasn't been accidental. Greg is behind it. He's trying to drive you out of business so that he won't have any competition."

"He's not trying to drive me out," Kim said bitterly, "he's already done it."

THE GIRL looked at him, her eyes very dark, very intense. Suddenly, she leaned forward and beat her small fists against the desk top. "And what are you going to do about it, Kim? Why don't you fight back? Why do you sit there and take it?"

"What can I do?" Kim flared. "Right now, my basketball team is over at the hotel. They're probably packing up to leave. With them gone, our championship hopes are blasted. They're leaving for just one reason. They like to be paid in money instead of promises."

"They can be paid in money!" Anne said flatly.

He stared at her, unable to comprehend. He was aware of the tension within him, of wanting to believe her, but fearing to believe. He said, "It sounds good. But where does the money come from?"

"From me," the girl said triumphantly. "I've got the money I inherited from my aunt. You need help, Kim. I want to buy into the trucking business. I want to make this a real partnership!"

Kim was flabbergasted. Somewhere within him there was a protest, but when it came out, it was very, very weak. "Suppose you put your money into the business," he countered. "Don't you realize that your money would only be paying salaries to keep the team together? It wouldn't mean more business for us. It would only be a stop-gap. Suppose we should lose? Suppose Greg pulls something else and the town stays sour on me! We could keep the business operating only as long as your money held out. Then we'd go broke and have to close up."

He stopped talking for she wasn't paying any attention to him. She sat there, her red mouth smiling, a look in her eyes that sent fire racing through him.

"I'm not listening, Kim! I want to help and I'm going to help. You'll never make me believe that things won't work out for us!"

Kim felt himself wilting. Ten minutes ago, he'd have slugged the first person who suggested that he'd ever take money from a woman. But when he looked at Anne, when he saw the stubborn angle of her jaw, something melted inside of him.

"Baby," he said huskily, "I can't help myself. I'm going to take you up on that

offer . . ." He got up and walked around the desk and when he looked down at her, he saw the invitation in her eyes. Now, for the first time, he admitted to himself how much he had missed her, how much he needed her. He was seething with pent-up emotion. His arms went out to her and she seemed to float up out of her chair. He held her very close and when, at last, he released her, the tension had gone out of him.

"I'd better call the hotel," he said. "I've got to tell the guys that they'll get their salaries."

THE TOWN of Central City found itself in a situation that could only be described as ludicrous. The Meteors were tied for first place for the national semi-pro lead. Yet the town, remembering the times Kim had fallen down before, was convinced that, with the chips down, he would fail them again.

But Kim Dolan had literally forgotten that Central City existed. Certain facts had grown clear in his mind and if those facts were true, Kim knew that a showdown with Greg Vincent was inevitable.

Backed by Anne Latham's money, relieved of pressing financial worries, the Meteors had only to concentrate on basketball. Only one game remained—the game against the Redliners on the Redliners' home court. The payoff for the title. A week before that game, Kim gathered his team in the back shop where all the trucks were parked. He made Monk stop hammering so that everyone could hear.

Kim said, "I may as well admit that I'm expecting trouble from Greg Vincent. He can't hurt our business because we haven't any. So that means he'll try to do something to our team! He'll never let us win the National title without attempting some dirty work. He can't bear being beaten, particularly by me." Kim let that sink in. The players looked at one another and began to nod vigorously. "So we won't take any chances," Kim continued. "We're going to stay in Central City until the afternoon of the

final game. Then we'll load our team into one of these transports and we'll wait until the last minute before we leave town. Instead of going by the regular highway, we'll follow the old county highway. We'll get there just before game time and Greg won't have a chance to do anything to us."

"That should take care of it," Dan Barritt said.

The week passed quickly and on the afternoon of the game, the team gathered in the front office.

Kim said, "You guys go on back. Get in the truck and close the doors. It'll be a little uncomfortable, but it's a short trip." Then, to Monk, Kim said, "You're sure that the truck is in perfect running order?"

"I'd lay a hundred to one that it is," Monk said proudly.

The rest of the team went into the back shop. Kim and Monk were alone. Kim got his clothes ready. Finally, he said, "Go back the truck into the alley. I think the guys had time to get loaded."

Later, Kim heard the truck backing out. He went into the alley. Monk was just climbing out. But Kim said, "Keep your seat, Monk. I'll need a mechanic in case anything goes wrong."

Monk frowned. "I dunno, Kim. I didn't tell my wife . . ."

Kim was scowling. "I can't take a chance, Monk." Kim's eyes were bleak. "Stay in the truck, Monk."

Monk looked at Kim. He stayed in the truck. Kim drove out the old county highway. The road was deserted, except for a small pickup truck moving along a quarter of a mile in front of him. But after a few minutes, the truck began to speed up and was quickly out of sight.

KIM GLANCED at Monk out of the corner of his eyes. "Not many guys would have offered to keep working for me the way you did, Monk. Particularly when you've got a big family."

"You been good to me," Monk said.

They drove a few miles in silence. Then Kim said, "Remember the day we

found the broken window in the shop? At first, we thought someone came in from the outside. But the window was really broken from the inside, Monk. Because most of the glass was lying outside on the ground."

Monk licked his lips. "Then all that damage—it was an inside job."

Kim didn't say anything. He had rounded a curve in a desolate stretch of road. In front of him was a detour sign pointing to a small side road. Kim swung off the highway, began to drop down the hill toward a valley.

Softly, Kim said, "Why did you do it, Monk?"

Monk Marvin's face was white. He sat there with perspiration beading his forehead. "I—you've got me wrong. I—"

"Jerry Allison of the Highway Patrol has been checking you, Monk. Until a year ago, you worked for Greg Vincent's outfit. Your references when you came to me for a job were phony. When you offered to work without pay, Monk, I knew you were getting your money somewhere. It was from Greg Vincent!"

"You—you can't prove it!" Monk muttered.

Kim said, "Maybe I can, Monk. You had orders to wreck my business. The day we got that Latham order, you loosened the front wheel—and then you told Greg Vincent what you'd done. That was how Greg knew why my three men were missing that night. But you made still another mistake Monk. You said you hadn't checked the wheels—but the Highway Patrol found your thumb print inside the hub cap—"

Monk screamed, "That's a lie. I wiped—" He stopped talking, his lips tight, eyes shifting nervously. Just ahead, Kim saw a small bridge looming. It was a narrow rickety bridge that crossed a jagged ravine. The sign on the bridge read, **LOAD LIMIT—12 TONS.**

Cautiously, Kim inched toward the bridge. Beside him Monk Marvin had turned a shade whiter. Monk's eyes were wild and frightened. When the truck

was within twenty feet of the bridge, Monk made a wild grab at the door handle. Kim hit the brakes hard. Quietly, Kim said, "It's no use, Monk. I jammed the lock on that door." He saw Monk reach down at his side, but Kim moved swiftly. He drove his fist into Monk's face and the man's eyes bulged. Then he fell back in the corner of the truck, mouth gaping, out cold.

Kim bounded from the truck. Approaching the sign on the bridge, he found that a small square of white cardboard had been tacked to the panel. Removing the cardboard, the sign read, **LOAD LIMIT—1 TON.**

A SIREN roared behind Kim and a highway patrol car rolled to a stop behind the truck. To Jerry Allison, who leaped out, Kim said, "It worked, Jerry. When Monk passed the word to Greg that we'd use the old county road, Greg saw his chance to send us crashing through a bridge. All they had to do then was arrange for someone to pick up the detour sign and remove the weight limit sign from the bridge. Everyone would have thought that we'd lost our way. . ."

Jerry said, "We caught a guy back at the junction. He was picking up the detour sign. He was driving a Redline Express truck. The boys are working on him now."

Kim said, "Later, they can work on Monk—when he comes out of it. I'm convinced that he'll spill everything."

Jerry Allison had a queer look in his eyes. "You were taking a long chance, Kim. You knew that Greg was out to get your team. But what if Monk had decided to take the easy way out and let the truck crash through that bridge?"

Kim shivered. "I had to take that chance. We didn't know what they had cooked up for us, but I was convinced that as long as I had Monk in the truck with me, he'd never allow anything to happen." Then Kim grinned. "I wonder what Monk will think when he finds out

that the team went out the back door of the shop instead of getting into the truck? All of his work went for nothing."

Jerry Allison said, "I dunno. But we'd better get you back to the junction. The bus with your players should be getting there about now. I told the boys down there to hold the bus until I could get you back. And I imagine, Kim, that there's a certain girl on that bus who'll be worrying . . ."

"Her worries," Kim said quietly, "are just about over."

Kim kept his team in a small hotel in the suburbs until almost game time. Then, fully dressed for action, they drove to the arena.

When Kim led his Meteors onto the floor, the crowd began to roar. But Kim wasn't listening. He was watching Greg Vincent. The big dark-haired leader of the Redliners gazed at Kim as if he were seeing a ghost. Kim grinned at Greg's discomfiture. Then he led his team into their pre-game warmup session.

The whistle sounded and Greg and Kim stepped into the center circle together. Greg was obviously upset. Under his breath Kim said, "You should have heard what Monk Marvin told the cops!"

GREG blanched and when he leaped for the ball it was as if some unseen weight was pushing down against his shoulders. Kim easily controlled the tip. Dan Barritt took the ball near the far sideline, began to dribble down the court.

Kim's Meteors moved with snap, with precision. Dan passed to Chris Allen. Chris feinted a shot, then flipped the ball to Kim who was driving straight down the middle. Kim took the ball at the free throw line. He slammed on the brakes, faked a shot. Greg Vincent came up from the rear, leaped high in front of Kim to block the shot. But Kim twisted to his left and pushed a short one-hander up against the backboard. The ball dropped through cleanly.

Twenty seconds later, Kim did it again

and the Meteors were leading 4 to 0. Angrily, Greg took the ball out of bounds beneath the Meteor basket. He saw Nick Kovitz streaking up the left sideline and he tried to connect with a looping overhand pass.

But the Meteors were on their toes. Babe York smashed through to make the interception. Babe took two steps, then bounced to Kim who was cutting in toward the basket. Kim was wide open. He went up into the air, the ball poised at the end of his fingers. Just as the shot left his hand, Dan yelled, "Kim! Watch it!"

But Dan was too late. Someone smashed into Kim from behind. A knee hit Kim under the ribs and a hand crashed down against the back of his head. Kim twisted away from the double blow, tried to protect himself. But when he landed, his ankle buckled under him and a pain, swift and agonizing, shot up his leg.

Kim lay on the floor, his face twisted, perspiration turning to ice on his body. Above him, he saw Greg Vincent peering down, his eyes arrogant again. The man extended a hand to Kim and as the referee said, "That'll be a free throw!" Greg put on a sympathetic look.

"Sorry, old boy," he muttered. "Hope I didn't hurt you!"

Kim disdained the hand. He got up and fresh pain shot through his leg. He tested it. The ankle was not broken, but it was terribly sprained. He could not put his weight on it. Kim limped to the free throw line. His basket had scored. Now, he took careful aim and the free throw dropped through for still another. The Meteors had jumped into a commanding 7 to 0 lead. But even as Kim watched the score change, he knew the price he had paid. He'd spend the rest of this one on the bench.

A physician took Kim to the dressing room. There, while the man looked at the ankle, Kim could hear the swift bursts of cheering outside. He grimaced at each cheer and knew that the home team, the Redliners, had begun to score.

"It's a bad sprain," the Doc said. "You won't be playing on it any more tonight."

Kim groaned. "I've got to play," he said fiercely.

"I could soak it a while," the Doc said. "Then I could tape it. But I doubt if you could stand the pain."

"Let's get going," Kim ordered. "Let me worry about the pain."

Kim spent the rest of that first half listening fretfully to the roaring crowd outside. From the tenor of that screaming, he had a feeling that his team had lost their lead. And when the half ended and the Meteors came dragging into the dressing room, Kim knew that they were behind. He had only to look at their drooping faces.

Kim watched the physician tape his ankle. He tested it and grimaced against the pain. Finally, he said, "How bad's the score?"

"They've got a 27 to 23 lead," Chris said.

KIM SCOWLED. "My ankle won't take much punishment. But if you guys keep their score down, I'll be in there for the last few minutes."

When the team went back for the second half, the applause was tremendous. Only last night Anne had said, "Kim, I'm going to make Dad hire another special train. I'm going to make him invite every person he knows. I want everyone to be there who saw what happened that night at the Colosseum."

The Central City rooters had turned out en masse and the man shouting the loudest was John Latham. Anne had kept her promise. The rest was up to Kim.

