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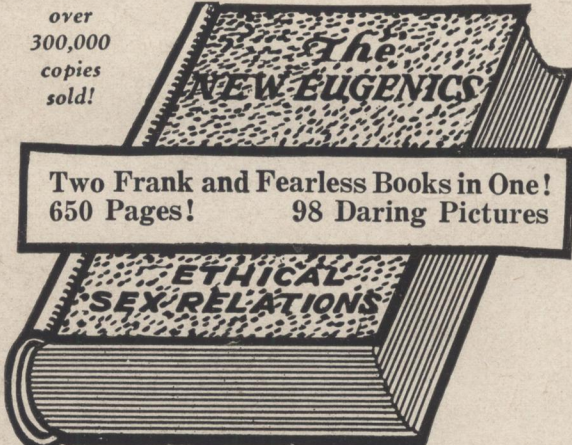
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Vol. XII No. 1

ACTION STORIES

THE LOG BOOK OF THE WORLD'S ADVENTURERS

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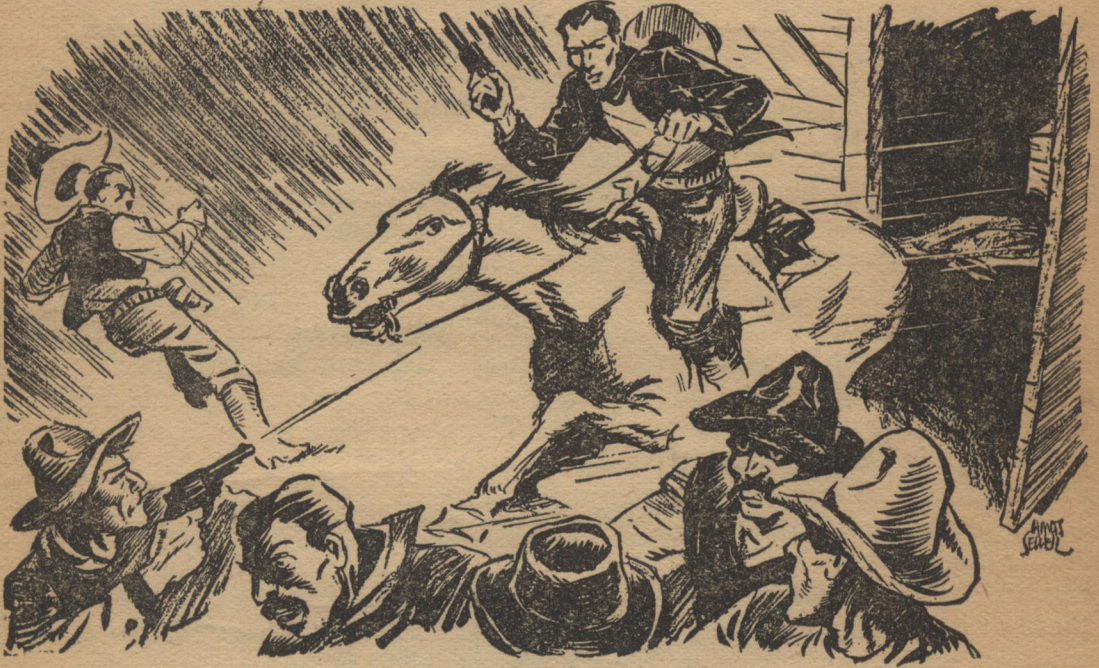
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ACTION STORIES

The Log-Book of Adventurers—The He-Men of All Time and All Climes Who Play Out Their Strings Far From the Streets of Men



TRIGGER TRIBE

By WALT COBURN

Author of "Guns West," "Gunhawk of the Rio Grande," etc.

Long Jake's saloon—nameless—a cutthroats' clearing-house at the crossing of dim trails. Men fled there on the dodge to save their hides. But none rode away without the sinister blackleg scar burned into his heart.

A Complete Western Novelet



ONTANA'S badlands, during rainy weather, are not the most pleasant place in the world, for the ground on the ridges and in the bottomlands is heavy gumbo. And it had been raining now for three days and nights. Which was not adding to the genial-

ity of the company gathered in the log saloon there on the south bank of the Missouri where Crooked Creek empties into the bigger stream. There in that U bend, the cowboys have a saying that you must cross the Missouri River twice to get on the other side.

A word about this saloon that has changed hands so many times: it stands

within sight of the abandoned ruins of old Fort Musselshell. It has seen many things and heard many strange tales. Its log walls bear the scars of bullets. Men have died there. And under its present ownership it bore a sinister name. Because Long Jake, who now ran the place, was a killer, it was said to be a way-station for outlaws who came up the trail. That the whisky peddling was just a stall to cover up bigger, more profitable business. That he supplied these hunted men with grub and clothing and guns and cartridges.

He was sitting now playing draw poker with his three customers. He was a long, dark skinned, black haired man with a hawklike beak of a nose and black eyes. One side of his face was scarred, the cheekbone caved in. Some said a horse had kicked him. But others who knew him better told of a fight to the finish down in Texas. The high heel of a boot can break a man's face. And spur rowels leave scars.

The three men sitting in the game all needed shaves and haircuts. One of them was a big man with a drooping white mustache and steady gray eyes. The man on his left was lean, wiry, almost tubercular looking. Now and then he coughed. He never took the cigaret from his thin-lipped mouth, and his eyes continually shifted. His hands were long-fingered, deft, well kept. He wore his gun in a shoulder holster. The stubble of sandy beard on his long jaw was scraggly, thin.

The third man was unkempt, sloppy, his hands unwashed, his shaggy hair and beard tangled and dirty. His eyes were puffed, bloodshot. His thick-lipped mouth leered continually. His language, when he spoke, was thick with lewdness. He drank from a jug on the floor beside him, spilling the whisky down his bared hairy chest and over a greasy buckskin shirt. He was short, blocky.

"Yuh plumb certain, Jake," said the big man in a Texan's drawl, "that no-body kin cross the river tonight?"

"Hell, Zack, not even a catfish would cross 'er, high as she is. A night as black as this, an owl can't see the end of his own beak."

"They tell me Pete Walters busted 'er wide open once when he was workin' for the Circle-C and was headed for the Two Bar outfit to rep with their spring round-up."

"Pete Walters was drunk on Injun whisky and ridin' a water hoss. And anyhow, Pete'd tackle the Atlantic Ocean if he taken the notion. There was only one Pete Walters."

"Don't be too certain," spoke the thin-faced cowpuncher. "Like the story of Joe Mefraw. Two Joes, one him named Louie. If we're caught here, Jake, hell will pop." And his eyes shifted toward the curtained windows and the closed door against which the rain beat. There was the rolling of thunder and an occasional flash of chain lightning.

At each lightning crash the thick-set, bearded, red-eyed man shivered and took a drink. And the thin-lipped man would smile, faintly contemptuous.

"Cards?" said Long Jake flatly. The man called Zack was under the gun. The bearded, drunken man had opened the jackpot, Long Jake dealing.

"One. Pink, Jake. You say Pete Walters is dead?"

"Deader'n a rock. Stayin', Slivers?"

"Certainly. Drawing to my hand. Two. Make 'em aces and I'll take you sports for your dirty socks."

"How about you, Wendell?"

"One card. Damn that lightnin'! It was near here it struck me'n that Injun. Killed him deader'n hell. Burned him black on one side. Killed our horses and I didn't know nothin' fer ten days."

"Meaning, Wendell," said Slivers, "that you knew anything of real importance before that time, or since? With all this water going to waste, why don't you use some of it with a bar or two of soap? You stink like a zoo. Bet, handsome, you opened this pot."

Long Jake discarded his hand with a slight shrug. The cards were all against

him tonight. He left the table and put another hunk of wood in the round-bellied stove.

AS he was closing the stove door he stiffened, his hand on his gun. His slitted black eyes darted toward a door that led into the kitchen and bedroom beyond. He had heard a noise. Now the front door opened and he whirled quickly.

The card game was forgotten. There, in the black doorway, stood a man in a yellow slicker, his hatbrim pulled down across his eyes. He smiled faintly at the drawn guns and shut the door. Water dripped from his slicker and hatbrim onto the worn pine board floor. He raised his arms slowly.

"I didn't mean tuh bust up yore game, gents," he said evenly. "I stumbled onto this place and figgered I'd git shelter. I done put up my horse in the barn. I'd buy drinks and git thawed out if yuh'd let a man. She's kinda damp this evenin'."

Their eyes watched him closely. They saw a man of medium build, his bronzed face white and pinched with cold. His eyes were the color of gray sage. His voice was unafraid.

"Who in hell might you be?" growled Wendell.

"I might be this Washington that crossed a crick called the Delaware, but I ain't. Does a man have tuh pass out dude callin' cards at Long Jake's? I was told different, down in New Mexico."

"Yuh come up the trail?"

"Plumb up."

"And who told yuh about Long Jake's place?" asked that gentleman, his eyes glittering dangerously.

"A feller that stayed around here last winter. Gent called Bill Newman. I was with him in the Moggolones when he got killed off after the San Lucas bank job. I'm ridin' his horse now. The same big flax-maned sorrel that once belonged tuh Pete Walters. Bill Newman tells me how this horse is shore

enough water dog. He didn't lie none. That ol' river seemed forty miles acrost. Do I git a drink or a belly full uh hot lead? Gimme one or the other quick, because I'm shore cold and shakin'."

A nod from Long Jake "Step up, stranger. These boys is all right. Just cautious."

The stranger nodded and unbuttoning his slicker, hung it on a nail. His clothes were sopping wet. His legs were stiff, a little wobbly from cold.

"Yuh alone?" asked the man called Zack.

"Plumb. I dropped three, four law gents yonder side uh the river."

"Just one thing," said Slivers in his flat, toneless voice. "You say you came from New Mexico. What were you doing, then, on the north side of the river?"

"Tendin' to a little business with some boys in the Little Rockies. I found that the man I wanted tuh see wasn't there."

"And just who was this man you want to see?"

"He's called Slivers. He run a big gamblin' house in the Klondike. Once he was a banker down in California. They picked him up on a bad cheque charge and he done a long stretch in—"

"I'm Slivers. We'll talk later. This is Zack Palmer. The unwashed gentleman who looks like a shepherd is Stubby Wendell when sober. When he's drunk his name is something far from complimentary."

An ugly snarl from the drunken Wendell. Slivers laughed flatly, mockingly.

"Get drunk enough some day, my dirty-necked bushwhacker, and you'll gather the yellow courage to take a pot shot at me from the brush. You'd better kill me the first shot because, if you don't, I'll send you where you belong. Your name, if any, stranger?"

THERE was a deadly tone to the slim one's voice. His eyes, too bright, sunk in blackened hollows above

cheekbones stained red with the tell-tale sign of the dread tuberculosis, watched the stranger who had swum the swollen river and found his way to this doubtful haven.

"My name wouldn't matter." The newcomer had to use both hands to lift his glass. "Let's drink. I need some-thing warm inside and some dry duds. Bill Newman told me how a man could git fixed up here. I got money to pay the damages. Kin you fix me out with dry clothes, Jake?"

The saloon keeper nodded. He dragged out underwear and socks and a flannel shirt and overalls.

"I'll change in the back room?"

"Yuh'll change here. There's—"

"There is no fire in the back room," Slivers cut in quickly. "Take another big slug of whisky, *stranger*."

The eyes of the two men met. The stranger smiled faintly and downed another stiff drink.

"Go back to yore game, boys. Don't mind me. I might sit in when I git done shakin'."

Wendell sat in his armchair, his bloodshot eyes hot with yellow venom. More than any man on earth he hated this sharp-tongued, white-fingered Slivers. Wendell hated him because he had once been a gentleman. That he had turned forger and outlaw after he had spent the best years of his life behind prison bars for breaking the banking laws made no difference. Slivers was as deadly as a cobra. But he killed in the open and sneered at such bush-whackers as the bearded Wendell.

The stranger stripped there beside the round-bellied stove. He rubbed down with a rough towel and put on dry clothes. The others did not fail to notice the .45 in its holster, the filled cartridge belt, the thickly filled money belt that he wore next to his skin. And Long Jake, for one, took note of the hard-muscled torso of this newcomer who had dared tackle the river on a night like this.

The poker game was resumed. The

wind still whipped the rain out of the black night. The thunder rolled and crashed, and once in a while, when the blinding white lightning filled the room, Wendell crouched in his chair, his bloodshot eyes wide with stark terror. And the thin, mirthless laugh of Slivers would cut through the rolling thunder like a dagger.

Pot after pot grew and was raked in.

After a spell Long Jake left the game with some muttered excuse and went through the doorway that led into the back part of the place where he cooked his meals and slept. He shut the door behind him, picked his way easily through the kitchen, and unlocked the door of the room beyond. Entering the room, he locked the door after him and struck a match. He lighted a small lamp and in its dim yellow glow he grinned down at the man who lay, bound and gagged, on the bunk.

"Changed yore mind about comin' through with some news, Lon?"

The man on the bunk shook his head and tried to curse through the unclean gag made of an old dishrag. His steel blue eyes were hard, unafraid, contemptuous. He twisted around on the cot and tried to kick Long Jake with his tied feet. His spurs jingled loudly. Long Jake drove a hard fist into the man's face, then took off the spurs.

"The water's high, Lon. Yore carcass will never be found. If yuh don't talk by daybreak, yuh'll git yourn. We know you got money buried near here. That's why yuh come back from the Argentine. It's hid between here and the Little Rockies. Split with me'n Slivers an' Zack an' Wendell and we'll call 'er a day. You kin git yore share. Then, if Slivers kills off Wendell, which he's most likely tuh do, we'll cut yuh in on Wendell's share. Don't be a damn fool, Lon. You ain't got a chance."

THE prisoner shook his head and cursed thickly through the rag that filled his mouth.

"Think 'er over, Lon. We're givin'

yuh till daylight. The boys is gittin' kinda jumpy, waitin' so long with them stolen horses in the pasture. Can't blame 'em. Three days and nights now they been here. And there might be a sheriff's posse showin' up. Wisht you'd look at 'er reasonable, Lon. Me'n you used tuh work together in Texas. I'd hate tuh see yuh meet up with bad luck like that kid that was with yuh. He had no call tuh crowd Wendell. Wendell's quick with a gun."

"Wendell," came the thick muffled words through the gag, "is a murderin' coward. And you, yuh double-crossin' scum, clear out!"

Long Jake slapped the helpless man, spat tobacco juice on him, then put out the light.

The three men at the poker table looked at Jake, who shook his head slightly. Wendell muttered thickly and took a drink from his jug. The stranger stood warming his back at the stove. Jake resumed his chair at the poker table.

The stranger's eyes, the color of the Montana sage, watched the men at their game. He had seen that dark stain on the floor in front of the bar and he had noticed a new, light-colored Stetson hanging on a peg behind the bar. The hat had a narrow leather band. There was dried blood on the brim. But he gave no sign that he noticed. Nor had he betrayed any sign that he had, a few minutes ago, heard the jangle of spurs in the back room. He stood there smoking, warming himself.

Presently the man called Slivers quit the game and joined the stranger at the stove.

"What was it you wanted of Slivers, stranger?"

"Bill Newman said you was right handy with a pen."

"For instance?"

"Incomplete currency that needs the signature uh the bankers."

"Got samples of the signatures you want copied?"

"Yuh don't think I'd be boneheaded

enough tuh come plumb from New Mexico without 'em, do yuh?"

"And my cut?"

"I'll treat yuh like yuh oughta be treated. I don't cut in these other gents, though."

"No reason you should, mister. Zack's all right if yuh don't trust him. Wendell's just a gun-throwin' whisky hog. Long Jake might want six bits or so for the use of his pen and ink. We'd better get at it. We'll be pulling out as soon as the rain let's up. Trot out your paper, mister."

"Ain't there a room where we kin be alone? No use lettin' them know what we're doin'. I'm packin' a nice stake with me and I don't trust Wendell er that Zack feller. I'll give Long Jake his six bits later on. Let's go in the kitchen or the back room. Ain't there a back room tuh this joint?"

Sliver's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What we do, we do here, mister. Here in the barroom."

"All right. Let's git at 'er, then."

He reached under his shirt and undershirt and unbuckled the money belt. Slivers found pen and ink. The three at the poker table were now watching them.

"A little private deal, gentlemen," spoke Slivers flatly.

CHAPTER II

DOUBLE-CROSS

THE stranger opened one of the pouches of the money belt. It was lined with waterproof silk and contained a package of new unsigned banknotes. Now he spread several signed, bona fide banknotes on the bar.

Slivers smiled at the stack of hundred-dollar bills and poured himself a drink. He found a sheet of paper and for several minutes practiced copying the two signatures on the banknotes. The stranger watched him with interest.

He spoke softly.

"Better than the real 'uns," was his approval.

Wendell lurched from his chair and started toward the bar. The glaring, mocking eyes of Slivers halted him.

"Tend to your knitting, Wendell, or I'll rid this earth of your lousy presence."

Wendell stood there on his short, thick bowed legs, his heavy lips working, bloodshot eyes unwinking. Then, with a shrug of his thick shoulders, he resumed his chair. He winced as the lightning crashed nearby.

The cigaret hung from the forger's thin lips. The man's eyes, as he fingered the money, seemed to grow brighter. Now the faint scratch of his pen. The poker game had ceased and the men at the table watched. The stranger brought out more money. Slivers took another drink to steady his hand, which shook a little at sight of so much money. He laid his gun on the bar alongside him and his sardonic smile twisted a trifle.

"A little private deal, gentlemen, between the stranger and myself. Curiosity has killed bigger game than cats."

The stranger grinned and rolled a cigaret, his back against the wall, his eyes watching every man in the place.

"Nice South America stake there," he commented.

Slivers looked up quickly. His eyes burned brightly. His voice, when he spoke, was husky.

"One month in Buenos Aires, one month of champagne, decent clothes, theatres, beautiful women, music, and I'd be ready to have my ticket punched!"

For the moment he forgot the men in this sordid saloon. His long white hands caressed the money. This man whose time on earth was limited by the dread disease that was slowly killing him, this man who had once been a respected citizen, whose years in prison had left their bitter scar, was dreaming of those things for which he had stolen and had been punished. He was pictur-

ing the gambling casinos, the bright lights, the laughter of women, the music of an orchestra. And the stranger who watched him knew that the man called Slivers would not hesitate to kill in order to keep this money that he wanted.

"Champagne," said big Zack Palmer, "is a sissy drink. Gimme rye whisky. And them monkey clothes—say, I'd as soon wear a straitjacket. Up at Landusky is some right good lookin' wimmen, too. And Piano Jim kin make music that's good enough tuh me. Eh, Jake? Ain't that right, Wendell?"

They grinned at Slivers who shrugged his thin shoulders. He turned to the stranger.

"Ever lived in South America? Buenos Aires?"

"I've been there."

A racking cough shook the penman's thin frame. But even as he coughed he kept his hand on his gun and his eyes on the three men at the poker table. He finished coughing and wiped away a thin trickle of blood from one corner of his mouth. He took a stiff drink and lighted another cigaret. His eyes were bloodshot, bright and deadly.

"How much in this haul, stranger?" he asked, picking up his pen.

"Better'n twenty-five thousand."

"From the New Mexico job?"

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell yuh no lies."

SLIVERS smiled faintly and went on with his work. His hand was never more than a few inches from his gun.

Long Jake went to the front door and opened it, letting in a swirling gust of rain. The flare of lightning showed the churning river, the giant cottonwoods swaying.