Kim was proud of his team that last half. They drove themselves frenziedly. But even at their best, the Meteors could not close the gap. Finally, Kim knew that he could wait no longer. With four minutes left, his club was trailing 54 to 49.

Kim's ankle was afire as he reported to the referee. But he ignored the pain. Kim set himself near his own free throw

line, watched his guards bring the ball down. Suddenly, the ball came to Kim. He grabbed it, whirled, fired a one-hander toward the rim. But the ball rimmed the basket, bounced out.

Both Kim and Greg Vincent followed the shot. But Kim touched it first. He gave the ball a light tap, sent it caroming off the backboard and into the hoop. Even as he got the ball away, an arm smashed against his face.

But the referee was watching. He charged in and waved angrily at Greg Vincent. The foul had been too deliberate for the crowd to miss and they began to boo.

Carefully, Kim set himself. He flicked his wrists and the ball made a nice swishing sound as it dropped through the hoop. Now it was 54 to 52 for the Redliners.

But that was the way the score stayed as the seconds dragged along. The Redliners were playing cool cautious basketball. Two minutes became one minute. Then fifty seconds. Kim crept up close to Greg Vincent. When the ball came in, Kim went out around the man, ignoring his aching ankle. Kim got his hands on the ball, hugged it. The referee came in, called a held ball.

As they squared off, Kim said, "What're you going to do with the trucking business while you're in the cooler, Greg?"

Greg Vincent's eyes grew deadly. The ball went up, but Greg flailed wildly, more conscious of Kim than of the ball. Greg's knee drove into Kim's ribs again and this time still more people saw the foul. This time the referee gestured more threateningly.

Kim walked slowly toward the far end of the court. The crowd grew silent. Kim stared at the hoop, then fired. But the ball hit the rim, bounded away. Dan Barritt snatched the ball away from an enemy forward. Dan had no shot, but he dribbled for the corner, pulling the Redliner defense over with him.

Suddenly, Kim made his break for the basket, Greg trailing at his heels. Kim

looked back, saw the pass coming toward him. He took it on the dead run and there, in front of him, was the goal—and not a man to stop him.

KIM KNEW what was coming. He counted on it. Even as he sent the ball through the hoop, he felt the impact of Greg Vincent slamming into him. Kim had tied the score. With the free throw, the Meteors could win.

The referee made himself heard over the angry booing. "That's your last foul!" he shouted at Greg. "But even if it wasn't, I'd bounce you. Now beat it, before I forget that I'm supposed to be impartial!"

Greg Vincent didn't look arrogant, now. He didn't look ruthless. He looked just like the guy he had always been. Too rich, too spoiled, unable to accept losing, convinced that money could solve all of his problems for him. He turned, shoulders drooping, and the steady storm of boos followed him all the way to the bench. But Greg didn't stop at the bench. He kept going.

Greg's lunge for the exit served to steady Kim. Coolly, Kim drew a bead on the basket. His wrists flipped upward and the ball went through in a perfect arc—the Meteors were leading 55 to 54.

Wildly, the Redliners raced down, trying to beat the clock. But Kim Dolan cut off a Redliner pass, then made a long pass down court to Chris Allen. Chris was all by himself. He leaped up, dropped the ball through. The gun went off before the ball could hit the floor.

There was pandemonium from the Central City side of the court. But Kim raced off the floor before they could get to him. He went all the way to the Redliner dressing room and when he got there, Greg Vincent was hurriedly jerking clothes from his locker.

Kim didn't say a word. But he went to work with abandon. He moved in close and pumped his fists into Greg Vincent's white face. Greg bounced back off his locker and his own fists came up. A blow hit Kim under the heart. He

shook it off and closed in, his ankle completely forgotten.

Kim smashed a left hand into Greg's face. Greg sat down, a queer look on his face, blood trickling from the corner of his mashed mouth.

"You'll be screaming for a lawyer," Kim shouted. "But first I want the truth about a few things. What about that time you slipped gin into my drink in New York?" When Greg didn't answer, Kim reached down, put one hand behind the man's head, cocked the other in front of Greg's face. "You've got just two more seconds!" Kim said menacingly.

Greg Vincent wilted. "Okay," he said hoarsely. "I—I gave you the alcohol. And I put the bottle in your locker."

Kim's temples were hammering. "And all those accidents you paid Monk to cause."

Greg looked at Kim's cocked fist. "All right," he said weakly. "I did that, too."

Kim straightened and that was when he became aware that he was not alone in the room with Greg. He turned quickly around. There, standing in the doorway, was Jerry Allison of the Highway Patrol. And beside him, John Latham.

John Latham was the kind of man who could admit a mistake. "Kim, I guess I'm a bigger fool than Anne told me I was. What else can I tell you except that I'm sorry?"

Kim said, "That's good enough for me. Now, I've got to go tell Anne." He went out of there in a hurry. He found Anne waiting outside on the court, Anne and twelve thousand others. But the others did not matter.

Kim said, "Baby, it's been a long, hard winter . . ."

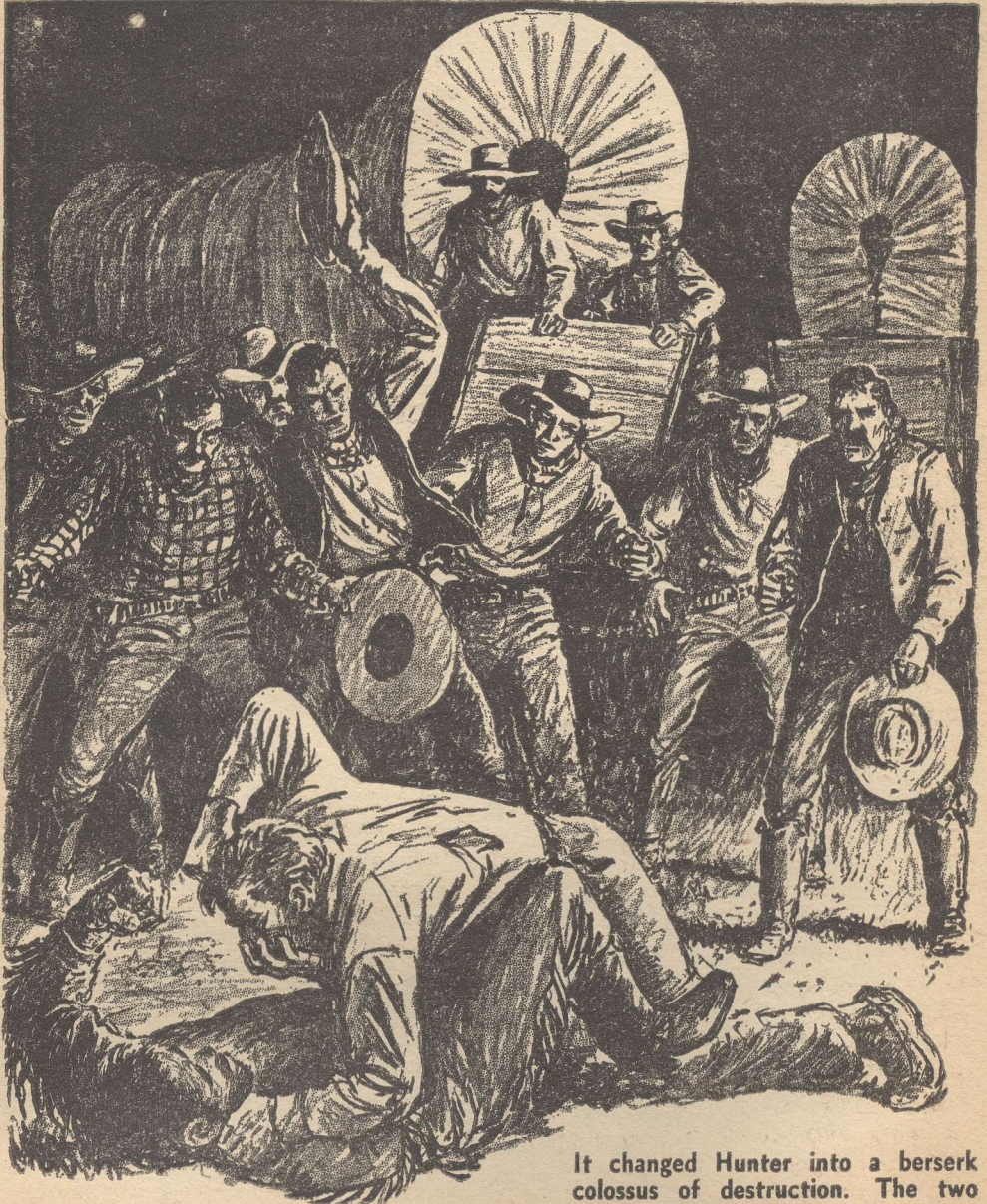
"And in the spring," Anne smiled, "what is it a young man's fancy turns to?"

Kim Dolan reached for the girl and he folded her into his arms. He kissed her soundly. After all, what were twelve thousand people, more or less. Kim liked the sample and he kissed her again.

And that was the picture that you saw in the rotogravure section.

SATAN HAUNTS A TOWN

By ED EARL REPP



It changed Hunter into a berserk colossus of destruction. The two men wrestled, kicking and gouging

THE GOLDEN DRAGON! Lee Hunter stood across the dusty street, eyeing the fabulous gambling palace and watching the steady stream of pilgrims pushing through the swinging doors. After months of preparation and waiting, his moment had come. He would enter the place and face a part of his past. He would see Eve again and talk to her. He might die . . . when he faced Duke Fenwick again.

Yellow lantern light from a nearby cafe window splashed over Hunter's lanky body, limning his tall figure against the velvet dusk that claimed the river town. The aroma of hot food came toward him, reminding him of the hunger that gnawed at his lean belly.

The street swarmed with new emigrants, flush with money, eager to drop a sizable chunk of it in the town's flesh-pots before fanning out on their diverse missions into the wilderness lands between here and the Pacific coast. Hunter idly fingered the lone silver dollar in his trouser pocket. The ride on the stern-wheeler from St. Louis up to Rock City had wiped out his meager bankroll. The problem of whether to eat or to try and build that single dollar into a nest-egg that would see him through his business here tormented him.

But the latter won. Money he must have, for this was not a poor man's town. Moving with the stiffness of a man who favors an ailing body, he stepped gingerly off the plankwalk into the ankle-deep dust and made his way across the busy street to the tune of cracking whips and loud oaths from the bullwhackers of a passing ox-drawn freight outfit.

The Golden Dragon sprawled over an entire block and reared its ornate Chinese facade three stories into the sky, towering over the falsefronts about it like the legendary monster whose name it bore. Ignoring the sharp glances of the two bouncers flanking the entrance, Lee Hunter passed between them and paused inside the foyer of the building, stunned by the ornate splendor of a place that had been described to him so mi-

nutely he knew every detail by heart.

The thick wine-colored rug under Hunter's worn boots covered the spacious floor as far as eye could see. Priceless tapestries and colored mosaics concealed the high walls. Glittering chandeliers and odd Chinese lamps festooned the ceiling overhead. They had told him that nothing in St. Louis equaled this place. He had not believed them; now he did.

A long mahogany bar ran the length of the room to his left. Trappers in buckskins, blue uniformed soldiers, mule-skinners and bullwhackers and swappers, freighters, merchants, pilgrims, all were packed deep in front of it while hurrying, white-aproned bartenders served their wants. Paralleling the bar were the green-topped poker tables, already well filled. Straight ahead lay the roulette and monte and faro layouts, surrounded by eager intent men. And over the huge room lay a clean smell, only faintly marred by the scent of men and tobacco and whiskey.

But the strangest feature of The Golden Dragon was the elaborate display of pool tables on Hunter's right. Tables of polished mahogany and gleaming silver trim, their green baize surfaces and racked balls ready for the night's play. Already more than half of them were in use.

HUNTER walked over and sank into a chair where he could view a nearby game. The play was poor. He wondered at the quirk in a man that would cause him to install such fine equipment out here miles from civilization where only novices at the game could abuse it. Yet Duke Fenwick had done so, and it suited Hunter's plans.

"Shoot a game of scratch, mister?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Hunter had seen the man from the door step inside and speak to a houseman. The houseman in turn had given Hunter a sharp glance, then said something to a pasty-faced individual who strolled over and asked for a game.

It's the uniform, Hunter thought. They figure me for a Confederate bum and they aim to get me out of here. Unless I can flash money. Then they'll let me stay, hoping to take it away from me.

Hunter had planned this thing for months. "Sure, I'll play," he said loudly, getting up and fumbling for a cue in the rack on the wall back of him. He rubbed some powder in the palm of his left hand and made a few awkward practice strokes while the pasty-faced man selected his stick.