The wind had ruffled the banknotes on the bar, threatening to scatter them to the far end of the room.

"Shut that door, damn it!" snarled Slivers. But for a long moment Long Jake stood there, peering out into the storm, watching the muddy, snag-filled

foam-flecked river that growled and muttered and ate at the high cutbanks. After a while Long Jake shut the door and came back inside. He wiped the rain from his face with his hand and smiled queerly at the stranger.

"The house buys this round," he said. "Slivers, let up on yore scribblin' fer a spell and let's h'ist one. And we'll drink to the stranger there that busted that river wide open on a night like this. After me bettin' a catfish couldn't swim 'er. Belly up, gents."

There was something in the tone of Long Jake's voice that tightened the nerves of the stranger. What had this tall renegade seen as he peered out there into the night? Why had he smiled like that as he closed the door? What did he suspect? Did his black eyes flash some furtive signal to the others?

Within these four walls, some time within the past three days and nights, a man had been killed here at the bar. Back in the rear of the house there had sounded the jingle of spurs and the grating creak of a key turned in a lock. These men here were all renegades, gun fighters. Long Jake, who laughed at the laws of God and man. Old Zack Palmer, who was known to be head of the horse rustlers out of Dakota, and who had figured in some hot gunfights. Wendell, who drank his whisky and killed from the brush. Slivers, living on borrowed time, perhaps the most deadly of them all.

Unconsciously the stranger looked at the hat with its thin leather band and dried blood-stains. And when his gaze came away from the hat, he found Long Jake smiling at him in that queer manner.

Slivers, carefully stacking the money, poured his drink. He was breathing a little hard and the red stains on his cheeks were more pronounced than before. He was still thinking of Buenos Aires. So he had failed to notice little things he might have noticed. Like Long Jake's thin smile and the hat.

Nor did the whisky-fogged Wendell notice. Only the cold eyes of the white-mustached Zack had seen, and his hand had passed down across his thigh as if to make sure his gun was handy.

"I'd shore like to have seen yuh make that swim," Long Jake said, as the bar bottle was passed along. "Never seen the river no higher than she is now. She wasn't up this high when Pete Walters tackled 'er on that Flaxy hoss. And Pete was as good a hand with a hoss in the water as ever I seen. You knowed Pete Walters, mister?"

"Yeah."

"In Arizona er Texas, mebby?"

"In South America."

"You was in the Argentine with Pete Walters?" asked Zack, his voice a heavy drawl.

"I was with him off and on for a year or so. Tradin' cattle and swapping horses we'd buy up and peddle. His place was near mine. About fifty miles off."

"Some other Montana boys down there, I hear. Some uh the old Wild Bunch drifted down there, they claim, and set up ranchin'. Ever run into any of 'em?"

"Sometimes. They drifted around a lot. Pete Walters got restless. Home-sick, I reckon. His girl up here wouldn't go down there, so he come back. Wasn't it around here somewheres that he got murdered?"

"Not far from here. Pete's wild ways made him some bad enemies. He'd take in them 'breed dances and git tuh swingin' them purty 'breed gals around. They liked him and he liked them, I reckon. Most likely it was some 'breed feller got Pete Walters." Long Jake's voice held a sneer.

"Mebbyso. From what I knowed of him, though, he was a one-woman man. Packed the picture uh his girl with him always and wrote letters. Sold out down in the Argentine tuh come back and git married. I never knowed Pete Walters tuh harm ary woman in ary way."

"Yuh might be right, yuh might be wrong. They tell me Lon Smith is back in this country. Him and a feller called Sage. Ever meet up with them down there?"

"Some."

"Lon," Long Jake went on, and now Slivers was listening closely, "was mixed up in that Wyoming train robbery five years ago. They claim he cached a lot uh money, most of it bein' incomplete currency like that which Slivers is workin' on. And the wild bushes a-whisperin' says that Lon Smith done come back tuh dig 'er up. Hear anythin' about it, comin' up the trail?"

Long Jake watched him narrowly.

"There was some talk about it. Then there was some talk that he'd come up tuh trail down the gent or gents that murdered Pete Walters. Seems like Lon Smith thought a heap uh Pete. It's my opinion that mebbysso Lon figgered he might kill two birds with one stone. He'd take care uh Pete Walters' debt, then dig up this hidden dinero an' drift back to the Argentine."

"And what about the Sage feller?" persisted Long Jake. "Who is he and what's he doin' trailin' with Lon Smith?"

"Mebbyso," said the stranger, his eyes watching Long Jake, "this feller Sage likes Lon Smith, same as Lon was kinda pardners with Pete Walters."

THERE was an air of tenseness in the place now. No man there but knew that Long Jake was putting the stranger through a set of cunning questions. In that back room was Lon Smith, bound and gagged. The young cowpuncher who had come here with Lon three days ago in the first part of the heavy rain, had been murdered by Wendell for no real reason except that when they had ganged up on Lon and clubbed him senseless, the young cowboy had shown fight. Wendell had shot him in the back and they had robbed his pockets, then weighted his body with an old plowshare and dropped it

over the bank into the river below. The river that held many wicked secrets. Now this stranger with the grayish green eyes had shown up out of the devil's own night.

Slivers was scrutinizing the serial numbers on the new banknotes. His eyes watched the stranger and Long Jake. The cigaret in his mouth was dead.

"Where did you say this Sage feller was from?" asked Long Jake.

"I never said."

"You rode Pete Walters' big Flaxy horse here?"

"Yep. And busted the river wide open with 'im. He's a water dog, that Flaxy."

"How'd yuh come by him?"

"Got him off Bill Newman, down in the Moggolone Mountains in New Mexico."

"I heard Bill Newman say more than once that no money could buy that big Flaxy."

The stranger smiled faintly. "I didn't buy Flaxy. Just taken him. Bill Newman wouldn't be needin' him no more. Bill Newman wouldn't need a horse where he was goin'. Er if he did, the devil would stake him to one outa hell's remuda. Bill Newman was dead, savvy, and dead men don't ride."

Long Jake stared hard at the easy-mannered stranger. The other returned the scrutiny without a trace of fear or anxiety.

"Mister," said Long Jake, "there's been several stories about just how my old friend Bill Newman died. I been told that the law officers killed him. Another story is that either Lon Smith or this Sage feller done it. Ever hear that?"

"I heard different stories about how Bill Newman got killed. There was a story I heard about how, some years back, Bill Newman murdered a kid in Montana. This kid had never harmed Newman. He'd never harmed any man. Fact was, he was a sort uh harmless button that was workin' for some out-

fit along Milk River. The boss sends this button out tuh hunt some horses that had turned up missin'. This button saddles up and pulls out from camp and that evenin' he picks up the sign uh some horses. The sign leads north, to'rd Canada. It's gittin' late in the day and the boy stays on the trail, hopin' he'll overtake his horses before dark. He's plenty sure that he's follerin' the horses he wants.

"Comes dark and he's like as not aimin' tuh hobble his horse and lay out that night, when he sights a campfire. He musta felt purty good when he sights that fire. He's hungry, and sharin' company at a campfire is better than layin' out alone."

"What's all this got tuh do with Bill Newman?" Long Jake's voice was a menacing growl.

"It's the story I heard along the trail," was the even reply, "and it has tuh do with Bill Newman. Fact is, it has everything tuh do with Bill Newman's bein' killed down in the Moggolones."

"Go ahead," said Zack. "Let 'im talk, Jake."

"By all means," nodded Slivers, who now had halted his pen work.

CHAPTER III

SAGA OF A KILLER

THE stranger continued his tale. "The boy, he's mebbys sixteen years old, sights the campfire. He's that trustful and unsuspectin' that it has never come into his head that there's a man er two hazin' along these horses he's huntin'. He ain't packin' a gun. And so it don't never occur to him that he's ridin' slap-dab up onto the camp uh the horse thieves.

"The two men at the fire, when they hears a horsebacker comin', ducks back into some brush. The fire is plumb deserted when the boy rides up. He sees the coffee pot an' skillet there, and a little grub. Some blankets and a tarp.

There's a jug uh whisky there by the fire, too.

"He gits off his horse and stands there, kinda uncertain-like. He's wonderin' why there's nobody around, I reckon. He aims tuh ask if he kin hobble his horse an' stay all night. He don't know that Bill Newman and another horse thief is watchin' him from the brush and that they've done read the brand on his horse. He don't know that Bill Newman and this other gent has held up a bank and are on the dodge. Ner he don't know that Bill Newman is drunk and ugly, and that he's a bush-whackin' killer.

"Nope, gents, this button don't suspect nothin'. He ain't huntin' trouble. All he's after is them horses and I reckon he thinks he'll ask whoever is here at the camp if they've sighted them.

"But he never gets a chance tuh ask. Bill Newman shoots him from the brush, killin' him the first shot. He's shot the boy square in the back. A sixteen-year-old button that ain't even got a .22 pop-gun on him. A friendly, unsuspectin' boy that never harmed nobody, man, woman er child."

"They never proved that killin' on Bill," snarled Long Jake. "All they had was the word uh that pardner uh his that coyoted on him. He laid the killin' on Bill Newman. He coyoted on Bill, got ketched, and done his hollerin'."

"He quit Bill Newman because he knowed Newman would murder him the same as he murdered that boy. Not only that, but Bill Newman, when he was drunk down in New Mexico, bragged about shootin' the boy. Bill Newman liked tuh brag about the banks he'd robbed and the men he'd killed. Sober, yuh couldn't get more'n a grunt outa him. But he shore liked to run off at the head when he was hittin' the jug. If he figgered he was camped among tough company, he'd brag a-plenty. And he bragged one night down in the Moggolones when the fire was blazin' bright and the jug was

a-goin' the rounds. And that's where he shore made his big mistake.

"The company was plenty tough. Bill Newman had just pulled off that San Lucas bank robbery and he was in a mood fer braggin'.

"There's a feller there that's listenin' hard. He'd come a long ways to listen tuh just such braggin'. Fact is, he'd come plumb from down in South America. He'd read in the paper about Bill Newman killin' that kid up north uh Milk River. So he come back to the States tuh find out about it. Two, three places along the trail he heard about the same story. But he wants tuh hear Bill Newman tell it hisse'f. He wants tuh make plumb certain, yuh see, that he's killin' the right man. Because this gent from South America is an older brother uh the boy that Bill Newman murdered."

THE stranger paused to light his cigaret. The others were watching him intently now. Slivers nodded, his lips smiling faintly, his eyes hard and bright.

"Go on, stranger. It's an interesting tale. You tell it as if you knew it well. Almost as if you were an eye-witness."

"I was." The stranger's tone had lost something of its soft drawl. His eyes watched Long Jake closely.

"Go on," growled Long Jake. "Finish it."

"Bill Newman, there at the camp, told how he'd killed this boy in cold blood because he was afraid the boy would put the law on his trail. He even described how the boy dropped there, twitchin', dyin', callin' for his mother.

"It was the last braggin' Bill Newman ever lived tuh do, gents. The feller from South America, the brother uh the murdered boy, had heard what he had come back to the States tuh hear. And that was plenty.

"He called to Bill Newman who he was and told Newman tuh fill his hand. He give that bushwhackin', murderin' skunk a fair chance. And he emptied

his gun into Bill Newman's kickin' carcass."

There was a tense silence. Long Jake was breathing hard, and his jaw muscles twitched.

"And you saw the shooting, stranger?" Slivers broke the silence.

"I done the shootin'. I killed Bill Newman. That's how I come by the big Flaxy horse."

Another silence, more tense than the last. Long Jake seemed to be trying to find the right words to say.

"You got a hell of a nerve tellin' that story in my place," he finally snarled. "Bill Newman was my friend."

"So I heard him tell."

"No man kin come here to my place and brag that he's killed Bill Newman and git away with it."

"I figgered 'er thataway," nodded the stranger, his hand on his gun.

"Know what I got a good mind tuh do with you, mister? I got a good mind tuh beat yuh tuh death with my hands. By God, I'm a-goin' to!" Long Jake unbuckled his gun belt and tore off his shirt and undershirt. He was grinning savagely now.

The stranger stripped to the waist. He looked at Slivers for a long moment, studying the man. Then he slid his gun across the bar to the penman, who smiled and nodded.

"Belly up to the bar, everybody," growled the grinning Long Jake, known as the best rough-and-tumble fighter along the river or in the tough mining camps and cow towns. "Then I'll give yuh a show yuh'll never forget. I'll show yuh how tuh pull a man apart. I'm killin' this 'un with my two hands." Now he glared at the stranger over the filled glasses.

"Yuh claim yuh swum the Missouri River tonight. I say yuh lie."

"Landusky's on the north side," replied the stranger coldly. "I left there at daybreak this mornin'. My horse ner me didn't wear wings tuh fly acrost. I'm on the south side now. We swum the river, leavin' three, four law fellers

behind me. I ain't askin' you tuh believe it. I don't give a damn what yuh think."

"When I looked out the door a while ago," said Long Jake, speaking to the others, "by the flash uh lightnin' I see the wire gate on the road south is open. I likewise sighted a man in a black slicker crouchin' near the haystack. I claim this gent come from the south, Gilt Edge er Lewistown, mebby, and he's got a pardner er two. He lies about crossin' the river. Wendell, see that the back door is barred and take a stand where you kin watch. Zack, you watch the front door. Slivers, keep yore eyes an' ears open. It might be the law."

THE stranger grinned crookedly and looked at Slivers. "Got them banknotes all signed?"

"All signed, and divided." He laid one stack of banknotes, bound with a heavy elastic band, beside the stranger's gun on the bar.

"I'm comin' at yuh!" snarled Long Jake, and without warning swung a hard fist into the stranger's face.

The blow staggered the stranger, but he got his balance, covered, blocked two more vicious swings, then sent a straight left into Long Jake's face. The blow brought a trickle of blood from the saloon man's mouth. He spat in the stranger's face as they rushed at one another.

Blow for blow now. Smashing, tearing at one another. Evenly matched for weight and reach. Neither man sciened to any extent. Theirs was not a boxing match, but a fight without rules. A finish fight.

They clinched now and stood there, heaving, straining, feet slipping on the pine plank floor as they braced their legs.

Long Jake suddenly gave way. The stranger was thrown off his balance. Long Jake tripped him and they went down, Jake on top. His thumbs were gouging at the under man's eyes and

the stranger was twisting and rolling his head from side to side in a frantic effort to escape those thumbs that were trying to root out his eyeballs.

"First eyeball-snatchin' I seen in some time," commented big Zack, over by the barred front door.

"Don't see any strewing the floor yet, Zack," replied Slivers. "Even money on the stranger. Bet fifty."

"Call it, but I don't want that new paper yuh got. Lay the money on the bar and—"

"Sweet work," said Slivers as the stranger, with a quick heave, upset the other man and scrambled to his feet just as Long Jake, with a snarling oath, kicked at his face.

Jake was on his feet now, but was rocked back on his boot heels by a right and left barrage that made the blood spurt from a battered nose. Then Long Jake, head shaking to rid himself of pain, rushed, both fists hammering. And for a few seconds they stood there, hammering at one another and taking punishment without an effort to block or dodge or cover.

"Kill 'im, Jake!" called Wendell from the door that led to the rear. He stood there, a bottle of whisky in one hand, a six-shooter in the other. He waved both, spilling some of the whisky.

Slivers had laid some money on the bar. Zack matched it.

"Another ten that Long Jake is the one that gives ground," said Slivers, watching the two battlers as, blood-smeared and breathing heavily, they swapped blow for blow.

"Call it."

"Watch that front door," said Slivers in a low tone. "Be ready for anything, Zack. I have a hunch the law is out there."

Zack nodded and went back to his post, just as the stranger battered Long Jake off his feet. The saloon man reeled backwards, almost fell over a table, then ended up with his back to the wall. He leaned back against the log wall for the fraction of a second, then as if shot

from a catapult, was springing at the other man. They went down in a tangled heap, hitting, kicking, biting, clawing. Over and over across the floor, upsetting a card table that came over on top of them. Long Jake made a frantic grab at a bottle that had rolled off the tumbling table. The other man sank his teeth in Long Jake's bare arm, drawing blood and a snarl from the saloon man. Now the stranger was on top, the bottle in his hand. He raised it, leered down at Long Jake through a smear of blood, then, with a harsh laugh, threw the bottle at Wendell, who was shouting hoarsely for Long Jake to kill the stranger. The bottle missed Wendell's head by a scant six inches and smashed to bits against the wall.

WITH an oath, Wendell ducked and thumbed back the hammer of his gun. But Slivers' cold voice halted his intention. Slivers, who had moved near him, a gun in his hand.

"Uncock that gun, you drunken dog. Hear me?" And he smiled thinly as Wendell sullenly obeyed.

"Now get back and take a look at that back door. The law is waiting outside until the dog fight is over."

Slivers picked up the ten he had won from Zack and pocketed it.

"If he pitches again, Zack, lay you two to one he hits his mark. He belongs in the big league."

"He's shore a good hand at bottle tossin'," agreed Zack. "I heard noises outside, Slivers. Think we orter tell Long Jake an' call off this fight?"

"One of Long Jake's ears looks like a red apple," replied Slivers, "and the other one's full of sawdust. Bet a hundred on the stranger and give yuh odds. Two to one."

"It'll be a good bet if I lose. Lay 'er on the mahogany."

"Hate to break you, Zack. You'll be needing dough if you get out of here alive. Me, I'm heeled. Buenos Aires, music, decent clothes, the laughter of women, gambling tables, champagne.

. . . I have the South America stake in my pocket."

"That money you signed?"

"It's as good as gold if you know where and how to pass it. Keep your big paws off that on the bar. It's the stranger's money. If Long Jake kills him, I'll give you a cut. But as long as the gentleman is still alive, it's his money. And his gun beside it. And he gets a fair deal. Look at him twisting Jake's head backwards. God, he's going to break Jake's neck! Back, Zack. Stand back, Wendell, or I'll gut-shoot you! The stranger gets a square deal!"

The stranger was astride the other man, who lay prone on his stomach. He had twisted Long Jake's head around in a steel-like grip. Now he looked over his shoulder at Slivers, grinned, and spoke through set teeth.

"Obliged, Slivers." He spat blood in the agonized, bloodshot eyes of Long Jake, rubbed the man's face in the dirty blood-spattered sawdust that was thinly sprinkled on the plank floor, and was on his feet in a quick leap. He kicked Long Jake in the ribs none too gently.

"Stand up and fight!" he panted, wiping the blood from his mouth and eyes. One of his eyes was almost closed.

Long Jake got slowly to his feet. He seemed groggy, weak, and his breath came in heaving sobs. The stranger, on guard, watched him. Long Jake reeled against the upturned table like a drunken man. He grasped a chair with both hands, as if unable to stand. But the next instant the chair came hurtling at the stranger, who ducked just in time. The thrown chair crashed into the wall, barely missing Wendell. At the same instant there came a terrific thunder-bolt.

As Long Jake and the stranger again stood toe to toe, smashing at one another, Slivers smiled faintly at the terrified Wendell.

"He thought he was struck by lightning that time, Zack. Too bad that chair missed. They're slugging again.

Bet fifty Long Jake caves in. Look at his face. Call the bet?"

"Don't want it, Slivers. There he goes! Slivers, that gent kin fight like a house afire!"

"Never saw a house afire fight, Zack. But Long Jake is out."

The stranger, with a terrific swing, had floored Long Jake, who lay there, doubled up, his face contorted, gray with pain. He had caught that last swing squarely in the pit of the stomach.

The stranger stood there, swaying a little, legs spread wide to keep his balance. He was panting hard and he was covered with sweat and blood.

"There's a tub of water here behind the bar," said Slivers. "Better sponge off and rub down some. Help yourself to dry clothes from the shelf. And better make it fast, because Johnny Law is outside or I'm a Chinaman. Here, take a drink. Jake will come alive directly. That was a sweet little quarrel."

CHAPTER IV

SIEGE

BIG Zack poured a drink and looked at the money on the bar, then at Slivers. "You win, Slivers. Pick up the marbles."

"Shove it in your pocket, Zack. I'm heeled. I'm telling you you'll need it if you ever get out of here alive. Wendell, throw some water on Long Jake and feed him some of his Injun whisky. We'll need him here in a few minutes."

The stranger was washing himself and rubbing himself down. He helped himself to clean clothes, then helped work on Long Jake, who was coming out of it. Long Jake, his eyes half closed from the battering he had taken, stood at the bar, water and sweat and blood smearing his hard-muscled body. He drank from the bottle, his bloodshot eyes filled with hatred for the man who had stood toe to toe with him and licked him. The

stranger had dressed and had put the newly signed currency in his money belt without counting it. He was still a little dizzy from the beating he had taken while he smashed Long Jake into defeat.

Wendell and big Zack rubbed down Long Jake and made him dress. Long Jake took another big swig of whisky and buckled on his gun. He stood at the bar, bloodshot eyes glittering, brooding, staring at nothing. Then he laughed harshly.

"Whoever yuh are," he said, the words coming from swollen split lips, "you kin fight. Yo're the only man that ever whipped Long Jake. But I'm a-tellin' yuh somethin'. No man kin whup me and live tuh brag about it. Me and you ain't done yet. Directly I finish this bottle and git my proper bearin's, you and me tangles again. But it won't be hands this time. It'll be knives er guns. This is my night tuh howl like a wolf. Yo're a better man than me with yore dukes, mister, but the game ain't finished. Not by a long shot. Hear that? Belly up to the bar, gents, and we'll lift 'un. Come on, Wendell. Quit duckin' them lightnin' crashes. Yuh ain't dead yet. Slivers, set out a bottle. Zack, git in on this."

Wendell, his face mottled with fear, for the storm had grown worse and the crash of thunder and lightning was terrific, needed no urging. Zack left his place by the front door reluctantly. He looked at Slivers and nodded briefly.

"Jake," said Slivers coldly, "the law is outside. We're in a tight. That front door barred good, Zack."

"Plumb solid, Slivers."

Slivers, assuming command, now turned to Wendell. His voice was toneless, deadly.

"How about the back?"

"Locked tight."

"Wendell," snapped Slivers, his eyes narrowed to bright slits, "guard the back. Jake, you'd better take a trip to the back room. Zack, watch the front door. I told you idiots we couldn't spend so much time here. They've

caught up with us. And when they find what they'll find besides that lousy bunch of stolen horses in the pasture, we'll all be going up for a long stretch. Now get busy. Wendell, get back there. Jake, better untie the ropes in the back room. That's straight. No more murder goes. Untie the ropes."

"I will like hell," snarled Long Jake. "I tell yuh, he'll talk."

"You damned idiot," snapped the man called Slivers. "Don't you see we . . . Never mind. But don't do any killing because if they do break in on us, there's only one man here will be up for murder. Our unwashed friend, Wendell, who shot that kid in the back. Steady, you drunken dog, or I'll break your back with a bullet. Now, Jake, go in and take the ropes off Lon Smith. If they start bombarding, we'll need his help. And if they get us, it won't help us any when they find a murdered man in that back room. I'm talking plain. Am I right, Zack?"

"Yo're right, Slivers. Halfway right. Don't kill Lon Smith. But don't turn him loose, neither, because—"

A POUNDING on the front door silenced Zack. Every eye was on that door now. Wendell made for the rear door, his gun in his hand. Zack and Long Jake took a stand, one on either side of the locked door that was made of heavy planks.

Alone at the bar stood the stranger and the thinly smiling Slivers. The latter poured two drinks.

"Here's how, Sage," he said in a low tone.

The stranger grinned faintly. "Here's how. Wendell killed the kid?"

"Shot him in the back when Zack and Long Jake beefed Lon from behind. This is a rotten joint. A pack of coyotes except old Zack. He's not so bad as the others."

"You spotted me?"

"From the start, Sage. I have you covered. If I tell Zack or Long Jake who you are, they'll kill you where you

stand. I know the serial numbers on these banknotes. It's the money from the old Wyoming job. The money that Lon Smith came back to get. I'll play ball with you, Sage. The stuff is divided in half. I'm splitting fifty-fifty with you and giving you and Lon Smith the chance for a getaway. Here's a key that'll unlock that back door. Here's a gun for Lon Smith. I'm not going to be trapped with these filthy renegades. You came here to meet Lon Smith. Right?"

"Plumb right."

"And you smelled something wrong. And you knew I had you spotted for Sage and you knew that there'd be a showdown and you wanted me to give you a break. So you played on my love for the long green money. And you won. If I'm lucky in Buenos Aires at the roulette tables, I'll pay you back. I have six months, a year, to live. Lungs shot to hell. But I'd like that last fling. Then the devil can rake in what's left of me. In about ten seconds, Sage, I'm shooting out the light. Make for the back room. The door is on the right. Good luck, Sage."

"The same to you, mister."

They drained their glasses. Shouts outside there in the storm. Now bullets thudded through the thick door. Sage and the man who had once been a gentleman looked at one another. Then the automatic in Slivers' hand spat fire. The big kerosene lamp hanging from the ridge log exploded.

IN the darkness, Sliver's flat voice sounded in Sage's ear.

"Long Jake and Wendell killed Pete Walters. Tell that to Lon Smith. See you in South America—or in hell."

Sage, a gun in each hand, the key in his teeth, groped his way through the darkness. Zack, Slivers and Long Jake were shooting at the men outside. There was the odor of kerosene and gunpowder smoke.

Through the kitchen. Now a hurtling, burly form crashed into Sage. It was

Wendell. Sage beat at the man with his gun barrels, driving him back. Wendell, breathing hard, cursing, stumbled back through the darkness toward the back door where men were trying to break in. Wendell's gun sent slugs through the barred door at the men outside.

A moment later Sage had freed Lon Smith. He shoved a six-shooter into Lon's hand.

"We'll have tuh shoot our way out, Lon."

"Suits me, Sage, old pardner. But before we clear out, I got tuh find me Long Jake. And Wendell. Sage, they're dirty murderin' skunks. They killed that kid that was with me. Good kid. He'd run off from home. Wanted to be an outlaw. I was aimin' tuh send him back. Sage, I've kept my word with yuh. You got the money?"

"I got it, Lon. I'm trustin' yuh. We'll see about— Look out, Lon!"

A tall rawboned figure showed like a black shadow in the darkness of the doorway. Now a gun belched flame.

A soft laugh from Lon Smith, outlaw, as he thumbed the hammer of his Colt. The tall figure of Long Jake sank slowly, then pitched face downward across the floor. A vivid flash of lightning showed him lying there. Lon's gun cracked again and the writhing form lay still.

Now, from outside, came a hail of bullets. Lon and Sage crept toward the rear of the house. It was dark, there in the kitchen, the sticky blackness filled with odors of cooked food. Bullets snarled through that darkness, and the two men crouched low along the floor. The posse outside were shooting through the shattered windows, wasting good lead. Poses made up of farmers and town men are apt to get wild and confused and panicky at a showdown. Gunfire excites them like fire excites a stabled horse. The back door, built of heavy slabs, was being riddled by bullets. There was no trace of Wendell.

"There's a cellar underneath," mut-

tered Lon, there in the darkness. "Trap door. And a short tunnel that comes out near the blacksmith shop. The trap door is under the wood box behind the stove. It's open. Wendell's done taken that way out. Gimme yore hand. There's a ten-foot drop, if yuh don't find the ladder. Foller me, now. Got it?"

"Got 'er, Lon."

Black as a pit down there. The musty odor of vegetables and barreled whisky. Lon struck a match and pointed to the narrow tunnel. They crawled through on their hands and knees.

"Wendell got away," Lon Smith kept muttering, as he led the way.

Now they stood in the little log blacksmith shop, in the darkness. Rain dripped through a leaky roof. They peered outside.

THE shadowy figures of men moved around. A few were on horseback, riding here and there. They called to one another excitedly. Some of them spoke broken English.

Lon grinned faintly at Sage when the lightning flared.

"Bunch uh sod-busters an' poolroom cowboys. Bumpin' into one another. We might as well join the posse, I reckon."

"I reckon."

"Ease our way to the barn. Git our horses an' hightail it. Sounds easy when yuh say it, Sage."

They had to lay low for a while because the lightning kept lighting up the scene too vividly. At Lon's suggestion they smeared their clothes and faces with mud.

"I only got part uh the money for yuh, Lon. Had to split with Slivers. But what I got is signed. Slivers had it on me. I seen the kid's hat with the bloodstains and knowed he'd been killed. Then I heard yore spurs in the back room. Them bell metal spurs I give you in the Argentine. So I played my cards the best I could. Wendell killed the kid. Wendell and Long Jake killed

Pete. Slivers told me. And he taken half the money."

"That's all right, Sage. We ain't hawgs. Wish I could git Wendell. I liked that kid. I was aimin' tuh send him home to his folks. Game young feller. Listen to 'em bombard the saloon! Let's take a chance. Ready?"

"All ready and a-rearin'."

Out in the darkness. Mud smeared, the rain soaking them, hats pulled low, they kept on toward the barn where their horses were. Now they mingled with the milling possemen. Questions were being called back and forth.

"How many of 'em is there in the saloon?"

"Dunno. They're puttin' up a scrap. Got any .30-30 shells?"

Lon Smith and Sage called and answered confused questions. They grinned at one another when they reached the barn. The barn doors were open. Horses inside stirred impatiently.

Now, like a bolt out of the dark, a man on a big horse charged out, almost knocking them down. There was a white flash of lightning. They stared at the man and the horse.

No mistaking that face with its pallor. A pair of blazing eyes. He was bareheaded, his silvery hair was red with clotted blood that stained his face. A face twisted in a triumphant desperate grimace. It was the man called Slivers. He was riding the big Flaxy horse and was headed straight for the raging muddy river.

Fate was playing with him. That terrific lightning bolt had struck the house. The air was filled with sulphur fumes and white spots of fire seemed to fill the night. Weird, terrible, driving fear into the hearts of the men who stood stunned, arms thrown across their eyes. Flames leaped from the building. A blinding white light now. Lon Smith and Sage, there by the barn, stared, their faces tense, at the man and horse that now tackled that deadly, swirling, snag-filled, treacherous river. And through

the last echoes of the thunderclap that brought darkness again, there came the mocking laugh of the man Slivers. Slivers, living on borrowed time. Slivers, who had once been a gentleman.

"One chance in a thousand," said Lon, as they slipped into the barn.

"One chance in a hundred thousand," was the grim reply of the man who, but a few hours ago, had breasted that same stream on the same stout-hearted horse.

THEY picked two horses and rode out into the crowd. The saloon was burning now, throwing scraggly yellow arms of flame, like claws, into the black, rainswept night.

The two men, hats pulled low, wearing slickers they had found in the barn, rode unobtrusively into the night, halted by no one. They caught a glimpse of a prisoner with shaggy white hair and white mustache.

"They got Zack. But he's got friends that'll clear 'im. Zack ain't so bad. Only if I ever cut his sign, I'll smoke him up some. But Wendell. I ain't leavin' this country till I git Wendell."

Sage made no reply. They were riding along a trail that followed the river bank. The storm seemed to be getting worse. Lightning crashed all around them. The giant cottonwoods loomed, swaying, against the storm-filled sky. Now a sharp cry from Lon, riding in the lead. A blinding white flash whirled their horses. The air was filled with fire. From somewhere ahead came an unearthly, howling inhuman scream that mingled with the thunder. Both men, white faced, looked at one another as they tried to quiet their lunging horses. Again and again that horrible screaming. They spurred their horses on, guns drawn, wind and rain whipping their faces.

Now another lightning bolt. For some minutes they were busy handling their horses. It was like the end of the earth had come. The screaming had ceased. The last echo of thunder rolled back into the hills. Sage, riding in the

lead, saw the blaze of the tree that had been struck. Near that tree his keen eyes spotted something else. He spurred on, Lon Smith following.

Wendell's body lay there on its back in the grass. The heavy face was a black terror-distorted mask. The two men on horseback looked down at the dead man who had met death there.

"He was always scared uh lightnin'," said Lon. "He got what he was scared of. Come on, Sage."

But even as they rode away from the spot, Sage pulled up. His arm pointed. Out across the yellow foam-flecked stretch of muddy water, now lighted by the continuous lightning flashes of the storm that was passing over.

"Tell me, Lon, that I ain't loco. Looky yonder. On the north bank, there on the sandbar. Ain't that a man on a horse?"

"And there ain't two horses like that big Flaxy. I'd swear it was Flaxy."

Now man and horse vanished. The two men looked at one another.

"We both seen it, Sage."

Sage nodded. "A man's brain plays tricks on him some times. It looked like a man a-horseback. And it looked like big Flaxy. But this lightnin' gits any man spooky."

"A man can't swear to nothin' after he's swallered that Crooked Crick whisky and been almost struck by lightnin'."

"If it was him, we'll see him down yonder. He wanted a South America stake. He got it. It'll be good to git back home, Lon."

"Yeah. . . . Yeah. . . . Home. The Argentine. . . ." Lon Smith's voice trailed off into silence.

And so they rode away, into the rain-filled night, neither man speaking. In a few weeks, with good luck, they would be back in that Argentine cattle country. They called it home, now. The only home left for the two friends who had ridden the outlaw trail.

A few stars were coming out. In the morning there would be a red sunrise. They would hear the yapping of the coyote, mournful, like the song of the cowboy. And with that sunrise they would catch their last look at the Little Rockies, north of the old Missouri. The Little Rockies, where they had both been born and raised. And then they would ride on, never again to see those blue peaks against the Montana sky.

Never again. . . .

Somewhere in that foreign land they would die. The hands of strangers would bury them. They rolled soggy cigarets and smoked as they rode on, neither man speaking. There was, after all, nothing for them to talk about. A man starts out for to be a tough hand. He plays his string out. As had Pete Walters—and the two who rode out of the country now, via the trigger trail.

THE END



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TRIAL BY TYPHOON



By **ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN**

Author of "Wake of the Typhoon," "The Hi-Jackers," etc.

Here they come! Thirteen brigands in a sleek black bark, scenting pearl plunder ripe for snatching in Typhoon Bradley's bailiwick. The captain of the crew? Gentleman Harry, corsair out of Singapore.

A Complete Action-Adventure Novelet



TYPHOON BRADLEY broke one of the unwritten laws of the Islands when he interfered. It was at Funafuti, toward the close of the pearling season. A score of ships were anchored in the lagoon. Half a hundred canoes and whaleboats dotted the surface of the limpid water. On the beach was a small city of tents, shacks, huts and lean-tos, such as always sprang up when a lagoon was being worked. Native women and children were scattered along the sand. White men sprawled here and there on the hastily built verandas. Pearl buyers from all the world rested in the shade and sipped their drinks. Typhoon Bradley was sitting with Chang, the Chinese pearl buyer, when it began.

First of all a slender native, or rather a half-caste from the look of him, came hurtling out of the bar door. He fell heavily on the sand and the next moment there was standing over him a burly, tall man with a ragged black beard and thick hairy arms. He seemed drunk and he wielded a short stock-whip.

"I'll teach you, you nigger swine!" he roared, and the whip rose and fell. The half-caste writhed, tried to crawl away, was kicked back and at last resigned himself to whimpering and crying out, his head buried in his arms.

A small crowd gathered. No one said anything. A man had a right to punish his own natives. The Islands were not being tamed by prayers and good wishes. The South was raw and a man's crew might at any time turn and rip him to

shreds if they thought him soft enough.

Typhoon Bradley drew on his cheroot and frowned a little.

"Who is he?" he asked quietly. Chang shrugged.

"The bearded one? A Captain Tench. Came in two days ago with that rakish bark over there. No one seems to know much about him. The thin, pock-marked man standing by him is his mate, I believe."

The whip rose and fell, the bearded man swore viciously. The half-caste's back was cut and raw, beginning to bleed. Soon his writhing and screaming ceased. He had fainted. Still no one said anything and no one moved. But the whip lifted and fell with sickening soft sounds and blood spattered the crowd.

TYPHOON BRADLEY got up, shook off Chang's detaining arm and tossed away his cheroot.

"Don't you think that's enough?" he asked mildly. Captain Tench paused for a moment and glared at him.

"You mind your own damned business!" he grated. "The damned swine stole a belt out of my cargo!"

Bradley looked and saw the unconscious half-caste was still clutching a cheap, patent leather belt such as was used for trade in the outer islands, a thing worth, perhaps, two cents.

"Stealing's bad when it gets started in a crew," Bradley agreed, "but you don't need to kill the man."

"Shut up!" snarled the other and brought the whip down again with a vicious swish upon the unconscious man's back. Typhoon's gray eyes hardened and his six feet of lean muscle tightened a little.

"I said that's enough!" he snapped. He caught the arm that held the whip, wrenched the weapon away and flung the owner aside. There was a silence that could almost be felt. Men stared. Captain Tench choked with wrath. The veins corded in his bull neck and the blood ran red in his face.

"You! . . . damn you!" he choked. Someone caught his arm.

"Careful there. That's Typhoon Bradley!"

Captain Tench hurled the cautioning hand aside.

"I don't give a damn who he is! He can't tell me what to do!"

"Listen . . ."

"Get out of my blasted way!" roared Tench, and he charged, his great fists flailing and his head lowered. Someone laughed. Typhoon Bradley was reputed to be the strongest man in the South and no one but a stranger would have been as big a fool as Tench.

There was a hard smacking noise and the bearded captain went sidewise and to the sand, sprawling a good six feet before he lighted. Typhoon Bradley rubbed his knuckles and waited.

Tench got up, shaking his head, undoubtedly surprised and sobered. He whipped 'round, cooler now, his eyes slits.

"Tough, eh?" he sneered and came in with the weaving gait of a practiced fighter. Bradley was no boxing man but he knew the rough and ready fighting of the outlands as few other men did. Even first-rate boxers are not always good fighters outside the ring, and champions have been known to be knocked out in a rough-house by men they could cut to pieces in a squared circle and under rules. But Tench was good. There could be no mistake about that.

He ducked Typhoon's right hook and landed with a stinging left jab that would have sent most men to their knees. Typhoon took half a step back and smack! Tench staggered, almost fell and covered up by instinct. He made the mistake then, of going into a clinch and Bradley got him under the heart with a right hook that nearly broke Tench's ribs.

Tench was game. He came back, landed a right jab, crossed with a hard left and left himself open. Typhoon laughed and put his body behind his

blow. Tench's feet left the sand and he was hurled twice his own length before crashing into the crowd and falling. He was out before his body hit the sand and his left ear was all but torn off.

"WELL," someone drawled, "he's pretty good. He hit Typhoon three times. That's one above the record."

Someone else laughed. Typhoon stared at his inert foe for a moment and thoughtfully rubbed his knuckles.