"Break 'em," Pasty Face invited, grinning at Hunter's visible ineptness at the game. Hunter did so, wildly plowing the cue ball through the rack, pocketing several balls. He missed his next shot, leaving the other man wide open. Pasty Face had a nice easy stroke. He was left-handed and he knew what he was doing. He picked off six balls with smooth precision, deliberately missed his next shot. Hunter took his time and painfully managed to pocket enough balls to win the game. He looked up at Pasty Face with a triumphant grin.

"I was lucky," he said.

Pasty Face shook his head. "That was good shooting, mister," he said as a houseman racked the balls. Several spectators had drifted over to watch the game. "Play this one for a dollar?"

"Yeah," agreed Hunter. The table was strange and he was still nervous from the risk he was taking. If this poolroom hustler knew his business, he would lose a few games before settling down to the routine task of cleaning his victim. Hunter would be ready for him then.

Pasty Face lost five straight games. "Hell," he growled, "this ain't getting us nowhere. Play this one for five?"

"Five it is," said Hunter. He was confident of himself now. His stroke had lost its jerkiness, and he had sounded out the table. It was fast and the rails were true. He broke the rack as Mirabeau, the French champion, had taught him back in Richmond at the hospital. Like the darting head of a striking rattler, the cue

ball struck the point ball, bounced back spinning furiously, took hold of the cloth and ran forward through the loosened rack. Two striped balls rolled into pockets. Hunter had an open shot at ball one. He cleared the table of enough balls to win the game. Pasty Face did not get a shot. The crowd about the table kept growing as word spread that a real pool game was in progress.

"Lefty's caught a sucker!" a spectator jeered gleefully.

"What you goin' to do with him?" someone else asked loudly. "Mebbe raise the ante ag'in?"

The man called Lefty stood there, a look of chagrin plastered across his pale face. "You're good, mister," he admitted. "You sure sucked me in. We'll soon see how good. Play for ten?"

Mirabeau had said that Hunter was a natural at this game. The Frenchman had marveled at the ease with which he picked up the finer points of technique. He had predicted fame and championship if Hunter entered tournament play. He had frowned when Hunter told him what he intended to do out on the frontier. Yet he had spent long hours teaching him all that he knew.

"Play for ten," agreed Hunter, fingering the thin roll of bills in his pocket. Again he won. And again. Lefty went to the bar for more money. They played for twenty-five, fifty, then one hundred dollars. Lefty never had a chance. Hunter was too good for him.

Lefty admitted it. "You're way out of my class," he said. "You've won some money here. Better clear out, mister. Duke Fenwick will be down soon. You've heard of Duke? He's played the best. You can't beat him. Don't be a chump. That's my advice."

"Duke Fenwick," said Lee Hunter softly, yet his deep voice carried over the packed crowd about the pool table. He straightened up so that late-comers got a good look at him. They saw a tall man with bleached sandy hair over a pale old-young face that had not cracked a smile all evening. He wore the shoddy

gray of a Confederate soldier, though the War between the States had ceased two years ago. He looked ill and harmless, yet a latent power lurked in him. It showed in his deliberate movements and his easy speech.

"Duke Fenwick," Hunter said again. "Tell him I'm here. I came a long way to play him. Tell him to bring his bank along, Lefty. I aim to break him on this table tonight."

An incredulous gleam appeared in Lefty's narrowed eyes. "That I'll have to see. I'll tell him you're here, mister. What's the name?"

"Never mind," said Hunter. "Just bring him here!"

A BEVY of imported girls entertained The Golden Dragon's customers every night. They danced and sang upon the large stage just back of the gaming area, and while they performed, all play in the gambling palace stopped. After the show the girls circulated through the audience, inducing them to spend their money on more drinks and heavier play at the gaming tables. Some went upstairs to the luxuriously furnished private rooms to finish the night in revelry and debauchery. But no man dared ask Evelyn, Duke Fenwick's "woman," for an assignation.

Tonight, the beautiful singer, star of the show, was descending the stairway from her apartment on the second floor when she noticed the crowd jammed around one of the pool tables. Idly her brown eyes flicked over the scene, settling suddenly on the tall, sandy-haired stranger who was playing Lefty.

She came to a startled halt, one slim hand clutching at the polished balustrade for support. Her other hand went up to her red lips. Her eyes went wide with shock.

"It can't be," she murmured huskily. "Lee is dead. It's just someone that resembles him."

She stood there motionless, watching the game below. Twin spots of color reddened her cheeks. Her breathing

came heavy and fast. Finally she leaned over the railing, her gaze fastened on the bony man in the gray uniform at the table. She watched the game break up and heard the stranger's challenge to Duke Fenwick.

Whirling, she dashed up the stairs, high heels clattering, slim silk-clad legs showing as she pulled her skirt high. She did not slacken her pace until she yanked open the door to Duke Fenwick's private office at the end of the long carpeted hall.

"Duke," she said unsteadily to the big stockily-built man seated behind a huge mahogany desk, "he's here. He's come for me. I—I'm scared. What will I say to him?"

Fenwick's bland yellow-brown eyes flamed momentarily as he stared at the girl's slim curved figure. The corners of his moist mouth pinched together as he spoke. "He? Who are you talking about, Eve? You look like you'd seen a ghost. You're shaking." Fenwick shoved back his chair and stood erect, a black fury clouding his broad face. His whispering metallic voice cut the air. "Has one of those lice downstairs tried to lay a hand on you, girl?"

"A ghost." Her eyes were wide and sick. "I wish it were a ghost. Or one of our drunk customers trying to paw me." She closed her eyes quickly, as if to shut out unpleasant memories. "Lee Hunter is downstairs, Duke!"

Fenwick's fleshy eyes widened. The long black cigar in his tapering fingers snapped into shredded leaves under the convulsive pressure of his fist. "That can't be!" he snapped. "Lee Hunter is dead. You were notified by the War Department."

"They were wrong," Eve said faintly. "He's down there alive. I'd know my own husband anywhere I saw him!"

FENWICK put his big hands palms down on his desk, stood there leaning heavily on them while he digested the girl's statement.

Lefty, the pool hustler, appeared in

the open doorway before any more words passed between them. "Boss," the pasty-faced man blurted, "a pool-playing gent just cleaned me. I dunno how good he is but he wants to play you. You'll come down and oblige him?"

"Not tonight," Fenwick murmured, giving Eve a quick glance. "Be courteous to the gentleman, Lefty. Pass the word along to the rest of the boys. Whatever you do, don't rile him. He's got a hair-trigger temper and he's hell-on-wheels when he's mad. Eve won't join the show tonight either. Tell the girls to go on without her. Keep an eye on this gent and report any move he makes to me at once."

"Okay, boss," said Lefty, disappearing into the hall.

Fenwick's sharp whisper brought him back into the doorway. "Where's Jack Hunter?"

Lefty winked knowingly. "In his room," he said. "Been there all evening, locked in with a bottle and Sue, the little blonde who joined the chorus last week."

The sick look in Eve's eyes deepened. Fenwick laughed harshly. "See that he stays there," he ordered. "Take him another bottle if necessary. But don't let him come downstairs."

"Okay, boss," said Lefty, disappearing again.

Swiftly, Eve closed the door and turned the key in the lock. "What are we going to do?" she asked, turning on Fenwick with the restless impatience of some cornered animal. "You remember how Lee always did things? Just like a tornado and with all its fury? He'll never let me explain."

Fenwick pulled up a chair for the girl, then eased his solid bulk into his own chair behind the desk. Opening a drawer, he lifted out a fancy decanter and some glasses. He poured the expensive whiskey into two glasses, shoved one of them across the desk top to Eve.

Casually, he said, "This is the test, Eve. We built The Golden Dragon, you and I—with Lee Hunter's money. We've

made it the biggest gold mine on the frontier. We did it honestly. There's nothing for you to be ashamed of." His metallic voice grew tense. "I've never pushed you about marriage. I knew how much you cared for your husband. Just knowing that you'd become my wife some day was enough for me. I prided myself in the knowledge that other men envied me because they thought you belonged to me.

"What is it going to be, Eve? Are you going back to him? Will I become the most laughed-at man along the river?"

The girl's slim fingers toyed with her untouched drink. She stared at Duke Fenwick, trying to hide the wild hammering of her heart. He was vain and proud and hard in a land where only the strong survived. He had many faults and she knew most of them. But he had shown his love for her in innumerable ways. Thinking that Lee lay buried in some unmarked Confederate grave, she had turned to the gambler for support and comfort. He had given it freely. Marriage to him had been indefinite yet inevitable.

Had it changed now? She faced the answer squarely, knowing there could be no answer until she talked to Lee Hunter again.

"Don't rush me, Duke," she said huskily, her brown eyes wistful with memories. "I must talk to Lee again. Maybe he's changed. Maybe he doesn't want me any more. I'll give you my answer—soon."

"Soon," Fenwick echoed hollowly. He raised his glass to touch Eve's. They drank silently to the uncertain future.

THE CROWD began drifting back to the bar and other amusements when Lefty came back with word that Duke Fenwick would not be down to accept Lee Hunter's challenge.

"Did Fenwick give any reason?" asked Hunter of the pasty-faced messenger.

"He don't have to," Lefty retorted. "He's the boss. I'm only telling you what he said."

"The boss?" Hunter said in a low voice which only Lefty heard. "I've heard otherwise. Three persons own The Golden Dragon. The other two are Jack Hunter and—the girl known as Evelyn. Where are they, friend? I want to see them."

Lefty shook his head, his narrow eyes hard and suspicious. "For a stranger," he said, "you know too damn much and you ask too many questions. I wouldn't get proddy, mister. It's been tried in here before. Especially with gents that made a play for Evelyn. Duke has his own way of handling 'em. I'll pass his warning along to you. *Get out—or die!*"

Methodically, Hunter placed his cue in the wall rack. He took his time in pulling the battered campaign hat over his unruly sandy hair. When he turned toward Lefty again, his right hand was in his threadbare gray coat pocket. The jutting fabric clearly revealed the muzzle of a stubby pistol in his fist.

"Over three years of my life were wasted in the war," he said flatly. "I lived on blood and murder. It does things to a man. Makes human life seem cheap and plentiful. I could shoot you down without blinking an eye." The click of the pistol's eared-back hammer emphasized his calloused words. "Duke Fenwick is afraid to face me. That means he knows I'm here. He can wait. I aim to see Eve right now. You'll take me to her room—without a fuss—or get a bullet through your guts."

Lefty shrugged his thin shoulders. "It's your funeral," he muttered. "Follow me."

Several of Duke Fenwick's hired gunhands eyed the two men curiously, seeing nothing amiss as they skirted the pool tables and ascended the corner stairs. To all appearances, Lefty was taking his erstwhile opponent to an appointment in the upper rooms. Probably with one of the girls. They smiled knowingly. The sucker would soon lose his recently earned winnings.

"No tricks," warned Hunter as Lefty led him into the carpeted hallway on

the next floor. "This is a hair trigger."

The pasty-faced man grunted. They turned into a dim corridor to their left, its long length illuminated by several flickering lamps mounted in wall brackets. A woman's shrill voice came from behind a closed door, followed by a man's coarse laugh. The racket suddenly quieted. Hunter heard other sounds as he paced the thick carpet. The clink of glasses, liquor-blurred voices raised in passionate argument. It was all sordid and evil and it sickened him.

Eve living in a place like this! Possibly participating in some of the drunken parties behind these locked doors? Hunter was immediately ashamed of the thought. But she had helped build The Golden Dragon and she was partly responsible for the sordidness of the place. She and Duke Fenwick and Jack, Hunter's younger brother.

Lefty stopped before the closed door of a room at the end of the hall. "This is Evelyn's room," he muttered. "Can I go now?"

"Knock on the door," Hunter said, ignoring the man's question.

No one answered.

"See if it's unlocked," Hunter ordered. The door swung open to Lefty's touch on the knob. "Get inside," said Hunter.

THE ROOM proved to be one of a large apartment. This, the living room, was simply arranged with an overstuffed couch and several comfortable easy chairs. Hunter's swift glance took in everything, down to the ornate oil lamp on the tiny table beside the couch. The lamp was burning. Eve would soon come back.

"Sit down," he told Lefty. "We'll wait. When the girl shows up, you can go."

They did not wait long. Soft footsteps sounded in the hall. The door swung open. Evelyn was inside the room before she saw her visitors. She stopped in her tracks, her wide eyes staring at Lee Hunter out of a face that had turned white.

"Lee!" Her voice came faintly.

Hunter turned cold eyes on Lefty. "Get out of here," he snapped. "Tell Fenwick not to bother us. It won't be healthy."