"You ain't heard the last of this," a voice said beside him and he turned sharply to see the thin, pock-marked man who was Tench's mate. The man was snarling and obviously savage and his right hand kept clawing at his gun butt, as if he had a hard time to control himself. But you can't shoot another man on Funafuti beach without giving him an even draw, and Typhoon's gun-belt hung over the back of his chair near Chang.

"Are you proposing to fight too?" inquired Typhoon mildly. The other licked his lips, breathed hard and then shook his head.

"Not now, Bradley. But I'm Tench's mate and I know him. He'll get back at you some way. We've heard of you! Big guy in the Islands, eh? You won't be for long."

Bradley shrugged.

"You'd better pick up the wreck," he said indifferently, jerking his head toward Tench who was still unconscious. The other glared at him, cooling off.

"I suppose you don't object if I take our man along too?" he asked sarcastically. Bradley glanced down at the now groaning half-caste and shook his head.

"If he's your man he's yours. But I wouldn't beat him up any more."

"No?"

"That's what I said."

"And what would you do, big guy? Board our packet?"

"I don't know just what I'd do but it wouldn't be pleasant."

"You're not the damned magistrate here!"

Someone snickered and Typhoon smiled grimly.

"That happens to be exactly what I am. Appointed for the duration of the season."

THE other's jaw dropped. He mumbled something, backed off, then, calling sharply to several of his crew he saw standing about, he had the half-caste and Captain Tench carried down to the water's edge and taken on board the bark.

The crowd broke up, some few men congratulating Typhoon. He merely shrugged and returned to his seat beside Chang. It had been the first time that season he had ever had to interfere as a magistrate and then he had handled the matter outside of officialdom. When Typhoon Bradley held authority no one cared to cause trouble. And anyone who knows the wild, roaring days and nights on a pearling beach understands just how much that means.

"He's bad, that Captain Tench," said Chang quietly. Typhoon nodded.

"Damned bad. I wonder what his game is?"

"I have been wondering too," said Chang drily. "I heard a short while ago that he has Gentleman Harry on board."

"What?" Bradley ripped out, turning to stare at the Chinaman. "Gentleman Harry?"

For a moment he was tense and motionless. If there was one name that could jar the habitual calm of the man it was that of his old enemy Gentleman Harry of Singapore. They had clashed a dozen times. They had wounded and all but killed each other. It had been a blow of Typhoon's fist one night on Balata Beach that had ruined the Gentleman's then handsome features. He had, before that night, been called Gentleman as a term of admiration for his looks as well as his immaculate clothing. But after that night the term of Gentleman was used as a jest, and for that

Gentleman Harry hated Typhoon Bradley with an intensesness that at times sent him almost insane. If Gentleman Harry was at Funafuti that meant trouble.

"I'll look into this," promised Typhoon grimly. "I'm responsible for the beach this season and no one's going to pull anything if I can help it. . . . Come on in and let's feed."

They both got up and went into Boston Charlie's for a drink and some food. Outside the night fell swiftly over the vast expanse of the great lagoon and the lights began to twinkle out on the ships. Bonfires flickered on the beach. The Kanakas shouted and boasted and strutted up and down telling of their day's diving. A tinny piano began to play in Boston Charlie's, and native women slipped quietly in and out while the rattle of dice and the harsh voices of the game dealers cut across the smoke-filled air.

CHAPTER II

TRAPPED

IT must have been two or three hours after sunset when Typhoon finally left the poker game he had been sitting in, and after a few words to Chang went outside into the cool night air. He paused for a moment to stare up and down the line of shacks and then hitching up his cartridge belt he pushed his way through the throng and made for the water's edge.

He was frankly puzzled at learning that Gentleman Harry was at Funafuti, and more than puzzled that though the man had been there two days he had made no attempt to come ashore. That meant he wanted to keep under cover. No one else in the lagoon seemed to know the Gentleman was present, and how Chang had found out Typhoon couldn't guess. The Chinaman, however, usually knew a good many things others didn't. When Typhoon had bluntly asked him how he was aware of

the Gentleman's presence on Tench's ship, Chang had merely shrugged, smiled inscrutably and said:

"It is my business to know everything. That is why I buy pearls for Cartier's and Tiffany. That is why I have been in the Islands twenty years and am still alive."

Bradley shook his head. He knew Chang too well to doubt that his information was correct. Then what did the Gentleman plan on doing? The season was closing in two days. Most of the pearls had been bought or were contracted for; so had the shell.

Tench hadn't brought any supplies to sell. . . . Typhoon had ascertained that. Nor had he claimed to be in need of supplies or water. He appeared to be some sea bully from northern waters who offered neither explanations nor courtesy. Typhoon suspected something was going to break and it had worried him so much he had not been able to attend to his poker. He was magistrate for the season and he intended it should close with a clean slate for him.

He picked out a dinghy when he reached the water's edge—as magistrate he could commandeer any boat he felt like, though for that matter no one would have argued with him—and getting in he pushed off and rowed himself out to Tench's bark, the *Wanderer*. There seemed to him to be a curious air of tension hanging over the night, a sense of something going to happen. He swore to himself and put his weight on the oars. He must be getting old to let such feelings bother him.

He reached the *Wanderer* at last and was surprised by several things. In the first place he could see in the starlight that she was riding to a short cable, almost up and down in fact, which was a curious thing for a vessel at anchor in a lagoon twenty miles long and with plenty of room to swing in. Second, her sails, which he would have sworn that afternoon were harbor stowed, were now loosened. Thirdly, there seemed to be an unusual number of men on

board . . . and she carried a white crew Chang had said.

At night at Funafuti most of not all of the shipping save the anchor watches went ashore for a brawl. Typhoon hesitated. The *Wanderer* had all the earmarks of a ship set for a quick getaway. Should he go back and gather a crowd to help him investigate or shouldn't he? But investigate what? Nothing had happened so far. And apart from that he, Typhoon, had a reputation to consider. He wasn't accustomed to going back for help. The strongest man in the South and the best shot in the Islands . . . excepting only Shark Gotch . . . did not rely on other men. Bradley cursed and forced the dinghy alongside, catching hold of the pilot ladder and making fast.

SOMEONE leaned over the bulwarks. "Who the hell's that?"

"We'll talk about that later," Bradley said irritably. "Is Captain Tench on board?"

"Maybe. But he ain't receiving visitors. Come back tomorrow."

Typhoon was already half way up the ladder.

"You ain't boarding us tonight!" warned the speaker above.

Typhoon reached the top of the ladder and a heavily built seaman in worn blue dungarees laid a rough hand against his chest. Bradley swore and pushed and the seaman went staggering. Before he could recover himself Typhoon was on deck. The seaman got up, swearing, and Typhoon saw he was wearing a gun belt, a strange thing for a common seaman.

"You gotta get out!" snarled the man, jerking out his weapon. "Orders is 'no one boards' . . ."

He gave a yelp of pain as a hard fist smacked him under the jaw. Bradley took his gun from him as he fell and contemptuously tossed it overside. He was immediately surrounded by a half dozen armed men, threatening and surly.

"I'm the magistrate for Funafuti," he said coldly. "Do you all want me to arrest you?"

Someone laughed.

"What a chance."

Another voice spoke up and a man in a peaked cap, evidently the second mate, pushed forward.

"Never mind the guff, fellers. This is Typhoon Bradley, ain't it?"

"Correct!" said Typhoon stiffly. The other gave a mocking bow.

"An' you want to see Cap'n Tench, eh?"

"I do."

"You're quite sure you wouldn't rather get back into th' dinghy."

Something warned Bradley but he hitched forward his holster and set his jaw.

"You heard what I wanted."

The other hesitated.

"You're sticking your nose into something," he warned. "What you doing out here anyway this time of night?"

Typhoon wasted no further words. He strode forward. A man tried to check him and went reeling from a back-hand blow. The second mate sprang forward to receive the flat of Bradley's hand full in the face. There was an ugly under-current of oaths and Typhoon spun around, his gun out and his eyes slits. They were drawing on him, but the second mate's snarling voice checked that.

"Let 'im go, fellers. The Old Man'll be glad t' see 'im anyway after what happened this afternoon."

THEY drew back then and after a pause Typhoon holstered his gun, turned and proceeded aft. He was angry, coldly angry. He was not used to being treated like that.

He strode up to the poop, approached the main cabin scuttle and dropped down the companion, his eyes like ice.

There were four men seated around the table and drinking, three of whom he recognized. One was Captain Tench, his head swathed in bandages. One was

the pock-marked mate. The third, Gentleman Harry, calm and smiling and malevolent as usual, in immaculate whites, his hair glossy black, a blue silk cummerbund about his slim waist and his terrible scarred face lemon-colored in the lamplight. The fourth man, a nervous, pimply-faced youth, Bradley did not know.

He faced the four, his face grim and his thumbs in his cartridge belt. Tench glared at him. The pock-marked mate swore sibilantly. The pimply-faced youth crouched lower in his chair and looked like a snake about to strike. Only Gentleman Harry seemed unmoved, unless the faint nervous twitching beneath his ears could be called apprehension.

"You see," he said smoothly, waving a well-manicured hand. "You see, Tench. I told you he would probably be along if he heard I was aboard."

He smiled craftily.

The bearded captain struck the table with his clenched fist and ripped out a scalding oath.

"Damn you, Bradley! I never thought you'd have th' nerve to board a ship of mine!"

"I'll board any damned ship in Funafuti I choose," said Bradley coldly. "I'm a magistrate and I've got that right."

Tench got up, choking, and made a move for his gun. The rest got up, excepting the Gentleman. Bradley stared at Tench.

"I wouldn't draw if I were you, unless you can shoot a lot better than you can fight."

The Gentleman smiled.

"For what are we indebted to this little visit, my friend?"

Tench kept his hand on his gun but did not draw. The rest watched. Bradley stared at his old enemy, his face like iron.

"You're the reason, Gentleman," said Bradley coldly. "I don't want you around. This ship will sail at once, with you on board. The wind's fair. The

tide'll be right by the time you reach the channel. So get out."

"We *are* getting out," the Gentleman assured him, smiling. "In fact we are getting out tonight as you suggest. But we did not expect to have the honor of your company, although I did warn Tench you might take a notion to come along."

"Yeah, you warned me but I never thought he'd be damned fool enough to come here alone. Anyway we'll handle him."

Typhoon glanced swiftly about. He sensed that if he had not actually walked into a trap they were prepared for the eventuality of his coming. The Gentleman knew him and his ways; probably the Gentleman even knew that Typhoon knew of his presence on board the *Wanderer*. If not that the Gentleman was certainly aware that when Typhoon Bradley was around it was always best to take precautions.

"What's the game?" said Bradley suddenly. The Gentleman smiled.

"A very sweet little game, my friend. But perhaps you had better throw your gun away first. There are four of us here. The second mate on deck had orders that if you should happen to arrive and be alone and insisted upon coming aft, you should. But right now there are two men covering the scuttle up above so you can't get out. And there are two more covering you with Winchesters from the skylight."

BRADLEY did not turn his head to look. It was an old trick to distract attention though he believed the Gentleman was telling the truth.

"Fair enough," he said quietly. "But you ought to know me better, Gentleman. If you want me—come and take me."

He jumped back against the bulkhead, out of line of the skylight fire, and his draw was fast as the strike of a rattler. They had him trapped perhaps, had him cornered, but he never surrendered. He would go down fighting like all the

Island pioneers went down, his back to the wall and his gun spouting flame.

It would be a battle to the finish.

The Gentleman dived for the deck and missed death by the sixteenth of an inch. Captain Tench had drawn and was firing. Bradley's gun ranged the cabin and the pimply-faced youth went down with a hole between his eyes. It was nothing but sheer bad luck that Typhoon did not get every man present. But he only had time for three shots and then a bullet from the pock-marked mate's gun, wide of the mark, ricocheted off one of the brass hanging lamps and grazed Bradley across the back of the head, stunning him as neatly as a black-jack could have done.

He pitched forward and lay still and there was a silence in the main cabin save for the hard-drawn breathing of Captain Tench and the harsh whistling noise that his mate made between his teeth.

"Gawd, I never saw a man draw as fast as that afore," said Tench, choking a little. "He's killed the supercargo."

Gentleman Harry got up from the deck and brushed his clothes. He was a little shaken.

"I never thought the fool would fight," he said harshly. "It's bad enough if he gives you an even break but when he jumps you first it's time to duck."

A respectful fear showed in his eyes.

"So I noticed," sneered Tench. The Gentleman's dark eyes glittered.

"Tench!" he said crisply. "There are just three men in the Islands who can draw faster and shoot straighter than I can. Those three men are Larsen of Singapore, Shark Gotch and Typhoon Bradley. Would you care to dispute the fact?"

Tench stared at him for a moment and then wilted. He had seen the Gentleman shoot.

"Well, you did duck," he said sullenly. The Gentleman nodded.

"That was common sense with Bradley shooting."

The pock-marked mate swore.

"Aw, what th' hell are you arguing about? We plugged th' swine, didn't we?"

GENTLEMAN HARRY, his own gun drawn now, gingerly approached Typhoon's prostrate body as a man might approach a wounded grizzly bear. He would not even stoop to see if Bradley was dead but made the mate do it. The Gentleman knew Bradley and once before he had shammed dead to advantage.

"Hell, he ain't croaked," said the mate disgustedly after a brief examination. "Just creased, that's all."

"Better finish him anyway," grunted Tench, cocking the hammer of his gun. "Th' swine butted into my business this afternoon and damned near knocked my ear off."

"We won't kill him," said the Gentleman decisively. "At least not yet. He's given me more grief than you'll ever have, Tench, and I'll get rid of him in my own way. Tie his hands and feet and chuck him into a spare room."

The other looked puzzled.

"I don't see why we don't croak him now," swore Tench.

"Because I say not!" rasped the Gentleman. "This is my deal and I'll play it as I see best. The thing you want to worry about is if anyone in th' lagoon has heard the shooting and wants to come over and look-see."

"Another thing," suggested the pock-marked mate sourly. "Th' boats oughta be back."

Gentleman Harry consulted his watch. His head nodded in agreement.

"That's right. We've got to get out of the lagoon before the tide turns. I told that fool Limpy not to wait and clean-up if time got too short."

Tench went upon the poop grumbling to himself and ordered two men below to bring up the supercargo's body. The Gentleman saw personally that Bradley's bonds were sound and aided to drag him into a cabin and lock him in. After that he too went on the poop.

CHAPTER III

THE CLEANOUT

ASHORE things were happening, also, but so smoothly they passed unnoticed. Perhaps half an hour after Bradley had left him, Chang, still sitting at the poker table, felt a touch on his shoulder. He looked around to discover a hawk-faced man in worn dungarees standing beside him.

"What is it?" he asked calmly.

"Captain Bradley wants to see you," said the man, his voice curt and business-like. "He's waiting down by the pandanus grove."

"What . . ." Chang began but the man abruptly turned on his heel and vanished in the milling crowd that was arguing, drinking and gambling in Boston Charlie's that night. Chang frowned a little, stared at his cards, absently raised a bet and when the hand was done politely excused himself and went out.

He wondered about the odd request.

The beach was dark save for the starlight, the glows from several bonfires and the shafts of light from the windows and doors of the pearling city. It was a place of dense shadows that shifted and moved as men came and went. Chang strode thoughtfully along until the last of the shacks had been left behind and he met no one save an occasional Kanaka hurrying from the village. Typhoon must have learned something, possibly discovered the reason for Gentleman Harry's presence at Funafuti. But why send for him to come to this out-of-the-way place?

Chang approached the pandanus palms suspiciously, his hand on his gun. He had thirty thousand dollars' worth of pearls in the canvas belt about his waist, and men had been killed for less than thirty dollars on the pearling beaches. Funafuti had been singularly free from that sort of thing since Bradley had taken over, otherwise Chang would never have ventured into the shadows

without at least half a dozen of his men at his back.

He reached the first palm, peered into the blackness of the grove and called.

"You there, Typhoon?"

He sensed the danger even as it caught him. Something swished through the air. Chang ducked, drew and fired, the sound of the shot muffled by the wind-noise in the palms and the shouting and laughter back along the beach. A noose settled over the Chinaman's shoulders, jerked tight. He lost his feet, crashed down and several men fell on him. Something crashed on his head and he lost consciousness.

"That's one, Limpy," someone grunted. There was a short laugh.

"All right. Drag him back a ways and tie him up."

FIFTEEN minutes later Jack Cummings, buyer for Lascelle's of Paris, busy examining four large pearls in a back room of Lascar Pete's store, was interrupted by a hawk-faced man.

"Chang says he'd like to see you if you can get away," said the hawk-faced man. "He's waiting down by the pandanus grove."

"Chang?" said Cummings, surprised. He swept the pearls into a wash-leather bag and looked at the stalwart native diver who faced him across the table. He finished his business hastily.

"I'll take them, Kinoo. One thousand dollars cash. You're in debt for supplies four hundred. I'll pay the balance in the morning."

"Ai," said Kinoo with a flash of betel-stained teeth. He lifted a hand in a sort of half-salute and went out. Cummings looked around for the hawk-faced man but he had disappeared. He got up, went out into Lascar Pete's main room and beckoned to Peira, buyer for a Pa-peete syndicate.

"Come along with me, Peira," he said. "Chang wants to see me. Sounds like something's up." They left the place together and walked down the beach to the pandanus grove where sundry things

happened to them with amazing swiftness.

"He brought Peira along," chuckled a voice as the unconscious men were examined. "That's a stroke of luck."

Altogether that night seven of the most famous buyers in the South were deftly knocked out and robbed, and in the riotous whirl of the pearling beach their absence passed almost unnoticed.

OUT in the lagoon the rakish and fast bark *Wanderer* slipped her cable and began to move silent as a ghost away from the rest of the shipping. Two whaleboats, filled with men ahead of her, were towing her. Two miles out the canvas was set and before the urge of a gentle wind she moved toward the channel.

Behind her a stab of red flame suddenly spurted up from Chang's schooner the *Lotus Bud*, followed almost at once by a similar red flame from Cumming's brig the *Hyacinth*. On the poop of the *Wanderer* Gentleman Harry chuckled.

"Neat work," he boasted. "That'll keep the whole beach busy for a while saving the ships."

Tench growled something in his beard and felt tenderly of his torn ear. The pock-marked mate hitched at his cartridge belt and swore sourly.

"It'll be a near thing if they get after us in whaleboats," he stated. Gentleman Harry lighted a cheroot and laughed.

"I've got it figured pretty well. All we needed was a fair wind and we've got that. The tide won't bother us yet and we ought to get out before it turns. Once it turns no boat'll be able to buck it and no ship can clear the channel. By daylight we'll be at sea, with twelve hours start anyway."

Funafuti Lagoon, which is one of the largest in the Islands, runs twenty miles from the pearling beach near the native village to the only channel practical for deep-water vessels, and that channel is only practical at high water. An hour after high water is reached the passage

is dangerous; two hours afterwards it is useless even for small boats.

Gentleman Harry had calculated things to a nicety, except he had not planned to make his clean-up until the following night. The presence of Typhoon Bradley and the fact that that night there was a favorable wind had induced him to act sooner than he had expected. At the three or four knot speed the *Wanderer* was making she would be several hours reaching the channel and clearing for the open sea. And she would just have time to scrape through before the tide turned. If pursuit could be delayed for only an hour after that the Gentleman was reasonably safe.

HE rubbed his hands together and walked up and down the poop with Tench. He was highly elated. He had pulled off one of the most spectacular raids in the history of the Islands; had made a laughing stock of Typhoon Bradley and was in a position to dispose of his old enemy for good. He could not resist the temptation to tell him so and he and Tench went down to the main cabin.

Bradley was conscious now, his head and one side of his face covered with dried blood and his limbs cramped from his bonds. He blinked in the sudden flood of light when Gentleman Harry opened the door of his prison and with Tench's aid hauled him into the main cabin and sat him in a chair.

"Well," he said coolly, although his head was throbbing as if it would burst. "You seem to have pulled off something."

The Gentleman lighted a cheroot and blew smoke into Bradley's eyes.

"I have," he boasted. "I've cleaned out the beach."

Typhoon stared at the little pile of canvas belts and chamois leather bags that lay on the table. He recognized Chang's belt by the ornate embroidery. He recognized Cummings' chamois sack, and Peira's initials showed he had been

cleaned too. The Gentleman laughed.

"Seven of 'em," he sneered. "Two-thirds of the season's output and the cream of the lot."

"Clever," admitted Typhoon evenly. "How did you manage it? Kill them?"

"Not at all. No need for that. Merely had 'em knocked out and tied up. Limpy Smith knew all the buyers by sight so I brought him along to handle the deal."

Bradley nodded. Limpy Smith was a vicious little rat of a man, one of the worst characters of the pearling grounds, but one who gained his ends by cunning rather than by force. Bradley had wondered why he hadn't shown up this season but this accounted for it. The Gentleman had got hold of him and used him.

The beach was all but cleaned, no doubt of it, and all the verandahs of the Islands would tell the tale how Gentleman Harry had finally bested Typhoon Bradley. Bradley swore under his breath.

"You can't get away with it," he stated harshly. "There'll be a dozen ships on your track."

The other shrugged. Captain Tench poured a drink and tossed it down with relish.

"We ain't fools," he growled. "We set fire to two packets so the others would be kept busy. And we'll be at sea just ahead of the tide turn. That'll shut 'em in for a while."

IT was true. Bradley thought hard. From the looks of things the Gentleman *would* get away with it. If he wasn't stopped this side of the channel there wouldn't be a chance in a hundred of catching him. He had a big crew also, nearly all white men, and heavily armed. There'd be a bloody fight even if the pearling ships did overtake him by some miracle. Typhoon groaned and the Gentleman laughed.

"I suppose you wonder why I'm keeping you?" he jeered. He leaned forward and with savageness struck Bradley's face with his open hand,

struck him again and again, his features convulsed and his eyes burning fire.

"Damn you, Bradley! I've got you now. You've had a long run, over ten years, and you've got in my way too many times. You remember the first time, eh? On Balata Beach. You smashed my face there. You're going to pay for that, savvy?"

Bradley shrugged though he was white and tense.

"Seems like you're talking too much," he said calmly. "Why not get it over?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" the Gentleman sneered. "Yes, you'd like a bullet through your damned head, a quick death! But that's too easy. I owe you too much. I'm going to watch you die slowly, see? Dying for days and days.

"When we're at sea I'm going to tie you in a boat and trail you along astern. I'll strip you so the sun can get at you. I'll watch you go mad with thirst and hunger, watch you try to break free to throw yourself overside and drown. I'll enjoy all that. Maybe now and then I'll bring you alongside and dribble a little cold water on your chest, just where you can't reach it. There'll be a good many in the Islands who'll thank me for all that. And maybe some time some skipper'll pick up a ship's boat with a dried-up mummy in it that was once Typhoon Bradley."

He was insane, working himself into a fury. Even Tench stared at him with some amazement. Tench had no liking at all for their captive but he was rather appalled at the sheer ferocity the Gentleman was exhibiting.

"Bah!" snapped the Gentleman at last. "Let's pitch him back in the cabin to think it over." He flung a glass of gin and water into Bradley's face, so the shattered fragments cut his cheek and the fiery spirit made his eyes run.

"I'll kill you for that!" he said between his teeth. The Gentleman laughed, recovering his calmness.

"Your killing days are over," he sneered. "Give me a hand, Tench."

THEY dragged Typhoon back into the cabin again, flung him inside, kicked him half unconscious and then left him to stare at the round circle of the open port where the stars shone big and flickering. The *Wanderer* slipped along, the wind humming in her rigging, the level water of the great lagoon lapping along her hull, and Typhoon's eyes grew hard as flint in his drawn face.

A fine end it would be all right, a fine end for Typhoon Bradley who had dominated the South for over a decade now. His friends would revenge him, of course. Shark Gotch would scour the seas. Cassidy of Apia would set in motion all his vast interests. Jack Barrett would oil up his guns and lurk around Singapore.

Sometime, somehow, Gentleman Harry would drop before hot lead to pay for this night's work. He might of course fly to Europe with his winnings, but it was not impossible that death would follow him there.

Yet for all that comforting thought Bradley was bitter. To go out lashed in an open boat, to go mad with thirst and hunger while his old enemy watched and laughed and gloated. Bradley swore through tight teeth and struggled furiously with his bonds. In a few hours there would be no hope. Once the *Wanderer* cleared the channel and the tide turned he was done.

CHAPTER IV

TYPHOON STRIKES

AN hour passed and then another. Typhoon gave up struggling with his bonds and lay panting and sweating on the cabin deck. He could hear the shoes of men on the poop above and sometimes caught the sound of their voices and a mutter of laughter as the wind blew into the open port. They were walking on the opposite side of the ship, which was the windward side, and that fact was fortunate for Bradley.

Occasionally two of the men would drop below and there would follow the clink of glasses in the main cabin. But Bradley was not disturbed any more.

He was just struggling to his feet with the idea of hoisting himself to the bunk for comfort's sake, when a dark shadow appeared in the open port and there came a sibilant hiss. Bradley grew rigid.

"Who is it?" he said cautiously. The shadow in the port, it was a man's head, spoke rapidly in a combination of beche-mer English and Samoan.

"Ai, this is the man who was whipped today. I learned you had fought for me. I learned also you were here and I came as soon as I was able."

Bradley suppressed an exclamation. He remembered the half-caste Tench had flogged over the theft of a cheap belt. He had completely forgotten the man was a member of the *Wanderer's* crew.

"How'd you get out there?" he demanded swiftly. "What are you on board?"

"I am the steward," the other whispered. "Be still. If you turn your back to me I will cut the ropes."

Typhoon heaved himself to the bunk with a tremendous effort, rolled over and inched toward the bulkhead. He felt a hand touch him, searchingly, and then a keen knife sawed through his bonds. His wrists fell apart and he was free. A few moments he spent bringing some life back to his numbed fingers and then seizing the proffered knife he cut his legs clear. That done he took a deep breath and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"I am grateful, my friend," he said simply. "You have given me a chance to die like a man . . . and perhaps to do even more."

The other gave a little grating laugh. "Keep the knife, master. I will unlock the door for I have stolen a key. And then you will kill Captain Tench for me."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Brad-

ley grimly and the head vanished. He hefted the keen knife for a moment, grinned and thrust it in his belt. He wasn't a knife man but if no other weapon came to hand this blade would serve.

He thrust his head out of the port and discovered how the half-caste had reached him. Along the hull of the *Wanderer* ran a narrow beading about four feet below the scupper edge. By holding on to the scupper edge and resting the toes on the beading an active man could inch along and go right around the ship if he chose. Had the *Wanderer* been at sea, or heeling much to leeward the feat would have been impossible. As it was, however, she was on an almost level keel and there was little pitch or roll to her.

BRADLEY waited. He heard the Gentleman and Tench come below and take a drink. The Gentleman came to the cabin door and hammered on it, obviously in a jovial mood.

"Think of the open boat, Bradley! It'll be a long, thirsty time before you croak."

He laughed and returned to the bottle. After a few minutes the two men went on deck again. Bradley breathed hard and pressed his ear to the door. He heard a faint foot pad on the companion, and then a key slid into the lock, turned and was withdrawn. The door opened the merest crack.

"I was ordered not to come below while you were prisoner here," muttered the half-caste. "And I am afraid. I go now."

Bradley opened the door swiftly and grasped the man's arm as he was about to make for the companion and get away. He gripped his hand.

"You're not quitting on me now," he said shortly but quietly. "You have been a man tonight."

The half-caste struggled for a moment, fearful that one of those above would come below, and then something about the white man's steady gray eyes

and strong jaw gave him courage. He drew himself up.

"I will fight with you," he agreed reluctantly and Typhoon nodded. The man's spirit was almost broken but some trace of his fighting Samoan ancestors remained in him.

There was the sound of someone at the scuttle above and the half-caste gave a gasp and almost wilted. Bradley gripped him by the shoulder and dragged him back into the cabin. They waited, crouched by the door. It was the pock-marked mate coming down and they could hear him discussing something with another man Bradley presently identified as Limpy Smith who had evidently engineered the shoreward end of the raid. They had several drinks before going on deck again but made no attempt to approach the cabin.

It was evident those on the poop were taking it in turns to hit the bottle. Limpy Smith and the mate went up at last and the main cabin was still save for the creakings of the hull and muffled water noises. Bradley came out of hiding and listened. Up above they were idly walking the weather deck. Bradley slipped toward the companion and went up, silent as a ghost, the trembling half-caste at his heels.

The poop was in darkness, and as the scuttle faced for'ard it was no task for Typhoon to crawl to the lee rail and then aft along the scupper. The main cabin scuttle, the skylights and a long locker that reached almost to the binnacle shielded him from possible discovery by those across the deck. The half-caste came fearfully with him, his teeth chattering but by now more afraid to go back than to go on.

Bradley hesitated when he could see the loom of the helmsman against the stars and the glow of the binnacle against the man's white shirt. He could slip overside and swim for the beach and safety, he knew. His situation was desperate, armed only with a knife and alone, save for a shivering half-caste, against a large crew of hard-case white

men. At any other time Typhoon would probably have taken the reasonable course and got out, depending upon another meeting to give him his revenge. But he was magistrate of Funafuti Beach, responsible for the peace of the pearling season. He was Typhoon Bradley and he had to keep the record clean.

HE braced himself and waited. Gentleman Harry and Tench came to view, the tips of their cheroots glowing cherry red in the dark. They were laughing at something as they paused together near the binnacle to look at the compass.

"We'll have to alter the course in twenty minutes," said the Gentleman. Tench agreed.

"It's not two miles to the channel. There's an ugly shoal to the sou'west. We'd better make a big swing to clear it."

"I guess west b' north ought to do it," observed the Gentleman. "We'll wait until we're abeam of Becke's point before swinging."

They turned and paced for'ard. Bradley heard them halt to speak with the pock-marked mate and Limpy Smith.

"We're going below for a snort," Tench growled. "Give us a shout when you're abreast of Becke's point."

"Aye, aye," said the mate gruffly.

The Gentleman and Tench went below. Limpy Smith and the mate came slowly aft. Bradley waited. They turned and went for'ard again and then Bradley leaped, silent as a panther making its kill. His iron fist took the astonished helmsman on the jaw and the man fell on the wheel with a grunt. Bradley lowered him to the deck, searched him and cursed. While steering the man had evidently laid his cartridge belt aside, for he was unarmed. The sails began to shiver and Bradley caught the wheel as it started to run. He checked the ship, then reached down to haul the shaking half-caste to him.

"Can you steer?" he whispered fiercely. The man nodded dumbly.

Bradley thrust the spokes into his hands.

"Keep her as she goes!" he ordered. "And stop rattling your teeth!"

He slid into the shadow of the main cabin skylight and crouched again. Astern of the *Wanderer* he could see the red glow in the night sky that told him ships were still burning back off the beach there. There was no sign of pursuit but visibility was poor by starlight and there might be a dozen boats on the trail by now.

THE mate and Limpy Smith had turned and were coming aft again. They reached the end of the skylight and then the mate, glancing at the wheel, halted with an astonished oath. The half-caste steward's sweat-dewed face was plain in the binnacle glow, convulsed with terror.

"What in hell . . ." began the mate and then something hit him and he went over and rolled into the scuppers. Limpy Smith, wizened, vicious and rat-like gave a sudden snarl and went into action with surprising suddenness. That is he dived instinctively for Typhoon's legs. Bradley was a little off balance after swinging at the mate and he went down with a jar. Limpy Smith clawed for his gun and then he thought he had wandered into the middle of a cyclone. Steel fingers choked back his breath. His right wrist snapped and then he was flung the length of the poop to bring up against the for'ard taffrail with sufficient force to topple him over it. Most men would have been killed but Limpy Smith had all the uncanny vitality of a cat. He landed on his feet, reeled, choked for air and then let out a yell.

Typhoon stooped over the pock-marked mate, secured his gun, hefted it with a little laugh and waited. He had teeth now and he was not known as one of the best shots in the Islands for nothing. There was a pounding of shoes on the main cabin companion. Limpy Smith was screaming and shouting for the crew to gather. Gentleman Harry and Tench burst on the poop, bewildered

at the noise and confusion. Tench leaned over the for'ard taffrail.

"What th' hell's wrong, you fool?" he roared. "What happened?"

"Aft there!" screeched Limpy Smith, holding his broken wrist and hopping with pain and viciousness. "Aft there. Typhoon Bradley!"

"He got loose?" choked the Gentleman incredulously and he whipped round to face aft, his gun leaping to his hand.

"Stay where you are!" snapped Typhoon crisply. "I . . ."

The Gentleman sent a stream of lead into the shadows by the wheel and then ducked behind the scuttle. Tench opened up. Men came running from for'ard and the night grew vivid with orange splashes. The half-caste slipped a bow-line over the wheel and dropped to the deck, quaking with awful fear. Typhoon shot three times, wounding two men, and then held his fire. The noise died away as Gentleman Harry shouted:

"Get overside, Bradley. We'll let you swim clear!"

But Typhoon laughed. He knew what was in the Gentleman's mind. The *Wanderer* was abeam of Becke's point and it was time to change the course.

He crawled cautiously to the unconscious mate and relieved him of his cartridge belt and then reloaded his gun. The Gentleman was swearing thickly. Tench was cursing in his beard. The stars were beginning to pale and the dawn would soon be upon them. The *Wanderer* had to get through the channel right away. If she were delayed she would be trapped for another tide and pursuit would catch her. Bradley set his jaw as he heard the Gentleman's voice grow calmer. Orders rapped out. Men moved swiftly.

"I'll give you just thirty seconds to clear out, Bradley," said the Gentleman from behind the cover of the scuttle. Bradley's only answer was to take a snap shot at the loom of a head. He missed and the next instant the firing was general.

NEVER before nor after was Typhoon Bradley in exactly the bad jam he was in then. The helmsman he had stunned was reviving and sitting up. The pock-marked mate was beginning to move. The night was fast disappearing and he had only his one gun to stand off a heavily armed crew of some two dozen men. They were already climbing up into the rigging to get shots at him. A veritable hail of lead swept the poop waist high so he could not rise. He only grinned. He was fighting and he was glad. The old wolf was at bay.

Crouched and nearly flat he picked off two men as they climbed into the ratlines. His every shot told. A man who incautiously exposed a shoulder around the scuttle went backward with a hole in his arm. Tench was wounded in the left thigh.

Had the attackers used their heads they would have waited and counted Typhoon's shots, and then rushed him while he was reloading. But they were too angry and excited. They did not dare to wait.

The *Wanderer* was yawing badly but under the urge of the wind still going forward. Becke's point was well past the beam. Ahead there was the roaring of breakers, muffled and dim as yet. To port were ugly shoals and the channel twisted between them.

Bradley turned his head and saw that the half-caste was entirely useless, gray from fear and crouched whimpering to the deck. Typhoon picked another man out of the rigging and then wriggled to the wheel. The stars were all but gone. The sky was a vast dome of opal white, steadily growing clearer. Bradley glanced at the sails, glanced to windward and chuckled. He threw clear the bow-line from the wheel, let it spin, checked it, let it spin again, all while he was lying almost flat beneath the leaden hail, protected only by the low poop houses. Tench's harsh voice roared out an oath.

"He's setting us aground!"

"Come on!" Gentleman Harry arose, mad with rage and reckless as he was

enraged. He led the charge along the poop and Typhoon rose to meet it. His six-gun spouted flame and death. Four men choked the port passageway with their bodies. Limpy Smith was shot by one of his own men in the excitement. The helmsman Bradley had stunned, revived now, got to his feet and blindly tried to take the lone wolf in the rear, to bring him down.

The half-caste, who had barely moved till this time, gained a sudden surge of courage, lunged upright and catching the helmsman about the waist carried him sprawling to one side. They both dropped, riddled in the leaden hail that was whickering past Bradley. Bradley himself was nicked in a half dozen places and his left arm holed, but the wound was so shallow he never noticed it until afterward. He fired his last shot and saw the convulsed face of Gentleman Harry before him.

"Got you!" snarled the Gentleman and lifted his gun. He fired, but the bullet whined into space.

Bradley gathered himself and leaped, not at the Gentleman, nor at Tench, nor at any of the others who pressed toward him, getting in each other's way. He jumped to the top of the locker, from there to the skylight of the main cabin, hooked back and open because of the tropical weather. He dropped clear through, landed on the main cabin table with a jar that took his breath, jumped from there to the deck and backed against a bulkhead, clear of the skylight opening, while he reloaded his gun with quick, cool fingers.

THERE was a perfect fury of noise on the poop above. It seemed to the excited attackers as if the ship had opened up and swallowed the lone man who had been facing them. Gentleman Harry was screaming. Tench was bellying orders. The pock-marked mate was swearing in a thick, slow voice and demanding someone give him a gun.

And in the midst of all this the *Wanderer* struck. Under the full press of

her canvas she rammed into the soft sandy shoal Bradley had aimed her at, jarred once or twice and then slowly heeled to port and was still, the main-topmast going by the board with a crash of rigging and spars.

On the poop Gentleman Harry had taken hold of himself with a tremendous effort.

"Lower the boats," he said harshly. "We'll have to chance it. Water and provisions."

"Jump to it!" Tench roared, because now the full day had come they could see, far down the lagoon, the white topsails of a dozen racing ships.

"I'd like to get that swine first!" the Gentleman grated, staring at the skylight.

"No time," Tench pointed out. "He might shut himself in a cabin and we'd be hours digging him out."

"Dynamite . . ." snarled the Gentleman. Tench swore at them.

"You're mad. Let him go now! Those packets will be on us in an hour. We've got to get through the channel before the tide turns. We can't wait."

The men were milling in a panic. Their losses had been fearful. Tench, the Gentleman and the pock-marked mate plunged into the midst of them and hammered and kicked some sense into them. They slopped one boat in the water and the three leaders piled in, together with four men. The rest fought and quarreled among themselves to get the other boat lowered and panic swept them again. It was every man for himself.

In the main cabin Typhoon sensed what was going on and hesitated. He was sick and weak but there was still something to be done. He knew the Gentleman had pushed off.

He found another gun in Tench's cabin and charged up the companion steps. The poop was deserted save for the dead. The survivors of the crew were laboring midships, striking each other and cursing. The Gentleman's boat was half a cable's length away, pull-

ing for the channel, and Bradley swore. Then he acted.

He landed on the main deck at one jump and swept against those left on board like the typhoon for which he was named. He knocked down two men with the barrels of his guns, shot another who drew on him and drove the rest to the boat falls in some semblance of order. They made no more resistance. Covered with blood, his eyes like ice and his tight-lipped mouth roaring at them, they were quelled.