The pool hustler vanished. Hunter stepped to the door, twisted the key in the lock and tested it. Not until then did he look squarely into the girl's clouded eyes. And now pain and memory had hardened Hunter's eyes, making them bleak as a wintry sky.

"I've come through hell for an explanation," he said harshly. "Start talking, Eve. Before I forget myself and start choking the truth out of that soft throat!"

She sank onto the couch, sat there staring up at him. Color ebbed back into her cheeks and she lifted her head defiantly. "You're treating me like a scarlet woman," she said. "It's not like that at all. I thought you were dead. I still can't believe you're alive—here in this room talking to me. It's too sudden."

Always her beauty had made a weakling of Hunter when he was around her. Now she was more beautiful than ever, and her old spell tugged subtly at his senses. She resembled a scared cornered kitten. The scent of her fragrant perfume filled the room, bringing back old days and memories.

"The War Department was in error," he said. "You couldn't know that I lay in a Richmond hospital while the doctors dug shrapnel out of me. I don't blame you for selling the ranch and talking Jack into selling his interest with you. As my beneficiaries, that was your privilege. I hold no grudge over it. But—" a shadow crossed his gaunt face, "why did you turn to Duke Fenwick? Why did you let that tinhorn gambler suck Jack into your dirty plans?"

"You seem to know most of the answers," Eve said huskily. "Why bother with questions? But you haven't heard the real truth. Jack went to pieces after word of your death. He idolized the ground you walked on. He spent most of his time in Santone, drinking and

gambling and running around with the wrong crowd. I couldn't manage the ranch alone. We sold it and moved into town. You know how it was between Duke and me before I met you. He came to see me again. I leaned on him for support. He promised to keep Jack out of trouble."

She stared into the past with clouded eyes. "No one could have done that. The kid just laughed at us. He killed a deputy sheriff in the Buckhorn one day. Duke helped Jack get out of town. The three of us fled to New Orleans just one step ahead of a posse. We kept running until we came here where there's no law. We built this place and we've done well. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Not the way you tell it," said Hunter, wanting to believe her, knowing he could not. "I investigated that killing before leaving Texas. The man was a lawman all right—a drunken crooked bum who needed what he got. Duke Fenwick hired him to arrest Jack, knowing there would be gunplay and that you'd play into his hands whatever happened. You did, willingly or otherwise. The tinhorn took your money and used it in the dirtiest possible manner. Do you think that he stopped at The Golden Dragon?" Hunter's soft, jeering laugh seemed to rock the room. "Not Duke Fenwick. He had his eye on something a lot bigger than a fancy gambling joint. You and Jack got a cut on the small profits. I'll wager you know nothing about the hidden organization that revolves about this place?"

"There's no such thing!" protested Eve, her eyes cold and unforgiving. "Duke's played it square with me from the start. What are you hinting at?"

"Ask the tinhorn," said Hunter drily. "Maybe it will open those pretty round eyes. I can see that I'm not wanted, Eve. I'll get out. Where's Jack's room? I want to see him."

"Just across the hall," she said in a low voice.

"Adios," he murmured, unlocking the door. He stepped into the corridor,

taking with him the picture of her stricken loveliness. He tried to blot it from his brain. Eve had changed too much. He must forget her before she swayed him from the job he had come here to do.

"Hunter!"

THE LOW whisper stopped him halfway across the hall. He would have recognized that metallic voice anywhere. Slowly he turned to face the only man he had ever hated. The six years since their last meeting evaporated. Duke Fenwick had crawled off a saloon floor, a bloody beaten wreck from Hunter's merciless fists.

"Eve is mine," Hunter had told him before the watching crowd. "When she married me, your claim on her disappeared. I warned you once not to bother her again. You ignored me, and you've suffered for it. Next time you'll die!"

Fenwick had entered Eve's life again. Worse, he had wrecked Jack's life. Intolerable to Hunter was the thought that the gambler had used his, Hunter's, money to build this place of evil and greed on the frontier's edge. But the years of hell during and after the war had given Hunter a mature perspective on death. A bullet was quick and painless; a man's pride could be twisted and rent so that he lived and died a thousand horrible deaths each day.

Lee Hunter intended to let Fenwick live . . . after condemning him to this living death.

Now in the dimly lit hallway of The Golden Dragon he faced the gambler again. Lamplight gleamed on the small derringer in Fenwick's hand.

"We're due for a talk," he said evenly. "In my office. Come along, my friend."

Hunter had been cautious when leaving Eve's room. The click of the hammer of the stubby pistol in his coat pocket sounded loud in the stillness following the other man's words. The feel of the weapon was solid and reassuring in his hand.

"We can talk here," he said softly. "Put the gun away, tinhorn. It might go off. You know I'd get you, too. You've a lot more to live for than I have. Put it away!"

NO MAN who had ever crossed Lee Hunter in the past would have ignored his warning. Not with a cocked gun in his hand. A forced smile twisted the gambler's bland face as he deftly lifted his arm. The derringer flicked out of sight under his sleeve.

"The same old Hunter," he murmured. "Certainly not a hombre to be pushed around. Nor to mince words with either. So I'll dispense with the niceties." His voice hardened. "What do you want here? What do you expect to accomplish?"

Hunter's deep laugh was not a pleasant thing to hear. "A man living on borrowed time shouldn't ask questions. It's unhealthy."

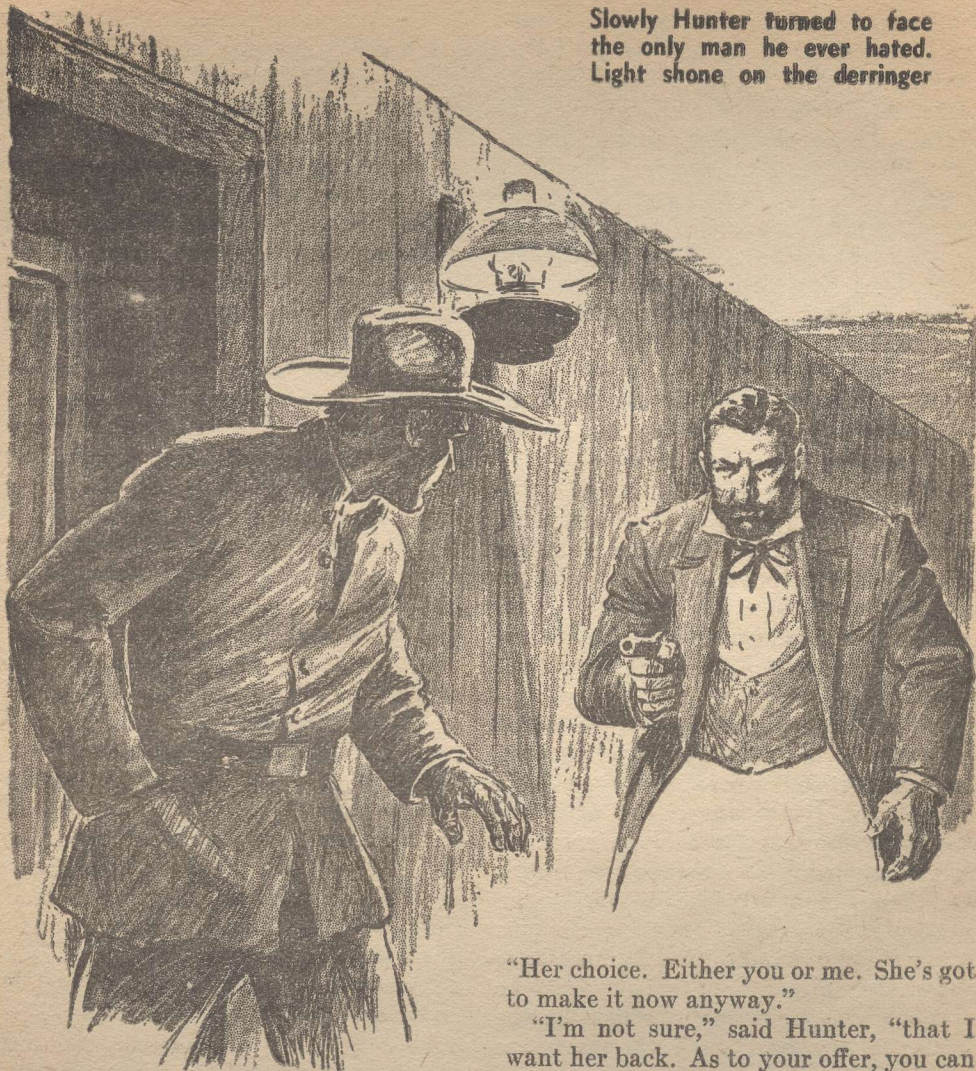
"Meaning you're going to kill me because of—of Eve?" A certain desperation entered Fenwick's voice. "Hell, man! Both of us thought you were dead. Eve must have explained everything to you?"

"There's a lot she couldn't explain," said Hunter, "because she didn't know anything about it. The way the greenhorns are doped and robbed in this place—drunken merchants and teamsters pumped about valuable merchandise and its destination—entire wagon trains gutted out on the trails, wiped out by white men masquerading as Indians.

"That's my score against you, tinhorn. You rooked my brother into killing a man, knowing both he and Eve would lean on you for advice and safety. They played into your hands as you figured. You took their money and built up your dirty organization. Even then you kept the real purpose of The Golden Dragon a secret."

"Naturally," said Fenwick, a look of astonishment momentarily lifting the shield from his fleshy eyes. "Eve wouldn't stand for it. Your brother might spill our secret when he's drunk—and he

Slowly Hunter turned to face the only man he ever hated. Light shone on the derringer



"Her choice. Either you or me. She's got to make it now anyway."

"I'm not sure," said Hunter, "that I want her back. As to your offer, you can go to hell! I came here to wreck you. I'll do it."

Slowly the gambler shook his head. "Even the Hunter that I knew before the war couldn't do that. You're a shadow of that man. The hospital warped your mind, friend. Better grab a seat in a wagon and head west. You'll live longer."

"That won't be necessary," said Hunter. "I like it here."

Fenwick's eyes gleamed in the shadows like a cat. "Around this town," he said harshly, "people don't cross me. You'll be no exception.

"Take him, boys!"

usually sleeps with a bottle in his hand. But where did you learn all this?"

Hunter said, "That's my secret."

"I'll make you one offer." The gambler's voice droned the words like one of his croupiers at a gaming table in the main room below. "Your ranch brought twenty-five thousand. Every cent went into this place. I'll give you fifty thousand if you'll take Jack and get out—with your promise not to talk about what you know."

"And Eve?" asked Hunter curiously. Fenwick shrugged his beefy shoulders.

Hunter tried to twist around to meet the dark shadows he had sensed rather than seen in the hallway behind him. Too late. A gun barrel slammed down on his head, bringing sickening pain and a clawing blackness. He strained paralyzed muscles into a headlong plunge at the vague figure that had struck him. The gun descended on his head again. The pain seemed dulled and far away this time. He sank deeper and deeper into a bottomless jet pit . . .

THE THROBBING inside his head brought Lee Hunter to his senses. The swaying jolting bed on which he lay brought new waves of dizziness. The rattle and bang of an empty wagon tore at his ears, as did the sound of pounding flint-hard mule hooves and the loud incessant curses of a muleskinner. These were old familiar sounds of ranch life and the roundup and the chuckwagon, yet there was a difference.

Hunter opened bleary eyes. He stared foolishly at the flapping dirty Osnaburg sheets stretched over the wagon bows above him. Where was he, and what was he doing here? Somehow he attached great importance to the answer, yet it was some minutes before his mind began to function normally. Slowly, the events of last night came to him. It must have been last night, he decided, since he could see daylight now. Judging by the angle of a vagrant sunbeam through a slit in the sheet, it must be mid-morning.

Struggling up to a sitting position was agony, but staying on the empty hard wagonbed was worse. Hunter managed it. He discovered he had company. A man's limp body lay sprawled beside him, his face covered by his arm. The stench of stale whiskey filled the closed wagon. Hunter decided the stranger was drunk. He suddenly wished he had a stiff drink himself. He could use it.

The drunk groaned. His arms moved feebly as he tried to sit up. His shadowed bloodshot eyes stared at Hunter without seeing him. He got one elbow under him before a jolting lurch tilted the wagon-

bed, putting him flat on the floor again.

Hunter stiffened at sight of the other man's bloated vacuous face. Despite the dissipation that had aged it, it was a youthful face and a familiar one.

"Jack!" he choked, reaching for the brother that he had not seen for six years. "What have they done to you!"

Hunter cursed steadily and bitterly through set teeth as he tried to bring his brother out of his stupor. An hour passed before Jack's dull eyes flickered with recognition. Shortly after, he struggled to a seat on the rocking wagonbed.