He drove them into the boat when it was overside, jumped into the stern sheets, shipped the tiller and jammed it over with one knee while he glared at the frightened men. Few of them had weapons now. They had discarded their Winchesters and what revolvers they had were empty from the fierce fighting on the poop. As in a mad daze they found themselves pulling at the oars. The mast was stepped and the sail hoisted. Heeling stiffly, the boat with a madman at her tiller, roared along after Gentleman Harry.

CHAPTER V

LOST LOOT

TENCH looked around and swore. "He's gaining on us. He's a devil. He ought to be dead and he's chasing us instead, in our own boat with our own men pulling for him."

"Get the mast stepped and the sail up!" rasped the pock-marked mate who was steering. Two of the men had to stop rowing to aid with the mast and guys and at first Bradley gained fast. But then the lighter loaded craft began to draw away again.

Typhoon balanced himself and fired. The range was long and the lunging of the boat made aim difficult but Typhoon could shoot. His first bullet whickered by the Gentleman's head. His second splashed the water alongside. His third nicked the shaft of an oar but his fourth,

fired as the boat steadied for a moment, blew in the back of the mate's head.

The mate moaned through dead lips.

He fell forward, letting go the tiller, and the boat yawed wide, came up into the wind. Tench cursed hysterically and jumped for the stern sheets. The oars brought the boat to the wind again but they had lost too much distance.

"We can't make the channel now!" snarled the Gentleman. "Head for the beach. There's fifty miles of brush and palms to hide in and anything can happen."

Both boats turned for the beach, two miles distance, but with the changed slant of the wind the more lightly loaded craft was hard to manage under sail while Typhoon's packet lay down to it and surged steadily forward. He gained, inch by inch, and he withheld his fire when he saw this.

Far down the lagoon the white sails of the pearling fleet were growing. Gentleman Harry began to shoot wildly but the jumpy movements of the craft beneath him made aim impossible.

Typhoon laughed to himself. The game was about played through. He had checked the *Wanderer* in her flight, beached her on a shoal. Now he had turned the retreat of the Gentleman. Even if he failed to get the pearls the others would get them, would scour the whole wide circle of the atoll and run every last thief to earth. But in his heart Bradley wanted that honor himself. He was responsible.

DRIVING with wind and oars the Gentleman's boat rammed into the shelving sand of the beach so hard it ploughed half ashore before stopping. The mast snapped off and fell, stunning one of the seamen. Tench and the Gentleman and the other two stumbled over the gunnels and started for the fringe of the palms fifty yards away, where they might temporarily at least find breathing space and shelter.

Scarce half a minute behind them Typhoon's boat beached with a jarring

crash and Typhoon himself with a flying leap was in the shallows and ploughing for the sand. None of the men he had cowed attempted to follow him. They remained in the boat looking stupidly at each other, as in a dream, and watching the racing pearly fleet coming down the lagoon. They felt as if they had tangled with a buzz-saw and they had had enough.

A bullet runs faster than a man and Typhoon fired as he ran. He dropped one of the seamen with a bullet in the left leg. Tench stumbled and fell over a fragment of coral rock and the others left him. The bearded captain turned snarling to face Typhoon, his eyes wide with terror and desperation. Bradley killed him as he passed, ignoring the bite of Tench's shot in his thigh.

The race was nearly done then. The last seaman, winded, abandoned himself to fate, threw his gun away and cowered on his knees. Typhoon struck down at him with a gun barrel and went on. He spun the Gentleman half around with a bullet through the left shoulder blade, and the Gentleman almost fell. He turned, his face convulsed with fury and pain, and he flung something almost at Bradley's feet before he turned and ran again, wobbling badly.

Typhoon checked. A large bag lay

on the sand. He picked it up, hefted it and laughed. The Gentleman had flung him the pearl loot in an effort to stop him. And it had stopped him.

Typhoon thrust the heavy bag into his shirt, tried to start running again and found his legs were trembling so much he dared not attempt a step. He lifted his gun at the fleeing Gentleman's back but his eyes were misty and he could not see. He had gone through too much. He had used up all he had. He cursed, pressed the trigger, but the bullet went into the sand not twenty feet ahead of him.

He heard the Gentleman's final bitter curse as that worthy vanished into the shelter of the palms and then, staggering, Typhoon turned to see the pearly fleet swinging up one by one and dropping anchor off the beach while the whaleboats were flung overside and raced toward him.

"All right, fellers," he said wearily. "It's all right. Nothing missing, I guess. I may be a hell of a magistrate but I figure the slate's clean!"

They could not hear him, of course, and when they came running up the sand toward him they found him lying unconscious on his face, his guns still gripped in his hands, and the loot of Funafuti lagoon safe inside his shirt.

THE END

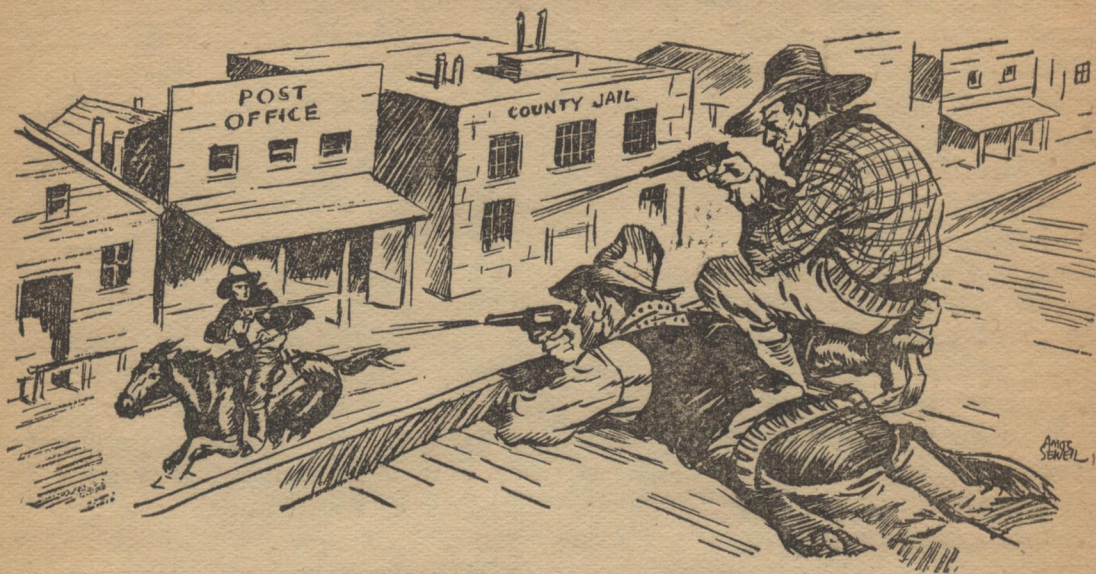
WOLF CHILDREN OF INDIA

IN India there seems to be no doubt that "wolf children" have existed and still exist. "Wolf children" are always boys. These wild children of the jungles die early in life. There are cases, though, when they at least reach adolescence. A fifteen-year-old boy of this kind was brought into an orphan asylum in 1874, says the *Detroit News*.

He was a curious figure, with his short arms, their growth having been stunted by his walking on his hands and feet. The boy was found at the side of the bodies of an old female wolf and two young wolves.

A female panther whose young one had been killed kidnaped a child in northern Katshare. This child was caught after a while and given back to its parents, who recognized it. The child had become used to walking on hands and feet, but it learned to walk upright after a while. After its capture it bit like a wild-cat and could hardly be tamed. Moreover, it tore and swallowed any sort of fowl it could catch.

HANGING BEE



By ART LAWSON

The law decreed ". . . hanged by the neck until dead—dead—dead." But a pistol posse named the hour—and the noose-bait!



HE funeral was all over now, and in his little office in front of the jail, Sheriff Matt Babcock sat with his booted feet on the desk. He sat there for a long time, chewing on a piece of grass he had picked up somewhere. He was staring at a framed snapshot of Olgie Matteson.

Even in the faded picture you could tell that Olgie had loved life and living. Her blonde hair was blown by the wind, sun and laughter sparkled in her blue eyes, and happiness flashed in her smile. Even the strong handwriting across the lower corner spoke of joy. It said: "With much love, Olgie."

The sheriff stared at it even after it was too dark to see. He just sat there looking. Looking at things the picture didn't show. Three blue-black thumb-marks on her young neck. A long black box, and six feet of earth.

In back of the office, in one of the cold iron cages, a man was making queer sounds. He was neither moaning nor

whining. But it sounded something like both. Now and then the noise would stop for a second and the man would rattle weakly on the barred door. The moaning would swell into words:

"Babcock—Sheriff—Sheriff . . ."

On and on like that.

And the rattling would drown out the words.

The front legs of Matt's chair thumped down. He heaved to his feet, staggered a little as if dazed, and jerked at the heavy gunbelt around his strong hips. Then he fumbled in his pocket for a match, scratched it listlessly on the side of the spur-scarred desk, and touched it to the wick of the kerosene lamp.

The flame sputtered, settled into a little wing of yellow that threw a glow around the bare room and a square of light into the cell corridor.

Out back, the man in the cage rattled at the door.

"Sheriff— Sheriff— Babcock—listen . . ."

Babcock turned on his heel. He stuck

his head out of the office door and muttered: "Shut up! I heard yuh!"

The man in the cage clung onto the bars. In a pleading voice he said: "Listen, Babcock. Listen."

The sheriff's heel tapped on the floorboards.

"What the hell to?" he snapped. "Say it. I'm listening!"

The man let go the door with one hand. His feet shuffled. He waved vaguely toward the south, toward the center of town. Night sounds drifted through the little barred window. Hoarse yelling of men carousing. Strident laughter of painted girls. And down the street to the front of the jail came the quick clatter of horses' hoofs. A staccato rattling of trotting hoofs on hard-baked earth that passed on and merged with the human noises.

The man in the cage stood there, looking at the sheriff.

"That!" he said.

"What of it?" Babcock asked.

"Ain't it early? Ain't it early for—that?" The man's hand passed through that little gesture again. His eyes stared straight ahead, wide. Breath gasped, and he clutched at the bars.

"They ain't—ain't plannin' to . . ."

The sheriff's heel came down hard. He took one firm step toward the cage. His hands clenched and the muscles of his shoulders tautened.

"There won't be no lynching party tonight!" he said, slow, measured, tight. "Though God knows . . ." Babcock's voice stuck. A harsh note slipped in: "You earned it. But things are done legal in my county."

The iron door shook with the man's trembling. His voice shook, too.

"I never done it, Matt! You know I couldn't have."

"You were drunk, weren't yuh? And yuh went around saying she'd pay for turning you down, didn't yuh?"

"But Ace went home with me. He'll swear . . ."

"And we'd believe him, I suppose? Yore own brother?"

"I loved her, Matt," the man in the cage sobbed. "I didn't mean what I said that night. I was drunk—and crazy. I loved her. I never killed her!"

"Yes," the sheriff said, cold and bitter. "Sure!"

The iron door creaked. And the two men stood silently tense. One in despair. One in hate. While downtown the revelry went on . . . shouting men, laughing girls.

"Sure!" the sheriff said. He turned and went back into the little office and closed the door. It shut out the sounds of the town and the prisoner, and gave him quiet. He slumped down again in his chair and stared at the photograph.

THE sheriff was still staring at the snapshot of Olgie when another little band of horsemen rattled on down the street. He didn't move. His broad tanned face looked almost stolid in the yellow light. His chin sagged and his big mouth hung half open. Only his eyes, blue and dry, had life. They blinked.

He just sat there, looking kind of dumb, even when Lon Hawkes slid in through the door and clicked it shut behind him. And Hawkes was a big man, bigger than the sheriff. He didn't usually sneak through doors that way.

Lon bent over the desk and whispered hoarsely: "Matt!"

The sheriff looked up, still dumbly open-mouthed, and rubbed his chin with his big hand.

Lon fumbled with the lamp, turned the wick down as far as it would go and still burn. Then he pushed it over in front of the picture so it threw a big square shadow on the front wall and blotted out the two windows.

"Come here, Matt!" Lon tugged at his sleeve. "Something to show yuh, outside," he whispered.

The sheriff stood up and followed him to the window. There they squatted on the floor, with only their eyes above the sill. They looked into the dark

street canopied by a darker, starless sky. There was Meade's store across the way, with one single light burning low, far in the back. Lon pointed up, where four, black second-story windows slept behind the broad veranda roof.

Something glittered up there, shone dully like a raindrop in the light of a straggling ray from the center of town.

"Guns," Lon whispered. "Two of them!"

He slid over and stood up between two of the windows and carefully pulled down the shades from the sides. The dumb expression on the sheriff twisted a bit. He still squatted beside the window ledge.

"Guns? Who?" he asked.

"Steve's brothers. They got a couple of carbines up there." Lon hesitated. "For you!"

The sheriff stood up, walked over to the desk and pushed the lamp away from in front of the girl's photograph.

"Bill an' Ace, huh?" he said.

Lon nodded. "Old man Meade told me they were there. He's out back now, sweatin' behind that lamp, waitin' for them to plug him because he talked."

The sheriff stood looking down at the picture of Olgie.

"Old man Meade, huh?" he said bitterly.

Lon began to make an answer but the sheriff seemed to be waking up. He sighed quiet, put his hands behind his head and stretched. Then he said:

"Don't worry about them Jackson boys. I'll handle them." He added: "What's new at the Silver Dollar?"

Hawkes shook his head; took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Bad stuff, Matt," he said. "Bad!"

"The Long Bar boys just come by, didn't they?" the sheriff asked. "An' I suppose the Valley Syndicate's in, and the Teapot gang?"

"And more, Matt," Lon said. "Just waiting, that's all. Fightin' amongst theirselves. Some want to stay by you—some want to get the lynch over and put Steve danglin' where he belongs.

A good lot are standing up for the law, but it's comin' . . ."

The inactivity faded from the sheriff's face. He smiled determinedly.

"Lon," he said, "you go downtown and help shut up that lynch talk. We can't have Steve hanged without a trial. Law comes first in my office." His voice slid down, grew bitter. "Even in a thing like this!"

Lon nodded his head. He said, "That's right, Matt. I'll do what I can!"

He turned to go. The sheriff said: "Thanks, Lon."

At the door the big boy turned again and looked back into the office. He saw the picture and it reminded him of something.

"Say, Matt. Yuh ain't found Olgie's ring yet, have yuh?"

The sheriff shook his head. He was looking at Lon's vest.

"He must of been mad as hell when he yanked it off of her that way, mustn't he?" Lon asked. "Near pulled half her finger along with it!"

Sheriff Babcock sat down on his desk. His face became very white and his hands clenched together on his knees. A shudder passed through his shoulders and back and his chin sagged again into that dull expression.

"Yeh," he said. "Mad as hell!"

"He must have thrown it somewhere," Lon said.

"That's right," the sheriff answered, stupid. "Must have thrown it somewhere." Then he caught the edge of the desk with his hands and tightened up all of his muscles. It pushed color back into his face and brightened his voice some.

"You better go down there, Lon. You better go right away and shut up this lynch talk. Don't bother about the Jackson boys for a spell. Worry about them later."

Lon Hawkes smiled reassuringly. He said: "We'll handle it. There won't be no hangin' bee!"

The sheriff nodded. Hawkes closed

the door carefully when he went out. But during the moment the door was open sounds drifted in. Men roaring in their cups, women laughing shrilly, and many horses pawing, uneasy, before the hitch racks.

MATT BABCOCK locked the front door of the jail and office combined after Lon had had plenty of time to get down the street. Then he looked around the room. All the shades were down and the lamp was still low.

The sheriff went over to his desk and took an old shirt out of the bottom drawer. He picked up the lamp, twisted the wick up a bit so it would keep on burning, and took a rope down from a peg on the wall. With the lamp in his left hand, and the rope and shirt in his right, he walked down the office to the cage where Steve Jackson was locked up.

Out there you could hear the sounds of the restless cow town. They drifted in like a thin fog through the small barred window. And now and then the heavy crack of a forty-five came in with the human noises. Cow-waddies blasting lead into the sky.

And Steve sagged against the bars of the iron door—waiting.

The sheriff set the lamp down on the floor. He shifted the shirt and rope to his left hand, lethargically fished a bunch of keys out of his Levis pocket. He dangled the keys in front of him, dangled them as he looked broodingly at the man in the cage.

And Steve only sagged more against the bars, his face limp and lifeless. A great purple bruise on his face. One eye swollen. The sheriff had been a bit wild when he went out to bring in the murderer of his girl.

A gust of wind brought up the town-sounds like the roar of surf on sand. A six-gun bit out harmlessly and the lead hissed warning. The sheriff's keys jangled in his hand. And his voice jangled when he talked.

"Want to talk to you, Steve," he said. "Peaceable."

Steve's eyes blinked and he swallowed. But he didn't do anything else. "About this lynching," the sheriff said.

Steve's hands tightened around the bars and he closed his mouth. The iron door rattled in tune with the sheriff's jangling keys.

Babcock said: "They're talking lynch, downtown, Steve. They're going to get you for what you done." The tortured man's breath gasped. "They'll be by soon," the sheriff went on. "And I won't be able to stop them. Too many against us. . . ."

Steve's face was jammed between the bars. The door shook and creaked. He slobbered: "Don't let them, Matt. Don't . . ."

The sheriff's head jerked forward.

"I ought to, damn you!" he snapped.

Steve recoiled. He backed across the little cell, a soft mass of shaking flesh, and stumbled limply over the chair and fell sprawling on the bed. He was trying to talk, but his mumbled words meant nothing and the sheriff, too, seemed to have lost his voice in his anger.

Then the sheriff peered between the iron and growled: "But I ain't going to, as much as I'd like it."

Steve sat up. He said, softly: "You ain't!"

"You knew damned well I wouldn't!" the sheriff said. "There never has been a lynching since I've been the law in this town. And there won't be!"

Steve's voice trembled. "You ain't goin' to let them?"

"You got to play ball with me," the sheriff answered. "You do and you'll get a fair trial. You don't, and . . ." His head nodded back in the direction of town. Steve said nothing. The sheriff went on.

"You willing to play?" he asked.

Steve tried to get up from the bed. His legs bent and wouldn't hold him. He shoved with his hands and wobbled over to the door again.

"I'll do anything," he mumbled.

The sheriff was strained and hard. He stood there for a moment dangling the keys. Then he stuck one in the lock and turned it. The door grated open.

"You sit down there!" He pointed to one end of the bed. Steve sagged down again. The sheriff squatted on the other end. He put the rope and shirt on his knees and took out a forty-five. He laid the gun across the top of the shirt.

"If you try anything phoney they'll get you sure," he said. "The whole county wants your hide."

Steve's face screwed up funny. "I won't do nothing. I'll do anything!"

The sheriff said: "You promise to come back in two weeks and I'll let you go."

Steve acted as if he had a stiff neck and was trying to loosen it up. And he made a lot of queer faces like a girl getting ready to have hysterics.

"Will yuh, Matt?" he sputtered. "Will yuh?"

The sheriff went on in a very dull voice: "We got to make it look real." He stood up and began unhooking his gunbelts. "I think you'll come back," he said. "You know what's best for you."

Steve nodded but didn't say anything. The sheriff took off his leather vest.

"You put on my J. B., Steve. And my chaps and guns and vest. Let the star show. In this light everybody will think you're me."

"Oh hell, Matt!" Steve said.

The sheriff unhitched his batwing chaps.