"I'm a damn fool," he groaned, pressing his temples with shaky hands. "Sue told me you were alive and headed this way. I was drunk as usual and didn't pay any attention to her. I've made a mess of things, Lee. You found that out?"

Hunter could not censure a brother who had taken his supposed death so seriously. "I'm blaming Fenwick for this mess," he answered. "The tinhorn will pay in full before we get through with him." Rapidly he sketched the previous night's experiences. "Fenwick planted men in Eve's room," he concluded bitterly. "Probably with her knowledge. Somehow, I didn't expect that. Somebody slugged me from behind. I came out of it a while ago here with you. You know a lot about Fenwick, Jack. Why didn't he kill me? What will he do with us?"

JACK HUNTER was a big youth, with swelling muscles under his soiled clothing and a reckless hardness in his unshaven face. I used to look like him, his brother thought. Only I learned to stand on my two feet and fight for my rights when I was a lot younger. He's got his battle before him. I hope Fenwick's influence hasn't taken too much out of him. Plenty of guts will be needed to get out of this.

Rocking to his hands and knees, Jack crawled unsteadily to the rear of the wagon. He fumbled at the canvas flap, finally jerked it open. Hunter saw a string of big-wheeled red and blue Cones-

togas lumbering in their wake, Osnaburg sheets piercing the yellow dust like dirty sails.

"Yeah, I know what's happened," Jack growled, raising his voice above the jumbled sound of wagon gear and racing mules. "This is Fenwick's way of getting rid of us. He's done other people the same way, though I wasn't supposed to know anything about it. No one has ever come back from this ride, Lee. It's a one-way ticket to hell."

"What's at the end of it?" asked Hunter, already aware of the answer.

Jack said, "Death! Bull Schworm bosses this outfit. The man's only half human. He looks like an ape and he's got the strength of a gorilla. I saw him take on a big Irish bullwhacker one day in Rock City." The youngster's swollen face paled at the memory. "The Irishman had never been licked before. Schworm handled him like a baby. Got the poor devil down on the ground and stomped him to death before our very eyes."

"Why didn't somebody stop him?"

"Face Bull Schworm?" Jack stared curiously at his brother, then fear-filled his bloodshot eyes. "You'll get your chance. For heaven's sake, Lee, don't argue with the man. Take anything from him. You couldn't have whipped him in your prime. You're in no shape to try it now."

"What kind of tie-up does Schworm have with Fenwick?" asked Hunter, ignoring the other's plea.

Jack said, "Fenwick owns this outfit. Schworm's only a front for him. All along the Santa Fe trail everybody thinks Bull Schworm is a legitimate freighter. If they knew the truth about him, they'd shoot him down like a dirty dog. And Fenwick, too."

It all tied together. Just like Hunter had figured it would. "Are all those wagons empty?" he asked. "Like this one?"

"Yeah," answered Jack, running a shaky hand through his tousled sandy hair. "For a damn good reason. A caravan of rich Yankee traders pulled out of town a couple weeks ago, bound for

Santa Fe. They'll never see New Mexico. They'll be wiped out to the last man—by white renegades dressed like Indians. Some of their wagons will be burned. Most of them will be saved. So'll their livestock. Thousands of dollars worth of merchandise will be packed into the wagons you're looking at, Lee. Bull Schworm will carry that looted merchandise into Santa Fe and sell it. But Fenwick's profits won't stop there. The massacre wagons will be driven to some secret spot and repainted, so nobody will recognize them. Then they'll be brought back into town and sold to new emigrants and traders. Same thing will happen to the livestock.

"The Indians get blamed. Nobody suspects Duke Fenwick or any white man. It's big, Lee. Plenty big and it keeps growing. The same thing has happened dozens of times before."

HUNTER could not keep the bitterness from his words. "You've known about this for a long time. It's partly your responsibility. Why didn't you expose Fenwick?"

"Who would listen to a drunk? Besides I wanted to live. Opening my mouth was sure death. When I was sober enough to think, I always swore I'd kill Fenwick for getting Eve into this mess. Trouble was I never stayed away from a bottle long enough to do it."

"It's a dirty picture," said Hunter. "Somewhere along the trail we draw a bullet apiece? Nobody ever sees us again. Fenwick keeps Eve and wipes out any source of future trouble. Right?"

Jack let the canvas flap fall back into place, closing the rear of the wagon. "Right," he admitted gloomily. "Tell me, Lee, how come you know so much about this setup?"

"Remember Howdy Parr, my old segundo in Texas?"

"Yeah. I couldn't ever forget Howdy. He taught me to ride. I reckon his was the first six-gun I ever fired. I never knew what happened to him after we sold the ranch. How's he doing?"

"Howdy is dead. I buried him in Santone a year ago. He wised me up to The Golden Dragon deal before I got out of the hospital. Wrote a letter home that was sent to me there. He'd drifted out here and signed on a wagon train as hunter. The outfit was wiped out by white men posing as Indians. Howdy got a bullet through his chest. He was scalped alive and left for dead along with the rest of those emigrants. A friendly Mexican found him staggering along the trail, took him home and nursed him until he got well. Howdy hung around Rock City. He wasn't much good any more with his insides all torn up from the bullet. He got a job swamping out The Golden Dragon. He'd changed so much that neither Eve or you noticed him. He suspected Duke Fenwick from talk he'd heard while his wagon train was looted. The loose information he picked up in the saloon was enough.

"Howdy had a queer idea of vengeance. He didn't know I was listed among the war dead. He thought Eve and you had pulled out on me. So he didn't open his mouth to anybody but headed back to Santone. I saw him there shortly before he died. He told me everything."

Jack said softly, "Poor Howdy. I'd like to put a bullet in Fenwick's heart for him."

"One of us will—if we live long enough. I promised him that. We won't let him down."

LEE HUNTER met Bull Schworm when the empty wagons stopped for a noontime meal. The big wheels had barely ground to a halt when a heavy weight tilted the wagonbox. The Osna-burg sheets were swept aside by a huge and hairy freckled hand. Hunter stared at the simian caricature of a man framed in the canvas opening.

Bull Schworm did not stand an inch over five feet four. But what he lacked in height he had amply in width and girth. Fleishy piglike eyes glared at Hunter from under a brutish low-ridged fore-

head. His almost chinless face bristled with a coarse red beard. His dirty greasy buckskins strained as their seams stretched taut over the rolling muscles that covered his squat body.

"You've had free passage this far!" he roared in a voice that sounded like a buffalo stampede. "From now on, you earn it! Climb out o' there and git to work!"

"Doing what?" asked Hunter, studying Schworm for weaknesses. "This trip is Fenwick's idea. Let him pay our fare."

Schworm slid over the sideboards with apelike agility. There was a cold mercilessness in him, an unconcealed joy at this show of spirit in his two prisoners. Yellow rotted teeth were exposed as he parted fleshy lips in a derisive grin.

"You got some sand, mister. Duke said you might. I aim to take it out of you. Startin' right now—"

Weak from hunger and still sluggish from the blows on his head, Hunter tried to dodge the hand that swiped at him. Steel-thewed fingers fastened into his shoulder. He felt like a child in that mighty grip as he was lifted effortlessly to his feet. He twisted, tried to fight back. Those long arms held him out of reach of Schworm's grinning bearded face.

"A reg'lar wildcat!" jeered the wagon boss, suddenly shifting his grip. One hand caught Hunter's coat by the collar, the other slid down to fasten in the loose slack of his trousers. Hunter found himself hanging helpless as the squat man jerked him off his feet. Then those powerful muscles bulged under soiled buckskins. The shoddy cloth of the gray uniform ripped apart. But not before Hunter was thrust high over Schworm's head, the rough feel of the wagon sheets against his face.

Plainly, Schworm meant to throw him onto the rough wagon planking. A helpless anger surged over him. And fear. Fear that barely healed battle wounds would burst open under this cruel manhandling. The hospital doctors had predicted that activity of any kind would put him back in bed again. They had

condemned him to a bleak existence which could not be called living, for he had always thrived on outdoor activity, laughing off hardships which most men could not endure.

He tensed himself for the impact against the floor. He heard Jack's strangled curse and the sodden jar of the youngster's big body against Schworm. He felt the strength run out of the squat man's arms as he lowered them to handle his new adversary. Twisting in mid-air like a cat, Hunter came down on the wagon boss with clubbed hands and tensed knees.

He soon found out why Jack had begged him not to tangle with Bull Schworm. A light of pure joy danced in the man's piggish eyes. His ear-splitting roar was a battle call of sheer delight. The animal strength of him was strong as he went into action.

One huge palm splattered against Hunter's face, shoved, sent him sprawling backward. He banged into the wagon end-gate and clutched at it for support, dazed and amazed at the prodigious strength in that apish body. He tried to focus bleary eyes on the struggle between Jack and the wagon boss. It should have been a battle of Titans, but it wasn't. Schworm buried a fist in the youngster's soft belly, doubling him up. The meaty sound of his other fist crossing to land solidly against Jack's unprotected jaw roused Hunter from his lethargy.

HE CAME at Schworm before his brother slumped unconscious onto the rough planking. He forgot his wounds, his emaciated body, his lack of strength. Momentarily, he was the Lee Hunter of old, the young giant who reveled in a good fight and had yet to meet the man who could best him in one. He brought his bony fist up from his boot tops in a vicious pile-driving swing that landed squarely on the point of the other man's bearded jaw. Schworm's bullet head rolled limply on his broad shoulders. His arms sagged helplessly. The Hunter of old could have finished

him then. Just another punch or two.

The Hunter of today did his best, but the meager strength within him had run out with that single uppercut. He bounced a left and a right off his opponent's oak-ribbed stomach, knowing the blows carried no sting. He threw another fist at that brutish face and only scraped the bristling red whiskers.

Schworm entered the fray again with an angry roar. Little eyes aflame with rage, he drove at Hunter. There was nothing scientific about him but he fought with cruel precision. His long arms caught Hunter's blows. His scaly fists landed on the other's skinny frame with devastating force, tearing and bruising the flesh under a flurry of punches. Yet none of his earlier fury showed in his attack.

It didn't take Hunter long to see why. Schworm was playing with him like a cat toying with a mouse, deliberately chopping him to pieces before finishing the odds-heavy fight. The fist that thudded into his ribs brought a sudden fiery agony as old battle wounds opened and began bleeding. Hunter winced, unable to hide the pain. Grinning mirthlessly, the squat man's fists beat a tattoo on the reddening front of his shirt.

Such punishment couldn't last, and it didn't. The liquid fire inside Hunter's throbbing flesh robbed him of his remaining strength. His knees buckled under him. He slid to a seated position on the floor. Schworm aimed a heavy boot at his head. Hunter twisted, took the kick in the shoulder. If the blow brought new pain, he did not feel it as he sprawled helpless against the raw planking.

"Git up!" ordered Schworm savagely. "You'll work out your fare or there'll be more of the same! Take that whiskey-bloated brother with you!"

Hunter staggered to his feet. Picking up Jack's heavy limp body and sliding it over the sideboard was something he only vaguely knew he was doing. Where he got the strength to do it, he never knew. He had pulled himself halfway across the sideboard when Schworm's

heavy foot battered against his side, toppling him out of the wagon onto Jack's inert form.

"You dirty louse!" Hunter croaked as his tormentor's harsh laughter pealed out above him. "I'll kill you for this—if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The merriment died out of the wagon boss' face. A thoughtful concern flitted over his leathery countenance. "Fenwick was right," he said slowly. "You been a fightin' man at one time. You'll give me trouble on the trip ahead. You might even give me a good fight. That I'd like to see."

Reaching into a hip pocket, he pulled out a huge plug of blackstrap. Tearing off a generous bite with his teeth, he perched there on the wagonbox and chewed thoughtfully. At last he spat an amber stream of tobacco juice into the dust beside the two beaten brothers.

"I oughta beef the pair o' you," he said. "Them's my orders. They can wait. You'll be good as dead 'fore this trip's over anyway. Git that drunk's eyes open and git to work!"

THERE were thirty wagons in the Schworm outfit. Twenty-eight were empties; one was stacked high with bales of hay for the mules; the remaining wagon carried food supplies and served as headquarters for the train cook. Two men rode each wagon, a muleskinner and a swamper. For each eight-mule team pulling a wagon, a relief team was driven along in the cavvy that trailed the freighters' wake. There were also a dozen blooded saddle horses, making a spare herd of some two hundred and fifty scared unruly animals.

Lee Hunter had to admire the efficiency and planning behind the outfit. While the noon meal of sowbelly and bread and hot coffee was prepared, all hands joined in pulling the tired sweaty mules from their traces and harnessing fresh animals to replace them. The meal eaten, Bull Schworm swung up atop a long limbed black horse where he sat in the saddle like a giant toad.