"We're near the same size, Steve," he said. "You'll look just like me. Then you tie and gag me and lock the door to the coop. And beat it on my horse."

Steve was still sitting there. The sheriff said: "Come on! We got to move fast. And you'd better sock me one on the head so it looks like the real thing!"

STEVE got the idea. He hitched on the wide chaps and hooked the huge star rowels on his boots. He slid into

the calfskin vest with the sheriff's silver badge on it, and hung the red and blue bandanna around his neck. The law's two sixguns clung smoothly to his hips.

Then he tied up Matt, and gagged him. He even socked the sheriff alongside of the ear with the gun barrel and nicked him with the sight so it would bring out some real blood.

"Oh, hell!" he said when he did it. But the blow didn't knock the sheriff out. It only dazed him a little. And even though he couldn't move, and the gag was shoved down tight in his mouth, he looked almost happy.

Steve rolled him against the iron cot. Then he took the keys and locked the door. The softness was all gone from his strong frame.

He put the keys in the office on the table and set the lamp down beside them. Then he glanced one last time down the corridor in the direction of the dark cages.

Steve and the sheriff were just about the same size. The clothes fitted him well, and when he went out the door of the jail with the sheriff's hat tilted over his face, and the sheriff's rowels jingling at his heels, he looked just like him.

Down the street, in front of the Silver Dollar bar, men were milling about on their horses. Other men were banging through the batwing doors, stepping up into the saddles of restless ponies. And one fellow, a big, yellow haired Swede, was bellowing orders to his homemade posse.

Across the street, in the black windows behind the wide porch roof of old man Meade's store, two rifle barrels glinted dully. But Steve didn't know about the rifles, and he paid no attention to the men down the street.

He just walked calmly down the three steps to the sidewalk, and climbed into the saddle of the sheriff's black mare.

One of the rifles across the street cracked into life. The slug sang over Steve's head and skittered into the roof of the jail. Another rifle bit out from

the dark shadows beside the jail. One of the windows of Meade's store crashed in a shower of glass. The second rifle in the store flashed. And the bullet creased over the rump of the sheriff's horse.

The animal snorted, pawed at air. Steve fed it the steel. And a man ran out shouting from behind the jail.

"Beat it!" the man yelled. "We'll get them, Matt." He held a carbine in his hands. Shot as he ran.

One of the rifles in Meade's store slid out of the window and slithered across the porch roof and fell to the ground. It exploded as it hit the board walk, jerked back crazily. The second rifle was shooting wild.

Steve jammed the hooks in deeper, swung around the jail, and hit a high lope for the open country just as Lon Hawkes broke through the doors of Meade's store.

The mounted men in front of the Silver Dollar wheeled around at the sound of the shooting. Someone yelled: "Lynch the woman-killer!"

Someone else raked his horse with his rowels. The big blond Swede belted hoarsely to his cohorts.

The mob broke loose. Hoofs pounded in the sandy street and the whisky-mad self-made "posse" careened up to the jail. Six-guns exploded recklessly in the air. Whiskied voices screeched in movie Injun war-cries.

For a moment the little army hung there. The Swede hollered: "Bring him out, Matt!"

SOMETHING crashed in the General Store. Someone swore. And big Lon's voice boomed out from behind the smashed windows. The mob howled.

Three men slid out of their saddles and held short conference on the jail steps. Then they clumped into the jail. For a moment there was a tight silence broken only by the scrapping in Meade's.

Inside the jail someone said: "The sheriff ain't here!"

The Swede answered: "Who cares? Here's the keys!"

A man with a high pitched voice came back: "He must've been expectin' us."

Outside the mob yowled louder than before: "Bring him out!"

The big Swede jangled the keys as the three men inside clumped back to the cages. It was pitch black in there. They couldn't see anything except the dull glitter of iron. Someone rattled at one of the cage doors.

The leader of the men said: "Come on out, Steve. We're goin' to hang yuh."

But Steve didn't answer.

Then the man with the high voice said: "Which coop's he in, Buck!"

"He must be here!" came the answer. "Someone's moving."

A key scratched in the lock. The iron door rattled open. Then the man with the grating voice let out a squawk: "He's tied up, Buck, an' gagged!"

They fumbled around.

"Wonder what Matt tied him up for?" someone asked.

The mob outside was becoming restless.

"Don't know."

Then the big Swede said: "We'll hang him that way. Won't have to listen to the woman killer yelpin' while his neck is stretchin'."

They dragged him along the hallway. Outside they hung him across a horse. The mob broke into a bedlam. And a minute later the posse was pounding leather for the hills. A swirling, howling, half-wild army venting a blind mad hatred.

* * * * *

Lon Hawkes found what he was looking for just as the sun pushed over the spruce covered hills. There, in a little open place, was the body of a man, still bound and gagged, dangling from a live oak limb.

He climbed out of his saddle and cut

down the body of his sheriff. His hard seamed face showed no surprise. For Steve had come back during the night and surrendered himself again to the law. He had heard of the lynching.

Lon took off the gag first and shuddered as he did it. Then he untied the ropes and tried to straighten the body out. It was stiff and he couldn't do it. He shook his head, heaved the corpse across his saddle.

Something bright flashed in the morning sun. It bounced down the side

of the dun horse and fell sparkling to the ground. Lon leaned over to pick it up. His body straightened, stiff and hard.

It was a ring. The diamond ring. Inside it was engraved in the gold "M. B. to O. M." And for the first time in two fast days Lon remembered something Olgie had said to him once recently:

"I don't know what to do, Lon. Matt Babcock's so jealous of Steve and me. . . . I'm afraid!"



FEAST FOR BIG BRAVES

AMONG the Indians of the Corn-Belt region, there is a curious survival of a very ancient custom called the "green corn dances." These dances were at one time very wide-spread through the plains, but now only a small group of Poncas, Otoes, and Pawnees preserve the tradition.

The ceremony is continued in practically the same manner as when the white man had not yet penetrated the country. When the green corn reaches the roasting-ear stage, the rites begin. After it is obvious that famine during the next winter is not to be feared, the chieftains of the different tribes set a date for the celebration. If they want to begin in a month, they bind bundles together of thirty sticks each, and send them by swift runners to all the village chieftains. These lesser dignitaries throw away one stick each day, amid great ceremony, to keep track of the time, and then gather their people together and travel to the tribal meeting place.

The initial feast, and the accompanying stomp dances, usually last three days. After that, various herbs are boiled overnight, and for three days and nights the braves drink this concoction, dancing furiously all the time, while the squaws and children sit in the middle of the circle without food or drink.

When this ceremony is completed, tom-toms rumble, and the whole gathering dances and feasts extravagantly on the new corn. When everyone has eaten until his stomach is like a board, and has crawled off behind the tepees to sleep it off, the yearly celebration comes to an end. And thus, in a far-off corner of Oklahoma the descendants of the first Americans still live in accord with traditions that were old when Columbus landed at Hispaniola.

THE CRIMSON PARROT



By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

Author of "The Holy Devil," "Hole in the Wall," etc.

Born under an evil star, squalid, malignant,—that was Port McCoy, where Johnny-Be-Blowed dropped anchor to keep a knife-and-bullet tryst.



TROPICAL dawn was three hours away. In the Bar of the Crimson Parrot a bleary-eyed man pounded discordantly on the scarred piano. A yellow girl was dancing and shrieking an obscene song as she danced. Smoke hung like a blue fog beneath the grass roof. Faces peered through the haze—black faces, brown, white, yellow.

Outside, in the Street of the Seven Little Sins, men shouted drunkenly. A tinny gramophone blared. A half-caste woman laughed. A half a dozen sailors quarreled with harsh, profane voices. On the long spit, which ran out into the muddy river, a dog howled frantically at the moon.

Sebastian Kay unbolted the door which was hidden behind the faded curtain at the back of the Crimson Parrot. Sebastian Kay whistled softly as his fat fingers unfastened the lock and slid back the heavy iron bar. Behind him, Lonnie Gee hung limply in the arms

of the two Chinos who did Sebastian Kay's bidding.

In Port McCoy it was said that the road to hell began just beyond that door. That was the thing men whispered, but no man knew the truth. Men who went into that small room at the back of the Bar of the Crimson Parrot—went in between the two Chinos who obeyed the commands of Sebastian Kay—did not return to tell what they had seen.

The muddy putrid river could have told, but the river chuckled obscenely to itself and kept its peace. The river cared nothing for that *other* door in the back room of Sebastian Kay's bar. The river cared nothing that the *other* door should open now and again and spew a lifeless huddle of flesh down into its thick and gurgling waters. The river kept its secrets well.

Sebastian Kay lighted the oil lamp which hung from a low rafter. The two Chinos placed Lonnie Gee's slack body in a heavy, oddly constructed chair. They fastened straps about Lon-

nie Gee's ankles and wrists. They ran a light chain about Lonnie Gee's throat, and hooked its end at the back of the chair top.

It was hot in the small room. Drops of sweat streamed down Lonnie Gee's pallid face as his staring eyes watched Sebastian Kay. The music, in the big room behind the door, thudded faintly on the stinking air. The oil lamp swung gently back and forth, and its yellow light threw grotesque and sinister shadows behind Sebastian Kay and the two Chinos who waited patiently.

Sebastian Kay said softly, "These ees good, eh? Now we weel have a long talk, my frien', an' you weel tell Sebastian Kay many theengs, eh? Yess!"

Lonnie Gee's teeth chattered with spasmodic clicks. He jerked at the straps which bit into his wrists. Sebastian Kay smiled mirthlessly, his white teeth gleaming through thick lips as he rocked back and forth in front of the doomed man. Sebastian Kay was big. His chest bulged his soiled white shirt. As he folded his arms, the muscles coiled and rippled like steel snakes beneath the yellow tinged skin.

LONNIE GEE tried twice to speak but his voice was only a rasping croak. He moistened his lips with his tongue. His pale eyes darted back and forth across the small room. They rested at last on the square trap cut into the floor behind Sebastian Kay. For a moment Lonnie Gee looked, then his fingers plucked frantically at the straps while the blood receded leaving his face the color of mottled putty.

"I didn't cross you, Sebastian! My God! I wouldn't lie to you! *You* know I wouldn't lie to you!"

The big man lifted his hand with a deprecating gesture. When he spoke his voice was soft, sinister—it was like the purr of a crouching jungle cat. The fear deepened in Lonnie Gee's eyes.

"Thees man, Pearl Jeem, he ees dead, no? Those box, wheech Pearl Jeem ees keep een hees house, ees gone, eh?

Pairhaps you hide those box, eh? Pairhaps you theenk to fool Sebastian Kay, no?"

"No! No!! I swear to you, Sebastian. I never saw no box. I killed him, but the box was gone!"

Sebastian Kay stepped a little to one side. In spite of his bulk he moved with the smooth noiselessness of a huge cat. His lips still twisted in their mirthless grin, but his eyes were like polished and evil bits of agate.

"Maybe eet ees hard for you to remembair, eh? Foo Gong!"

One of the Chinos glided forward silently. The other stooped over the scarlet glow of the small brazier which smoked in a corner of the smelly room. Tiny tongues of flame leaped up as the crouching man stirred the coals.

"Feex hees feet, Foo Gong. Yess! Eet ees hard for thees, our so good frien', to remembair."

The Chino nodded without emotion. With quick hard fingers, he unfastened the straps about Lonnie Gee's ankles, raised the legs of the helpless man, and slipped the straps through two rings set in the smooth post which stood in front of the big chair. Lonnie Gee screamed once as the straps tightened again. The second Chino jammed a stick between his teeth, secured it with a turn of cord. Lonnie struggled futilely.

Sebastian Kay said, "Eet ees not good to forget weeth me, my vairy good frien'. Take off hees shoes, Foo Gong!"

The Chino stripped Lonnie Gee's shoes from his feet and tossed them into the corner of the stinking room. The smelly lamp had stopped its gentle swing. From a crack in the floor a cockroach peered at the men with beady eyes, then scuttled to safety across the room. A woman was singing on the other side of the door—singing in a hoarse, cracked voice. Beneath the floor of the little room at the back of the Bar of the Crimson Parrot the river gurgled with sinister mirth.

"Pairhaps now you weel remembair,

my vairy good frien'. Breeng thee iron now, Ah Moon!"

Lonnie Gee's body twitched spasmodically for a moment. The Chino slithered forward with the gleaming iron, a rag of canvas wrapped about his hand and wrist to fend off the heat. Lonnie Gee's fascinated eyes watched the glowing cherry of the point.

"Once, Ah Moon! Once, across the bottom. So!"

"Ahhhh! Ahhhh! Ahh! Ahh!"

Lonnie Gee's voice was strangled in his throat. The gag stifled his screams. Great drops of sweat suddenly beaded his forehead with a glistening coat. Sebastian Kay's lips lifted cruelly. At a nod from him, Foo Gong loosened the cord which held the stick between the tortured man's jaws. The air was sickening with the stench of burned flesh.

Lonnie Gee's voice broke in his throat. His eyes were hideous with stark terror. "I'll tell! I'll tell! Don't let that yellow devil touch me with that iron again! Oh God, I'll tell! Keep him away, Sebastian!"

THE big man snapped a curt command and Ah Moon held the smoking iron in front of Lonnie Gee's face. For an instant the night was quiet—heavy with an ominous hush.

"Now you remembair bettair, eh? What do you remembair, my so good frien'?"

Lonnie Gee wet his parched lips with his tongue. His eyes darted around the narrow room and then rested on the red hot iron again. There was an expression of dull hopelessness on the man's narrow room and then rested on the redman. He knew it now.

"I went up to Jim's like you said, Sebastian." Lonnie Gee's voice was flat and emotionless. "That was last night. He was alone. I stuck a knife between his shoulder blades and he died without a squawk. I was lookin' for the box when the girl came in."

Foo Gong stirred the coals in the brazier again. He added a handful of

fuel from a sack on the floor. The red flame danced wickedly on the drab walls of the room. Sebastian Kay was rocking slowly back and forth on the balls of his feet. His heavy face was expressionless now. Only his cruel eyes glowed darkly in the yellow light of the oil lamp.

"She started to scream and I hit her. I knocked her down but she got to her knees and started to pray. Then I hit her again and she fell over. I seen the box in Jim's bed and I grabbed it and started to run. It was heavy as hell—I . . ."

The man's voice died in a husky rattle. His fingers clawed frantically at the wooden arms of the chair. With a slow and deliberate motion. Sebastian Kay stretched out his great arm. His fingers clamped on Lonnie Gee's ear. He jerked. The tortured man screamed again—once. The side of his face was crimson!

"You do not remembair, eh? Have a care or Sebastian Kay weel grow angree weeth you. Yess! Thee chest?"

"I—hid—it. I—buried—it—by the big palm—by the trail, damn you!"

Sebastian Kay smiled frostily and recrossed his arms. Behind the chair the two Chinos stood, and their yellow faces impassive, uninterested. They were Sebastian Kay's men. They did only Sebastian Kay's bidding.

"Enough! I am through weeth thees fool. Foo Gong, take heem away, eh? Yess!"

The Chino nodded. A long naked blade flashed in his hand. Ah Moon was kneeling, fumbling with the bar of the door which led into the river. When he lifted it, the moist fecund stench of the water swirled upward.

Lonnie Gee screamed as the knife flashed home. His scream changed to a gurgling rattle in his throat as the life went out of him. There was a gentle splash. Then Ah Moon knelt once more while he fastened the gate which had opened the road to hell for many in Port McCoy.

DAWN had just broken as Johnny-Be-Blowed walked up the narrow path which led to Pearl Jim's lonesome house. The early morning was almost cool. The wind from the sea was sweet and clean on the big man's face.

Johnny-Be-Blowed was not old, but his face was lined deeply and his eyes were incredibly ancient. The sun glinted on his copper-colored hair; it touched the red stubble of beard on his lean cheeks, accentuated the watchful hardness of his amber-shaded eyes. One hand was thrust into the pocket of his worn canvas trousers. The ragged cotton singlet which he wore was startlingly white against the brown swell of his chest and shoulders.

Once Johnny-Be-Blowed had been known as John Kane, but that was ten years ago—a long time in the Islands. Now he was the master of the *Hester*, and a hunted man. In Sydney they would pay a thousand pounds gold for the head of Johnny-Be-Blowed, but those who had thought to profit by his death had found treachery a dear thing. They had not died comfortably.

Pearl Jim's house stood beneath a clump of mangy palms a quarter of a mile back from the foreshore. Johnny-Be-Blowed stopped for a moment as he came to the veranda. Behind him, along the sand and a thousand yards away, Port McCoy lay quietly in the glaring rays of the sun. Johnny-Be-Blowed had no love for Port McCoy.

He kicked open the flimsy screen and entered the dim coolness of the house. It was quiet. At the end of the hall a half-open door led to Jim's bedroom. Johnny-Be-Blowed strode forward impatiently. Three weeks before, Jim had sent word for him to come. Now he wanted to finish the business and be away from Port McCoy again.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, his eyes blinking in the dim light. The dead man in front of him was Pearl Jim. The old man lay on his back, his arms outflung. From the stained bosom of his shirt protruded the bone

handle of a knife. The chair, in which he had been sitting, was overturned and one of its legs was splintered. Outside the window, which opened toward the lagoon, Pearl Jim's monkey jerked at its chain and chattered angrily.

Johnny-Be-Blowed stepped inside the door. At first he hadn't seen the crumpled figure lying on Pearl Jim's bed. As the man watched, the figure stirred, sat up. It was a girl.

She said in a muffled voice, "Don't move. I'll shoot!"

Johnny-Be-Blowed thrust his thumbs into the broad leather belt and stared sardonically at the speaker. He could see her plainly now. She was young, he thought—nineteen, maybe. Pretty, in a way. There was a livid bruise on one side of her face and a trace of blood on her lips. The heavy automatic trembled in her hand.

"Put down that gun, sister."

THE big man's voice was quiet, emotionless. He walked slowly toward the girl, his amber eyes watchful. She watched him come with a sort of desperate indecision in her face. He reached out a big hand and took the gun from her trembling fingers. She didn't move as he placed the gun on the table and bent over the still figure on the floor.

"Who did old Jim in, sister?"

"I—don't know."

She spoke with an effort. After a minute she got up and walked slowly to the window where the monkey still chattered at the end of its chain. Johnny-Be-Blowed saw that she was tall, slender—prettier than he had thought at first. Then he forgot her as he bent over the old man.

He lifted what was left of Pearl Jim and eased him onto the tumbled cot where the girl had sat. Once he swore indifferently under his breath. For a moment he stood looking down at the dead man. In the eight years since he had become Johnny-Be-Blowed, the master of the *Hester* had seen death too

many times to be greatly moved by it. He had wanted to talk to old Pearl Jim, but Jim was dead. That was that! It was inconvenient—nothing more. Johnny-Be-Blowed pulled a sheet over the old man's still form and turned back to the girl.

"Who did it, sister?" he asked again.

The girl turned, stumbled. Johnny-Be-Blowed caught her by the arms, kicked a chair about and lowered her into it. With deliberate fingers he jerked open the collar of the man's shirt which she wore, then stepped to where a cupboard had been built into the wall. The neck of a bottle clinked on glass.

"Drink this, sister." The big man's voice was cold, indifferent. "Drink it, I tell you!"

He forced the glass into her hand. A sudden breeze whipped along the beach, rustling the dry fans of the palms outside the house, stirring the curtains at the window. The girl coughed hoarsely. Some of the whiskey trickled from her lips to the floor as she placed the glass on the table.