"Stretch out!" his voice boomed, and the fast-moving caravan continued its journey across the plains.

The two brothers were assigned to the cook wagon that first day. The cook, a fat Georgia Negro, listened respectfully to Schworm's terse orders. When his boss had gone, he turned to his two new helpers, a sympathetic smile on his black face.

"Mistuh Bull's a hard man," he said apologetically. "Says tuh put yo'all tuh servin' the crew. Ah knows yo' ain't in no shape tuh do it. Jest take it easy till we gits rollin' ag'in. Man," he said to Hunter, "yo'all is sick an' bloody. Sho', I got some soup for yo' insides. Soon's I kin, I'll git axle grease for yo' outsides, too."

Hunter ate a little soup, hoping it wouldn't make him any sicker than he felt at that moment. The thought came to him that this was the first food he'd had since stepping off the steamboat thirty-six hours ago. Later when the wagons started rolling, Jack and Cooky smeared his chest with tarry grease and tied a clean bandage over it. The crude doctoring stopped the bleeding and brought some relief to his throbbing body. He gulped down some more soup and knew that he'd survive Schworm's cruel beating.

The wagons pulled up at Lone Elm before dusk. They made Willow Springs the second day out. Schworm set a fast pace for the clumsy vehicles, yet slowed it down enough that the mule teams did not wear themselves out. The sky was still dark that third morning when Hunter felt the sharp boot toe dig into his side, rolling him out of the blanket under the cook wagon.

"Git up!" came the wagon boss' harsh voice. "You've had it too easy. Fenwick says you know hosses. You'd better 'cause that's your job now—along with that red-eye-lappin' brother of yours. You'll guard our cavvy. Lose one hoss or mule an' you answer to me. Try to escape an' you'll git a slug betwixt your shoulder blades. Savvy?"

"Yeah," grunted Hunter as he and Jack clambered to their feet. He had found Schworm's weakness. The man was bent on humiliating them, and assigning them to cavy duty, a job reserved for kids or ignorant greenhorns, should further grind their pride into the dust. Only Hunter didn't see it that way. The more ignominious the tasks that they did for Schworm, the more his arrogant disdain of them would grow. That contemptuous attitude would soon spread among his men. Sooner or later, they would relax their vigilance . . .

WRANGLING the spare herd was hard and dirty work. The wild animals longed for home pastures; they made constant attempts to turn back, and until they became trail broken constant vigilance was the only method of keeping them in the cavy. Hunter wondered if he'd stand up to the rigorous life. He had not topped a bronc in almost three years. He had not uncoiled a rope in six.

Several wagons carried saddle gear and related equipment. The two brothers prowled through them, tossing two sets of riding gear onto the ground. Hunter staggered under the weight of his center-fire hull as they made their way toward the distant herd. Under the bandage, his wounds broke again and began bleeding. Gritting his teeth from the pain, he matched Jack's long stride.

"Wait here," Jack said as they neared the cavy. "I'll bring in a couple of horses. You saddle 'em."

So his brother had spotted his condition? Hunter did not care at that moment. He sank down on his saddle, thankful for the rest. He watched Jack make several unsuccessful throws with his rope before snaring a racy-looking sorrel. He saw one of the night guards ride up and argue violently with the youngster. The guard ended the argument when he reached over and slid the noose from about the sorrel's neck.

Jack came back some minutes later, leaning against his taut rope and swear-

ing at the balky mule on the other end of it. "We ride these critters or walk," he snapped angrily. "Schworm's orders. They ain't taking any chances on us getting away, Lee."

"That will come later," said Hunter, trying to arrange a saddle blanket on the boogery mule's back. "They can't watch us forever."

Hunter ate forty miles of dust that day. Except for the noon meal, he and Jack were constantly busy. They had no weapons to scare the animals with, so they used their rope ends, turning strays back into the herd and speeding up the laggards with stinging licks across dusty rumps and sides.

At first, Hunter wondered if he'd finish the day. His chest grew numb from the throbbing pain that went through it at every jolting step of the big roan mule under him. He scratched leather plenty all along the hot weary miles. He fell out of the saddle at noon and Jack had to lift him back into it. But a surprising thing happened that afternoon. Muscles that had not known the feel of leather for many months instinctively began to respond to the mule's hard gait.

Hunter ate a generous helping of beans and sowbelly that night, the first meal that he had enjoyed or wanted in months. He rolled up in his thin blanket and instantly went to sleep. Bull Schworm's heavy toe prodded him out of it.

"On your feet!" he boomed. "I said you'd earn your fare on this trip. Git over to Cooky's wagon an' lend a hand with the dishes!"

"Leave him alone," objected Jack. "Can't you see he's almost dead?"

Schworm's piggish eyes slid appraisingly over the youngster. His face had lost most of the whiskey mottle, was acquiring a healthy tan. Blue eyes flashed an angry challenge. A week's growth of beard added awesomeness to the heft of his broad shoulders under his dusty jacket. The hardships of the past few days were bringing out the man in Jack Hunter.

"He works," said Schworm, "if he dies on his feet. So do you. Wanta make somethin' of it?"

"No." Jack shook his head, fear and respect for the wagon boss showing in his eyes. "But I could do his work too."

Hunter wobbled between them. "Button your lip, kid. No use of you getting into more trouble over me. I'll make out."

The mocking laughter of the entire crew followed the two brothers into the cook wagon. Except for Bull Schworm, everyone was asleep when they finished the mess chores and wearily rolled up in their blankets. Hunter could feel those merciless eyes boring into his back from the dying campfire. Drowsily he wondered what new devilment the wagon boss was hatching for him.

COUNCIL GROVE'S verdant timber reared its dark crest above the horizon before nightfall that next day. Rock City lay almost one hundred and fifty miles behind. It took the heavily loaded wagon trains bound for Santa Fe two weeks to roll this far. Bull Schworm's empty wagons had made it in four days. He made camp that night on the extreme edge of the timber strip along the creek, putting a good quarter mile between the nearest wagons and his own caravan.

Long before pulling into the grove, Hunter and his brother were relieved of cavvy duty by two fresh guards. Schworm personally herded them to a wagon where they were ordered to lie down in the box while a swamper expertly trussed them with rawhide thongs.

"You'll cause us no trouble now," said the wagon boss. "Jest one peep out of you an' you'll rate gags. We may be here some time so take it easy. That's my only warnin', misters."

After the squat man had swung over the sideboard out of sight, Hunter asked, "Why the stop-over? Why's he going to all this trouble over us?"

"That's easy," said Jack. "Little groups of wagons gather here and organize for the trail ahead. There may be a

hundred of 'em camped around us right now. They'll elect a Captain and several lieutenants to boss the trip. Some kind of authority is needed for what's ahead of them. Indians, sickness, wagon trouble, which route to follow, and Lord knows what else." A grimace twisted his bearded lips. "The bigger outfits, like the Yankee wagons Schworm is after, hire guides and hunters in Rock City. They move fast and don't mix with the small merchants. They only stop here long enough to repair broken gear and rest their animals and pick up trail information. I'll bet that's just what the Yankees did. Schworm will wait here until word reaches him that they've been wiped out. Then we'll roll like hell to pick up their cargo before the massacre is discovered. That's why we're tied up, Lee. He's got to keep our mouths shut. We're lucky the devil wants to keep us alive for a while. Maybe we'd be better off dead."

"Maybe," agreed Hunter, "but there's still hope. They can't watch us forever. We can do a lot of damage if we escape."

"If?" said Jack hollowly.

DUKE FENWICK and Evelyn Hunter quarreled for the first time on the day following the two Hunter brothers' disappearance from Rock City. Eve came into the gambler's office, quietly closing the door behind her. Morning light shafted through the glass windows, limning the girl's slender body against the dark woodwork behind her.

Fenwick's yellowish eyes lit up under half closed lids as he openly admired Eve's loveliness. A frosty shield slid over them when he noted the dark shadows under her eyes, her pale face.

"Good morning, Eve," he said softly. "You're up early."

"I didn't go to bed last night." Her voice was low and toneless. "I kept thinking about Lee. And Jack. Where are they, Duke? What will happen to them? I've got to know."

Slowly Fenwick leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk before him.

The swivel chair groaned under his heavy weight. "Take a seat," he evaded. "Let's straighten this thing out once and for all."

"What have you done to Lee?" insisted Eve. "I've a right to know. I intend to find out."

Fenwick shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I wouldn't hide anything from you. I put him in a wagon headed west. It was a good chance of ridding us of Jack at the same time. I sent him along. They won't bother us again."

"You mean they won't come back? They'll die?"

"Exactly." Fenwick selected a cigar from the humidor on his desk, bit off the end and stuck the unlighted stogie into the corner of his mouth. "What else could I do? Jack was harmless—but with Lee around to jack him up?" The gambler spread his white hands wide in a helpless gesture. "That pair would be dynamite. You know it as well as I do. It was either them or us. I preferred to make the first move. We'll never be bothered with them again."

"Maybe I don't want it that way." Eve's breath caught raggedly in something close to a sob. "Maybe I want my husband. Did that ever occur to you, Duke?"

Fenwick faced the issue squarely. "It did. That's why I had him removed from town. If that's the way it's going to be, you'll soon forget him, girl. You'll be free to marry me."

"Marry you?" She said it wonderingly, as if she were seeing the real Duke Fenwick for the first time. The gambler flinched at the scorn behind the words. "You don't want to marry me, Duke. Not really. You want the same thing that all these men out here want, only it's pride of possession that makes you offer marriage. You'd soon tire of me. I'd get the same treatment as Lee and Jack. And for almost the same reason—to eliminate anybody who has an interest in The Golden Dragon, who might threaten your power and your dirty scheme to continue the trail massacres.

"I can see it now. I was blind until Lee exposed it all last night in the hallway. No wonder he hated me . . ."

SHE STOOD before Fenwick, brown eyes narrowed and defiant. "Last night I promised you an answer after I talked to Lee. My answer is NO! I'll never marry you, Duke. I'll sell you my interest in this place. I'm getting out today."

Need for her throbbed throughout Fenwick's body. She had been in his eyes and thoughts and soul for many years. Lee Hunter had taken her away from him once. Now he had returned from the grave to do it again. The gambler had no intention of letting it happen this time.

"You're upset, Eve." His metallic voice cut the air with hidden warning. "Get some sleep and think it over. I don't wish to buy you out. I don't want The Golden Dragon unless you stay with it."

"Yesterday, I'd have believed you," said Eve. "But not now. We're through, Duke! It's all over!"

Fenwick got to his feet, no trace of emotion on his bland face. "Very well," he murmured, walking around his desk toward the girl. "I'll make out a deed for your signature—"

He moved with surprising speed for a big man. He swept her roughly against him into the circle of his arms. Politeness and respect for her had always been punctiliously observed by Fenwick. Too late, she sensed the passion and desire beneath the man's outward show of respectability.

Eve had plenty of spunk. She fought back, squirming and twisting with tigerish fury, raking at Fenwick's face with her long pointed fingernails. She did not scream, knowing it was futile. No one would dare enter the office without the gambler's permission.

Fenwick cursed harshly as Eve's fingers ripped across his dark-bearded cheek, leaving bloody furrows. Her other hand slipped out of his grasp. She picked up an ivory-handled stiletto that the

gambler used for a letter opener from the desk, stabbed at him as he closed in on her.

The thread that held Fenwick in check had snapped. His big hand closed about her wrist, crushing the bones and the knife slipped out of her numbed fingers. Struggling against him, she stumbled over a throw rug and would have fallen but for his hand. He pulled her toward him. "I didn't want it this way, Eve," he said. "You forced my hand. Now it's too late . . ."

BULL SCHWORM'S train laid over at Council Grove for two days. It pulled out long before daylight of the third morning. Lee and Jack Hunter were released from their prison wagon during the noon meal. And as they took their turn at wrangling the cavvy that afternoon, the cadaverous Hunter found that his saddle mule's pounding gait did not re-open his wounds. Clean fresh air and the rigorous life of the plains was doing what the doctors had never been able to do. Hunter's appetite grew with each passing day; he could feel strength seeping back into his emaciated body; it was with a feeling of triumph that he loosened the belt about his skeleton-like waist one notch.

"Just a few weeks," he told Jack, "and I'll be as sound as you are. Then we'll take care of Bull Schworm—and Duke Fenwick."

Those weeks passed with agonizing slowness. Escape was a remote possibility. Mounted guards hovered at a distance from the wagons, armed with rifles and disguised as meat-getters. They rode the blooded saddlers, and a pair of buckskin-clad horsemen always lurked just behind the dust of the drag.

Hunter had hoped that they would meet a Rock City bound caravan. Regardless of the risk, he vowed he would get word of Schworm's dirty scheme to them if such a miracle happened. It didn't. The trail-wise wagon boss had taken the precaution to send out scouts to spot any oncoming wagons. Either

none were on this portion of the trail or the canny Schworm had swung his empty wagons around them. Riding through the heat and dust kicked up by the cavvy, Hunter was not certain of which.

Noon of the third day out of Council Grove brought the outfit to the steep muddy banks of the Little Arkansas and the gutted charred remains of the bright Pennsylvania wagons that were mired in ruins in its hub-deep waters.

"Look," said Jack as the cavvy scattered along the river banks, eager to get to the water below. "Five wagons burned and the teams down in the harness killed by arrows. The Yankees had twenty to thirty wagons in their outfit. The rest of 'em got across before they were wiped out." He stood up in the stirrups, eyeing the flat prairie on the west bank of the river. "There's the others. They're being unloaded right now. And the Indians will get blamed, just like I said."

Hardened as he was to blood and death and mangled bodies, Lee Hunter turned his face away from the carnage about him. Scalped bodies sprawled in the wagon seats and floated on the water's surface. And on the far side of the stream, the butchered victims were thick as flies. The thought that unsuspecting men had died to satisfy the insatiable greed of trail vultures like Schworm and Fenwick filled Hunter with a gnawing anger.

Those two men and their organization must be wiped out!

Once his empty wagons were loaded with the looted merchandise from the Yankee train and started on their monotonous journey toward Santa Fe, Bull Schworm again turned his malicious attention on his two prisoners. There was a devil in the man, and inflicting pain and humiliation on others gave it outlet.

The two brothers were put on foot during the day and forced to tend the wild cavvy. Their high-heeled cowmen boots wore blisters on their aching feet and made walking a misery. After several days of it, Cooky managed to filch two pairs of beaded Indian moccasins from

the stolen merchandise and slip the comfortable footgear to them. At night they got no rest. They served the ribald crew at mess-time and cleaned the dishes afterward. Every night they stood a four hour stretch at guard duty. Once Hunter fell asleep at his post and Schworm came upon him leaning against a wagon wheel.

"On your feet!" boomed the wagon boss, aiming a heavy boot at the dozing man's ribs. "This is Injun country, mister. Wanta git all o' us scalped?"

The blow hurt but Hunter took it without argument, knowing that Schworm wanted him to fight back. He clambered to his feet, clamping tight the temper that boiled inside him. This wasn't the time. He mustn't ruin everything with hot-headed anger. Schworm was too sure of himself. Eventually the man would think his two prisoners were harmless. He'd leave himself open . . .

THAT time came just one day short of Fort Mann, the Army post just east of the Cimarron Crossing of the broad Arkansas. Here the dreaded *Jornado del Muerte* snaked its tortuous path across the desert to Santa Fe. Schworm had announced his intention of taking the shorter route in preference to the longer easier route past Bent's Fort along the Arkansas.

Everything was going well for the wagon boss and he was in rare good humor. Until he tapped a keg of trade whiskey and filled the thirsty teamsters' tin cups with the fiery liquid. His truculent nature was aroused by the alcohol. And as usual, Schworm looked about for a fight.

Hunter sensed trouble long before it came. He warned Jack of his suspicions and discussed the youngster's course of action when it occurred. This might be their first and only opportunity to escape from the caravan. They were two against seventy-five trail-hardened hellions and the odds were overwhelming. But Hunter had come through a war in which daring had often effaced superior odds.

The crew had finished the evening meal and turned its thirsty attention on the whiskey barrel again. Hunter moved among them, picking up the empty dishes they had discarded. Over on the other side of the campfire, Jack did likewise.

Balancing an unsteady stack of tin plates and cups in his arms, Hunter made for the cook wagon. He did not see Schworm's broad wink to his comrades nor the booted foot that was deliberately thrust between his long legs, tripping him. He went sprawling on his face amidst the wild clatter of falling dishes. He lay there, furious, trying to clamp down on his temper and hearing the delighted howls of the drunken teamsters.

"Git up!" roared the apish wagon boss, prodding him with a hard toe. "Git busy, you clumsy ass! An' from here on, keep your eyes open. You ain't on no picnic. Don't forget it!"

Schworm's short legs were within easy reach as Hunter crawled onto hands and knees. The impulse and the opportunity made his decision. He scooped those stubby legs into his arms and came to his own feet in one powerful motion, lifting Schworm shoulder height from the ground and tossing him headlong onto its grass-tufted surface.

An audible gasp came from the watching wagon crew. No man had ever handled Bull Schworm so scornfully before. The mess helper was inviting a quick death. They sucked in their breaths and awaited the wagon boss' retaliation.

Schworm hit the grass, rolled over and bounced to his feet with swift ease. "So you want a fight!" he bawled gleefully. "You finally got a bellyful. You wanta take it out on me. That'll be your last mistake. I'll take you apart, piece by piece!"

He sprang at Hunter, his abnormally long arms hanging well below the pair of heavy Walker Colts holstered about his thick waist. His contempt for the man dressed in threadbare gray was very obvious. He was Bull Schworm, uncontested ruler of the trails. He had whipped

this ragged scarecrow once before; now he had the opportunity to do it again.

THE MORE sober members of Schworm's outfit saw that he faced a real scrap. Under those tattered clothes, the sickly prisoner was no longer a bony skeleton. They saw that now. Hunter wore no coat and his worn shirt had split into shreds as tensed muscles strained against the sweat-rotted fabric. His blocky shoulders matched Schworm's in width, and a covering of firm flesh sheathed his wedge-shaped body. And there was no fear in his tanned bearded face as he slid forward to meet his opponent's apelike charge.

Hunter faded to one side at the last moment. His hand caught Schworm's thick wrist as the man stumbled past. Putting his back to his startled victim, Hunter brought the man's arm over his own shoulder and heaved. A helpless bellow came from Schworm's lips as he flipped over Hunter's head in a huge half arc. He hit the dry ground with a sodden jolting thud, lay there on his back and stared stupidly up at the ring of gaping teamsters.

"Get up!" snapped Hunter, enjoying this moment to which he had looked forward all these long weary weeks. His moccasin-clad foot rolled the prostrate wagon boss onto his paunchy belly. "You're not facing a cripple this time, mister! Get up and take it!"

Schworm did. He knew no science and probably would not have used it if he did. He had fought mountain men and Indians, French rivermen and Mexican muleteers, white traders and their Negro slaves. He had faced men bigger and huskier than Lee Hunter and he had whipped them all by his superior knowledge of the lowest and blackest tricks that could be used in a rough-and-tumble fight. Plainly, he figured he could add Lee Hunter to his list a second time.

He came at Hunter with deceptive speed—on hands and knees like a giant crab. Before Hunter could sidestep, those long arms wrapped about his legs and

yanked savagely. Despite his frantic effort to kick loose, Hunter felt himself falling. He landed on his side and winced at the expected pain inside his chest. Then he realized that the fall had not hurt him. He was a well man again.

He chuckled softly and started to climb to his feet to face the cursing wagon boss who had already jumped erect. The chuckle abruptly choked off as a hard boot sole landed squarely on his mouth. The dirty kick put Hunter on the grass again, his face a bloody ruin. It also made a great change in the fight, as the cheering teamsters soon saw.

For it turned Hunter into a berserk colossus of destruction. Schworm dove upon him, aiming to end the brawl in short order. The two men rolled over and over, kicking and gouging, seeking to gain a bone-breaking hold on the other. The watching crew saw Hunter climb to his feet, holding Schworm helpless. He stood there, the firelight playing on the rolling muscles that showed through the tattered shirt. Then deliberately he dropped Schworm's struggling body into the scattered embers about the fire.

Schworm bawled with pain and scrambled to safety, slapping at his burning buckskins where the hot coals had eaten through. Hunter's iron-hard fist slashed across his face, snapping his head back from the terrific impact of the blow. The wagon boss reeled groggily on his bowlegs, eyes glazed.

Hunter had his man whipped, yet he did not end the fight. He was remembering the long endless days as Schworm's prisoner, the constant cruelty of the man, the unforgettable picture of the slaughter scene back at the Little Arkansas where the Yankee caravan had met its doom. A man like that deserved more than a fist beating, and he'd get it. But physical punishment came first.

THE AWE-STRUCK teamsters saw their champion take the worst licking ever given a man along the trail. Hunter's big fists licked at him from all direc-

tions. Light blows that stung flesh and spirit, cruel blows that slashed and bloodied, hard jolting blows that rocked the man on his feet. Schworm got in a few punches of his own and Hunter took them contemptuously. And when all fight had left the blind stumbling hulk of a man, Hunter finished it with a looping uppercut to his bloody chin.

Schworm had lost one of his guns during the tussle. Hunter's hand plucked the remaining Colt from its holster as the wagon boss slid to the ground at his feet. The feel of the heavy weapon was reassuring in his hand as he eared back the hammer. Its muzzle flicked warily over the ring of men about the arena.

"Don't move," he said edgily, spitting out a tooth. "First gent makes a play for his gun gets a slug dead center—and I won't miss." He raised his voice. "Jack! Everything okay?"

"Yeah," came his brother's voice from the other side of the men at his back. "I got me a Henry rifle out of a wagon. I can send twelve men to hell before it's empty. We're giving you gents three to shuck your hardware.

"One — two— three!"

That was the way Lee Hunter had planned it earlier in the evening, knowing it had a bare chance of working. Now he let his pent-up breath gust out of his lungs as those seventy-five men tossed their weapons upon the ground, too startled and shocked to see the audacious ruse behind Jack's order.

"Everybody unbuckle their belts," ordered Hunter. "Drop your pants down about your legs."

They swore at the order but they were still cowed so they obeyed. Jack pushed through them bringing an extra rifle for Lee. "Hurry," whispered Hunter, "and saddle a couple of horses. I'll keep these men harmless. We'll take Schworm into Fort Mann tonight and turn him over to the soldiers. These lowdown creatures will all run like rabbits but it can't be helped. They can't take the wagons with them. Maybe the Army can locate the heirs that should get what's in 'em."

BACK in Rock City Duke Fenwick traced the progress of his current big steal through hard-riding messengers who brought Schworm's reports to him. When he received the news that the Yankee train had been looted and its merchandise transferred to his own wagons, the gambler's elation soared.

"And the two Hunter brothers?" he asked of the dusty courier. "They're dead?"

"Nope," said the man, "but they won't last long. Schworm is shore workin' them poor devils over plenty."

Fenwick's low curse came fervent and heartfelt. "Lee Hunter is dangerous. He can wreck everything. Tell Schworm that. My orders are to put that pair away at once. Before it's too late. He'll answer to me if he doesn't."

Confirmation of the gambler's fears came some weeks later when the remnants of his mighty outfit began drifting into town with the story of how the two Hunter brothers had outsmarted them and ridden into Fort Mann with Bull Schworm their prisoner.

"Damn that bungling idiot!" Fenwick cursed. He was furiously angry but shaken to the core. He sat alone in his office, trying to visualize the future. "I warned him to beef Lee Hunter. He got what was coming to him. The important question is whether he'll spill what he knows. If not, I can wiggle out of this—provided the Hunters are taken care of."

He sat there uneasily trying to reassure himself. He had made his gamble and played his cards to his own best advantage. Lee Hunter had raked in the first pot. There would be another . . .

Every Saturday night an elaborate pool tournament was held in The Golden Dragon's spacious billiard room. Anybody could enter, and the weekly contest always filled the place with players, intent on winning the five-hundred-dollar prize. There was one hitch however. The victorious cueman had to play Duke Fenwick for the money, and the gambler had never been beaten in the tournament's two-year history.

This Saturday night proceeded in routine manner, the spectator's interest centering on a tall sandy-bearded giant, wearing clean fringed buckskins, who dominated the night's play. Unlike most of the contestants, he had not removed his gun. The heavy Walker Colt rode in a tied-hard holster low on his right leg, exciting comment from several onlookers.

For that notched ivory-butted .44 in the black oiled holster bore a striking resemblance to Bull Schworm's matched pair of weapons.

Long before the big stranger had emerged from the elimination games as certain winner, Lefty, the pasty-faced houseman, had carried word to his boss that Lee Hunter was back. Fenwick quietly slipped downstairs and eased into the packed spectators about the stranger's table where he could size up the caliber of his future opponent's play.

His curiosity satisfied, he made a surreptitious circuit of the gambling palace, speaking to several of his men in a low voice. They, in turn, circulated among the crowd and alerted other men who took up strategic positions about the huge room.

This night had been long planned, Fenwick thought grimly as he climbed the stairs up to the third floor of the building. Ever since he'd learned of the Hunter brothers' new freedom out on the trail, his snare had been ready for the pair. Now they'd walked into it.

IF THE rooms and apartments on the second floor were ornate and comfortable, those on the floor above were luxurious in comparison. Fenwick had installed them for the money trade, the prosperous traders and merchants and adventurers who sought privacy in their relaxation with The Golden Dragon's girls. They were stoutly built with thick walls and huge oaken doors. Evelyn Hunter had been held captive up here since the day of her quarrel with the gambler.

Fenwick stopped before the girl's apartment, his eyes narrowing at sight

of the smashed lock on the door. He knew that Eve was gone but he made a hurried search of the empty rooms. A panicky haste urged him on. His life wasn't worth a tinker's damn if she talked downstairs. Even though he hadn't touched her since the day of their struggle, many men in Rock City would not hesitate to shoot him at her bidding. Fenwick did not want to die.

He made a sudden fatalistic decision and hurried to his office. He had used this town and it had made him rich. Now his luck had turned, and the town with it. It was time for him to move on. But not without the fortune in gold specie locked up in his private safe.

He stopped short just inside the office, staring open mouthed at the skimpy-bearded buckskin-clad figure seated behind his desk.

"Howdy, Duke," said Jack Hunter, lazily lifting a pistol out of his lap and pointing its long barrel at the startled gambler. "It's been a while since I last saw you."

Startled, Fenwick said, "The trail changed you, Jack. It's made a man of you. Why did you come back?"

"A little bit of unattended business," the youngster drawled, watching his old partner sharply. "I found Eve upstairs. She's down in the billiard room now. You're mighty lucky you didn't harm her, Duke. I'd have shot you already if you had."

Sweat glistened on the gambler's forehead. "I was leaving town," he muttered, his voice hollow. "You're all that stops me. That safe is stacked with gold, kid. Half of it is yours—if you let me leave right away."

Jack laughed scornfully. "You're not begging off, Duke. Take a chair. The tournament will soon be over. You're going down there and face Lee. This is his night. One he's had coming for a long time."

Fenwick sat down, knowing that some of Lee Hunter's steel had crept into his brother, wondering how a whiskey-sodden wreck could have been transformed

into this clear-eyed individual.

"My chances down there are good," he murmured. "My men are ready for anything. Even this."

"So we figured," agreed Jack, grinning coldly. "We've got men down there too. And a couple of U. S. Marshals. You're through, Duke. Tonight finishes you."

LEE HUNTER never knew who spread the story but it had been whispered all over The Golden Dragon by the time Duke Fenwick appeared for the tournament playoff. Everybody knew that the buckskin-clad pool wizard was Evelyn's husband, that Fenwick had gotten rid of the two Hunter brothers and tried to force Evelyn to marry him, that the brothers had come back and were forcing a showdown.

It was a juicy tale, one they believed when they got a glimpse of Fenwick's damp, uneasy face.

"This is a farce," growled the gambler as he came face to face with Hunter. "You know you can't beat me on a pool table. Why go ahead with it?"

Hunter said, "That's what all these people are thinking. I hope to show them different. I'm going to break you here on this table—before most of the men you've beaten and robbed. When I'm through with you, you won't have anything to live for, tinhorn."

"Supposing I win?" sneered the gambler confidently. "I've played some of the best in my time. These yokels you've beaten aren't in my class."

"Mirabeau is," Hunter countered. "He taught me to play. He's faced you. He says I'm good enough. Get your stick, tinhorn."

They saw championship play that night, those people of Rock City. Maybe the strain under which he played was too much for Fenwick, although some said he played the canniest games of his career. Maybe Hunter was shooting inspired pool but most people doubted it. But one fact stood out clear as the evening wore on.

From the moment he won the toss and

broke the rack on that first game, Hunter was the winning player that night. By midnight he had pyramided the five-hundred-dollar tournament prize into a cool twenty-five thousand.

And as Hunter had figured, the gambler's pride would not let him back out of the game. Yet that stubborn pride had to break some time. It was long overdue when the man's poise cracked and deserted him.

"Damn you, Hunter!" he swore, tossing his cue on the green surface of the table. "I'm cleaned. One hundred thousand dollars is all I've got."

"There's The Golden Dragon," reminded Hunter, an odd smile bending his bearded lips. "The money against your place. Not that you have clear title to it, but I'm feeling generous. You game?"

"Yes," said Fenwick, dabbing at his perspiring face with a silk handkerchief. His hand steadied as he returned the piece of cloth to his trouser pocket. He whipped a stubby sneak gun out from under his coat. His wild yell echoed throughout the building. "Fight for it, boys! The place is full of Hunter men!"

He squeezed trigger as he spoke and his bullets were aimed at Hunter's heart. Hunter was caught with his cue in his right hand. He swung the long stick at the gambler's gun, hoping to ruin the man's pointblank aim. He felt lead breeze past his chest as Fenwick swayed back to avert the blow.

But Hunter had gained the few seconds he needed. Using the cue as a spear, he jabbed its end into the gambler's soft belly. By the time the man had straightened up, Hunter had dropped the stick and snaked the Walker from his holster. The .44 slug tore through the gambler's chest before he could trigger again.

"You—you—" choked Fenwick, swaying on his feet. Triumph faded from his suddenly colorless face as he stared at the passive crowd. Except for a quick scattering of those in line with the pistol fire, no man had joined him in his fight. And good reason. None of Fenwick's men wanted any part of it—not with the cold

muzzle of a six-gun prodding his ribs.

Fenwick tried to speak again. The words rattled in his throat as he collapsed face down on the thick wine-colored rug.

HUNTER and Eve patched up everything before dawn that morning. "Knowing you were alive," she told him when they were alone in her rooms on the second floor, "I couldn't go on with Fenwick. Not even after he thought you

were out of the way again. I—I was a fool, Lee. Not seeing the kind of place he ran—not realizing what a monster he really was. We'll sell The Golden Dragon and move away—back to Texas and make a new start. That is," she said wistfully, "if you want me back?"

"That's the way I've dreamed it for the past few weeks," he said huskily, taking her into his arms. "Texas—and a new start. You and me and Jack."

Antarctica—Land of Adventure

(Continued from Inside Back Cover)

Open seams of coal have been discovered near the Thome Glacier and in other places. Samples of other minerals have been brought back by explorers—namely, gold, silver, copper, molybdenum and antimony. Little is known about the quantity and frequency of these minerals but the mountains of Antarctica belong to the Pacific Fire Ring—of which the Andes and Rockies are also a part—and the mountains in this chain which have been explored have abounded in valuable minerals.

Some geological exploration is being done by Byrd's expedition, using planes equipped with highly sensitive electronic devices, similar to mine-detectors used during the War. But the expedition whose findings interest the world is the one-ship party led by Finn Ronne, a civilian, and staffed by scientists and geologists. One main purpose of the group, which left the United States in the middle of January, is geologic exploration of the land around Marguerite Bay. They will use gravimeters and portable apparatus to detect and measure radioactivity which will help them assess the mineral wealth of the Antarctic.

Aside from its potential resources the Antarctic has a vital present-day strategic value. Now that radar has simplified the navigator's problems and can eliminate the menace of icebergs and fog-shrouded mountain peaks, ship and air travel around and above the Antarctic is feasible. As early as 1941, Admiral Byrd suggested that air bases be established at Little America to support American ships which take passage around South America in case an enemy puts the Panama Canal out of commission.

Another suggestion is to establish a chain of air-stations and refueling depots to service commercial planes on a short route between Cape-town and South American points, and Australia and New Zealand. Airplanes equipped with skis operate well at temperatures of 40-50° below zero. And there are portions of the Antarctic, such as the Palmer Peninsula, which are much warmer than Byrd's base at Little America.

How can man live in this barren continent where there are only two flowering plants—a pink and a grass—and the only land animals are mites and insects? Life is difficult, all supplies and

equipment must be brought in from outside, but reports show that he can maintain himself.

Living in wooden shacks, which have two floors separated by a blanket of warm air to keep their feet warm, Admiral Byrd's men found that, at camp, well-fitting woolen clothes, topped by heavy wool parkas and windproof outer garments, kept them comfortable. On the trail they used fur parkas and fur-lined boots, mukluks. For traveling over snow, army tractors equipped with special wide-spaced tank treads work well. And, for long trips, planes are indispensable. They used special radio equipment, designed to operate at low temperature, and built an electric light plant. In fact, after a four-year absence, when the switches were turned on the electricity still worked—feebly!

And in the coming Antarctic winter Commander Finn Ronne's expedition will be confined to their snowed-over houses at the base, communicating with one another by tunnels underneath the snow.

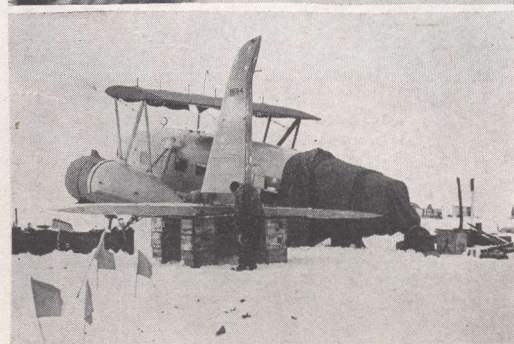
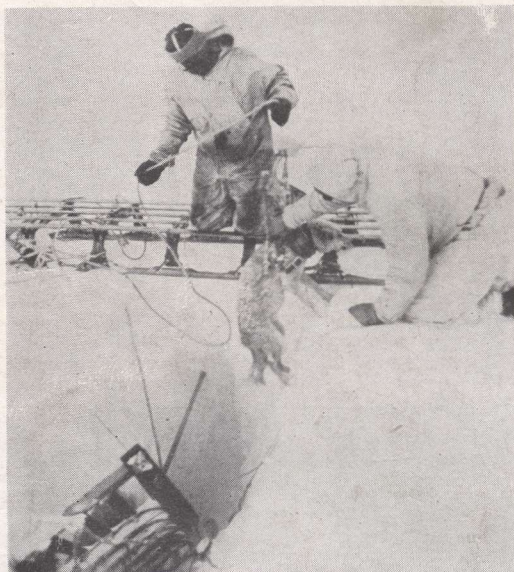
They take all their food with them, canned and frozen foods at camp and explorers rations of highly concentrated food like pemmican (dried meat, raisins, sugar, suet) and chocolate on the trail. At least they don't have to worry about refrigeration! Extreme cold burns up extra energy and the men need more than twice their usual number of calories per day.

But for many years one resource of the South Polar region has been utilized. During the 1920's huge factory ships which capture and process whales were constructed and these have been used by Norwegians and British to build up a thriving whaling industry in the Antarctic Ocean. These ships used to meet at Deception Bay to exchange information. During the War it was rumored that Germany's *Graf Spee* used Deception Bay as a supply base for her depredations on South Atlantic shipping. Which certainly points up the strategic value of Antarctica!

And, some day, if the experiments of the Russians in their Institute for Eternally Frozen Soil, with which they have been reclaiming land in the Arctic, prove applicable to the South Polar region, man may be able to shrink the icecap of the South Pole and gradually warm the Antarctic!



antarctica—land of adventure



Last continent of adventure! That is Antarctica, only small portions of whose 6,000,000 square miles have been explored. The map of the world's southernmost continent is still a vague blob with portions of her coastline and a few mountain chains outlined:

It is a bleak and forbidding plateau land whose altitude is generally above 6,000 feet, with mountain peaks reaching 15,000 feet and more. Because of its high altitude the polar icecap is larger than that of the North Pole and the South Polar region is much colder. One of the great storm centers of the world, the Antarctic shores are swept by gales. These winds on land may reach a velocity of 60 miles an hour while at sea a 200 mile-an-hour wind is not unusual. Although on warm summer days during December and January the temperature goes above freezing, the average for those months is below 32°. In winter 60° below zero is an average temperature and 90° below zero has been recorded. If hell is cold, as some people say, Antarctica must be its waiting room.

Yet despite this unpromising outlook, Antarctica draws men—Ellsworth, Byrd, Scott, Amundsen and others. Right now, Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd has an expedition of 4,000 men and 12 ships in Little America, the British have had a three-ship expedition at Marguerite Bay for over two years, and the Russian and Norwegians are also rumored to have exploratory groups at the southern tip of the world. Why? Is it only the lure of the unknown? Man's desire to establish his superiority over every iota of land on this planet?

This is part of it but there are other reasons. Antarctica may well hold vast mineral treasures.

(Continued on page 146)

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