"What's your name, sister?"

"Doris Landon," she answered in a lifeless voice. Johnny-Be-Blowed stared at her for a moment with his hard eyes. Then he fumbled for his pipe, stuffed it with rank tobacco. The flare of the match lit up his dark unhandsome face with the copper stubble of beard on his lean cheeks.

"What are you doing in this sink hole, sister? You don't belong in Port McCoy."

"I came by steamer the day before yesterday." The girl pushed the short curly hair back from her forehead wearily. Once she glanced at the still, sheet-covered form on the bed and her eyes clouded for an instant.

"You better have gone away on that same steamer," said Johnny-Be-Blowed shortly. "Where's your folks? You got anybody to look after you, sister?"

She shook her head slowly and, once again, her eyes wandered to the tumbled cot. Johnny-Be-Blowed's hard face

was turned toward the window. Three-quarters of a mile away, along the trail which led across the sand, three men were coming from Port McCoy.

The girl said, "I have no one—now."

JOHNNY-BE-BLOWED smoked for a long minute, his eyes watching the three who came along the sand. Then he turned, splashed liquor into a glass, and drained it. His voice was harsh and unfeeling when he spoke again.

"Then you've come to a damned poor place, sister! Where'd you come from—the States? I thought so. Why didn't you stay there? I've seen your kind before!" The big man's voice was bitter and sardonic, but his face did not lose its hard expressionlessness—his eyes did not leave the three men who tramped over the sand a half a mile away.

"You come out here to find romance. Adventure. Bah! I'll tell you what you'll find! Three months from now you'll be a drab and some stinking half-caste will be your owner! Do you understand that? You'll not be the first who's come to that in Port McCoy."

The monkey shrilled viciously. Over the thatched roof of Pearl Jim's house the palm fronds scraped together with a dry harsh sound. The girl's face hardened. A tinge of color crept into her cheeks at the big man's words, but Johnny-Be-Blowed didn't notice. He went on.

"I came down here to see old Jim, sister," he went on softly. "I find that he is dead. What do you know about it?"

The girl reached for the nearly empty glass which stood on the table. She lifted it to her lips, drained the rest of the raw whiskey. When she started to speak there was a metallic hardness in her voice which matched that of the big man in front of her.

"I told you that I didn't know," she said shortly. "It happened last night. I came in and—he was lying there on the floor. There was another man here

—a tall, white faced man. He was looking for something. Then he straightened up and saw me.”

The girl's eyes darkened suddenly, and Johnny-Be-Blowed saw that she was trembling with anger.

“He hit me—twice. Then I saw him grab the thing he had been looking for, and run out into the night. After that I can't remember anything more.”

“Ah!” The big man's voice was dangerously quiet. “He hit you, eh?”

“Twice.”

BLUE tobacco smoke eddied around the big man's head. The yellow points in his eyes glowed with bright anger as he slowly stood up. The girl watched him dully.

“What was this fellow looking for, girl? You know, do you?”

“Yes,” answered the girl. “I know. It was the chest.”

“The chest?”

“Pearl Jim's copper chest,” explained the woman in her dispassionate voice. “My father's chest.”

Johnny-Be-Blowed looked at her for a long minute and there was a baffled expression in his eyes. He knocked his hot pipe bowl against the table, stepped on the smouldering remains of the tobacco. The three men, coming from Port McCoy, were less than a hundred yards away now. He saw that two of them were Chinos. The third was a huge white man with a soiled pith helmet pulled forward over his face.

“Hmm,” said Johnny-Be-Blowed after a long minute. “Pearl Jim's daughter, eh? I might have known it,” he added shortly.

The girl nodded her head indifferently. “It doesn't matter,” she said slowly as she touched the ugly bruise which disfigured the side of her face.

“You're a fool, girl. Your father was a fool—but he did me a good turn once. I'll not leave his daughter to rot in Port McCoy.”

“It doesn't matter,” the girl answered again.

Sudden footsteps clattered on the porch outside the window. Johnny-Be-Blowed slid to his feet with a soft and noiseless stride. All at once his face had become expressionless, as hard as though it had been chopped from flinty rock. He moved in front of the girl.

Boards creaked in the dark hallway. Outside, the chained monkey chattered in a spasm of fear. His screams stopped suddenly as though they had been choked off by vicious fingers.

“Open thees door!”

Sebastian Kay's voice purred with sinister gentleness from the gloomy hall. The door crashed back on its hinges under the weight of his kick. He stood just inside the door and looked at Johnny-Be-Blowed with insolent eyes. Behind him peered the yellow faces of the two Chinos who did his bidding.

He said, “Thees vary beautiful young lady has thee veeseetor, no? Pairhaps Sebastian Kay he ees not wanted? Yess?”

Johnny-Be-Blowed stood, feet apart, thumbs hooked in his belt as he stared at the big man in front of him. Sebastian Kay was big—so big that Johnny-Be-Blowed looked small beside him. He was smiling, his white and even teeth showing through his fat lips.

“Who are *you*, fellow?”

Johnny-Be-Blowed's voice was gentle, polite almost, but the amber points at the back of his eyes glowed with a sinister warning. Sebastian Kay moved forward a half a dozen short steps until he stood in front of the other.

“Ah! Eet ees that you are eenqueesiteeve, my frien'. Now eet ees bad to be eenqueesiteeve een Port McCoy!”

SUDDENLY Sebastian's small pig-like eyes shifted and fastened themselves on the girl behind Johnny-Be-Blowed. He smiled and there was a nasty curl to his lips as he appraised her with his gaze. Behind him the two Chinos stood, quietly watchful. Johnny-Be-Blowed's voice crackled like a whip-lash.

"Speak your piece, fellow! Then get out. Or shall I kick you out?"

Sebastian Kay turned slowly. He looked at the man in front of him with amused insolence in his eyes. Then he spat—spat with a soft, insulting contempt.

"Ah? Eet ees that you would keeck Sebastian Kay, no?"

His hand flashed up with the deadly suddenness of a striking rattlesnake. Sunlight sparkled on the wicked whiteness of the blade which drove toward Johnny-Be-Blowed's throat, but it was too slow. For a split second Johnny-Be-Blowed had set himself and then his right arm smashed at the other's heart with a pile driver blow.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The knife clattered against the wall. Sebastian Kay stumbled forward, his face greying as he fought to drive back the white mists of the death which was hovering toward him. That had been a terrible blow, a blow which would have killed a lesser man where he stood.

Knives flashed in the hands of the two Chinos as Johnny-Be-Blowed whirled toward them. Foo Gong's hand darted backward for the throw, but the big man was on him before he could send the steel hurtling forward. Johnny-Be-Blowed's left fist crashed into his face and he stumbled rapidly backward into the wall. He dropped like an empty meal bag. The girl screamed.

"Behind you! Watch behind you!"

Ah Moon crouched, waiting, his knife held before him as he watched for his chance to make that quick twisting thrust upward which would end the fight. There was a grim smile on the big man's lips as he slid forward. He had not been Johnny-Be-Blowed for eight years for nothing. He feinted with his left hand and, as the flickering knife darted after the feint, he hurled himself forward. The girl screamed again, agonized terror in her voice.

"Ahhh. . . . God!"

Sebastian Kay had painfully clawed himself upright behind Johnny-Be-

Blowed's back. His yellow fingers closed about the neck of the whiskey bottle on the table. For a second he steadied himself, his eyes watching the swaying forms in front of him. Then he struck.

Johnny-Be-Blowed's knees sagged under him. The Chino sprang free with a grunt of satisfaction. As the white man stumbled forward, the knife flashed down—once—twice.

For an instant Johnny-Be-Blowed fought to hold his balance, then he slumped forward on his face. A splotch of crimson began to dye the back of his torn cotton singlet.

IT was night when Johnny-Be-Blowed regained consciousness. His head ached fiercely. It seemed to him that a million devils were trying to tear his brain apart with red hot hooks. The window, which faced toward the lagoon, was a square of white moonlight. The hot air of the room was alive with the drone of a horde of insects.

Johnny-Be-Blowed spat and struggled to sit up. A firm hand caught his shoulder, steadied it. A tin cup was jammed against his lips. He swore under his breath at the cold pain which was stabbing itself through his back.

A lazy voice said, "Easy does it. Steady, ho—there!"

The raw liquor drove a flood of hot life back through the big man's veins. He shook his head violently and it began to clear. Another man—a man who was little more than a boy—was squatting in front of him with the tin cup in his hand. Johnny-Be-Blowed could see him clearly in the moonlight. He was young, smooth-faced, handsome with an almost feminine prettiness—but it was his eyes which held Johnny-Be-Blowed's attention. They were gray and as hard as points of case-hardened steel as they watched from the soft brownness of the other's face. A cartridge-studded belt slanted across the stranger's hips. A holstered automatic scraped against the floor as he moved.

Johnny-Be-Blowed reached for the tin pannikin again and drained it slowly. He raised his hand, and his fingers explored the four-inch gash which ran across his scalp above his left ear. The other watched interestedly. Johnny-Be-Blowed swore softly under his breath, then threw back his head and laughed with a mirthless harshness.

"Done in, by God!" With a tremendous effort he hauled himself to his feet and glared down at the man in front of him. "Done in by a stinking half-breed and a couple of yellow sand rats! Nice, isn't it? Bah!"

The other grinned pleasantly. He straddled a chair and began to roll a cigaret between his slim fingers. He finished it with a dexterous twist and snapped a match on his thumb nail. He was tall and blonde, his pale eyebrows giving his face an expression of perpetual wonder as though he was constantly being surprised at what he saw around him. Only his eyes gave the lie to the softness of his face for they were hard, watchful, unchanging.

"No," he answered coolly. "You'll live to stretch a rope's end yet, Red, worse luck. Who carved you up, and why?"

FOR a moment Johnny-Be-Blowed stared at the stranger angrily, but the latter's indifferent grin did not change. He blew twin jets of blue smoke from his finely-chiseled nostrils and jerked his left hand in a deprecating gesture.

"No offense, Red. I happened by and found you pretty well sliced up. Just idle curiosity, Red. Wondered why a man would get sliced up in a nice quiet place like Port McCoy, that's all."

Johnny-Be-Blowed stared again in silence. His scarred and lined face had taken on its habitual, expressionless immobility. The smear of dried blood on the red stubble of his cheeks was dark in the moonlight.

He spoke at last.

"What's your name, kid?"

The other snapped a match stick between his slender fingers, tossed the broken bits to the littered floor. With a lazy gesture he got to his feet, his thumbs hooked in the cartridge-studded belt.

"Down south they call me the Pitcairn Kid, Red. Maybe you don't like it?"

The yellow points of light glowed at the back of Johnny-Be-Blowed's eyes. His voice was monotonous and harsh as he spoke.

"I don't like nicknames, Kid. Like 'Red,' for instance. Understand? Johnny-Be-Blowed will do for a name. Don't forget that again, Kid!"

A curious look of respect came into the Pitcairn Kid's hard eyes. He sat down in the chair again while his fingers fumbled for the tobacco sack. Johnny-Be-Blowed poured more liquor into the tin pannikin.

"Ah," the Pitcairn Kid said softly. "Sorry. No offense. I've heard of you, Johnny-Be-Blowed. At Suva they call you the blackest devil between Lord Howe and the Straits Settlements!"

Johnny-Be-Blowed lifted the pannikin to his lips and drained it. The tin crashed against the wall, clattered to the floor.

"They don't lie! Pull a sheet off that bed, mister. You're going to do a little doctoring. I've got a job or two to do tonight!"

The Pitcairn Kid did not move for a long minute. Then he stood up slowly. When he spoke there was a curious respect in his drawling voice.

"I'd—like to cut myself in on this deal, Johnny," he said quietly.

The Kid washed the wounds in Johnny-Be-Blowed's back with whiskey from the black-labeled bottle. He worked quickly with hard sure fingers as he bandaged with strips torn from a sheet of the dead Pearl Jim's bed. The lamp flickered and smoked. A mile away, in Port McCoy, the evening revelry was in full blast again.

"An inch farther down and they'd

be planting you in a hole in the sand, Johnny. As it is you've got nothing worse than a slit through a couple of muscles."

Johnny - Be - Blowed grunted and puffed slowly at his black pipe while he stared at the patch of moonlight on the littered floor.

"I'll not die under a Chino's filthy knife," he promised grimly.

THE Kid yanked the last knot tight and kicked the tin basin, which he had been using, out of his way. "Neat job," he commented critically. "You said it was a chest—a copper chest they were after?"

Johnny-Be-Blowed jerked his head impatiently as he got to his feet.

"How in hell do I know what they were after? I told you Jim sent me a letter asking me to come down. I came and found him dead and that fool girl was blatting about a chest. That's all I know! I butted in where I had no business, and got a knife slipped into me. Now I'm making it my business to butt in again—and, when I'm through, there'll be three more yellow rats started on their way to hell. Is that clear, mister?"

The Pitcairn Kid grinned happily as he hitched at the heavy belt about his waist.

"Now that would be right interesting," he said in his soft even voice. "I knew last night that I was going to enjoy this place."

Johnny-Be-Blowed did not reply. He had yanked open the cupboard door. After a moment he straightened and laid a black automatic on the table beside the lamp. The Kid watched for a moment as the older man slipped bright brass cartridges into a spare clip, then he walked swiftly to where a double-barreled shotgun stood in one corner. He broke it and squinted critically.

"Hmm. Nice! Now I wonder if a man might find a shell or two for this. Always had a fondness for a shotgun in an argument."

He rummaged in the cupboard and reappeared with two square boxes in his hands. Johnny-Be-Blowed suddenly paused for a moment. In the yellow lamp light his face looked older, more lined. There was an odd weariness in his voice.

"Mister, there's going to be men killed tonight. That's not strange in Port McCoy. You're young and it's not your fight. Keep out of it. They'll hang you tomorrow morning if you're still in Port McCoy!"

"Right," said the Pitcairn Kid carelessly. He stuffed two buckshot-loaded shells into the breech of the shotgun. The room stank with the smell of burned kerosene. A cloud of insects hummed about the smoking lamp.

"You'll either go out on the *Hester* on tomorrow morning's tide or they'll hang you," Johnny-Be-Blowed repeated. "Do you know what it means to go out on the *Hester*, mister? I'll tell you!"

The big man's voice was suddenly as harsh and brittle as the jagged edge of a broken bottle.

"It means that you're a hunted man, a man with a price on your head! It means that you'll never know what peace, security, happiness means again! It means that men will hunt you down like a dog, that you'll walk with treachery for a shadow, that you'll sleep with hate for a bedfellow. It means that you'll play against Death with your life in the gamble—and, from start to finish, the game will be crooked and the deck stacked! You can't win. You'll kick your toes at the end of a noose for the finish! Do you understand? Damn you, do you understand?"

"Sure," said the Pitcairn Kid. "I understand. Let's go!"

He turned on his heel and stepped out into the white moonlight with the shotgun tucked under his arm. After a minute Johnny-Be-Blowed followed.

THE bar of the Crimson Parrot was crowded. Sebastian Kay stood at the end of the long bar for a moment,

his eyes watching the dancers who reeled and shouted in front of him. A drunken Kanaka stumbled and fell. He lay on his face in the middle of the floor while the dancers kicked at him as they passed. A woman, her voice hoarse with cigarets and whiskey, laughed shrilly.

After a moment Sebastian Kay walked slowly toward the door at the far end of the long room. Foo Gong, his yellow face swollen and cut, stood impassively in front of the faded curtain. Sebastian Kay paused.

"You weel see that I am not deestudbed, eh? Yess! I shall be deespleased eef I should be deesturbed."

Foo Gong nodded silently. Sebastian Kay unbarred the door, swung it wide, disappeared within. As the door closed again, Foo Gong squatted on his heels, his arms folded across his chest. Across the big hall, near the door which opened into the Street of the Seven Little Sins, Ah Moon watched. They were Sebastian Kay's men.

The hanging lamp, in the little room over the river, sputtered and smoked as Sebastian Kay stood just inside the door and looked at the chair. The girl was there, her wrists circled by the black straps, her loosened hair flooded about her shoulders. Sebastian Kay walked forward and stood facing her. His thick lips were smiling.

"Sebastian Kay, he ees vairy happee that you are a guest of hees so mean house, leetle dove. Yess! He ees vairy happee."

The girl had not lifted her head. If she heard him speak she gave no sign. Except for the gentle rise and fall of her breast she might have been already dead. One sleeve of the shirt which she wore had been torn away leaving her arm bare to the shoulder. There were four black marks on its whiteness—the print of brutal fingers.

"Pairhaps the so beautiful *señorita* sleeps," Sebastian's voice purred on. "Pairhaps she does not hear, eh?"

He stretched out his hand with a lazy gesture and twisted his fingers in a

strand of the loose hair. He jerked. The girl moaned softly, her face stark deadly white.

"Ah! You hear, eh? Yess!"

"I hear you," she replied dully.

THE mocking smile was suddenly wiped from Sebastian Kay's face. He reached out his hand, jerked the girl's chin up so that she was forced to meet his stare. In its corner, the brazier glowed redly as the charcoal burned.

"You weel leesten to me, no? Eet would be vairy regrettable eef an accident should happen. Yess!"

"I don't know—what you mean."

The girl's voice faltered as she looked at the sneering face above her, but her eyes were steady. Sebastian's fingers jerked her head cruelly.

"Where ees thee box? Where ees thee copper box wheech was een thee house of Pearl Jeem?"

"I've told you—before—I don't know. The white faced man took it—after he had—killed . . ."

Sebastian's face was black and knotted with anger as he jerked his hand away and stepped back. The room was hot and it was hard to breathe. Drops of beaded perspiration stood out on the girl's white forehead. Beneath the floor, the river gurgled with Satanic anticipation.

"You leesten to me, you she-snake!" The big man's voice rose with violent anger. "You lie, eh? I know that you lie! But you shall lie no longer. I, Sebastian Kay, tell you that you shall lie no longer! There are ways to stop lying, eh? Where ees thee chest?"

"I—don't know."

"Once more I shall ask you!" The big man whirled with a cat-like gesture and stooped over the glowing brazier. When he straightened he held an iron rod whose end glowed with a sinister redness. The fingers of his left hand fastened on the girl's bare shoulder.

"Once more I shall ask you, eh? Then I shall mark you so—and so!"

He gestured significantly with the red-hot iron.

"Ahh! You weel tell me then. And after you have told, I weel take you out there," he jerked his head toward the door which opened into the bar of the Crimson Parrot, "and I weel sell you to thee drunken fool who weel bid thee highest, eh? That weel be vairy fonny. Yess! Where ees thee chest, leetle dove?"

The girl's self-control gave way. She screamed wildly as her terror-mad eyes followed the movement of the red-hot iron.

"I don't know! Oh, God! I don't know!"

Sebastian Kay swore viciously. His fingers reached for the open collar of her torn shirt. They twisted cruelly in the cloth. The iron touched a strand of the girl's hair and the hot air reeked with the burned odor.

JOHNNY-BE-BLOWED, with the Pitcairn Kid at his shoulder, stood just inside the door of the Bar of the Crimson Parrot. The big man blinked in the yellow lamplight as his hard eyes traveled swiftly over the crowd. The Pitcairn Kid lounged against the door jamb, his shotgun held carelessly in the crook of his arm.

Ah Moon saw, and there was sudden gleam of fear in his slanting eyes. Hidden by the end of the long bar, he slipped to his feet and darted through the crowd of milling dancers. At the back of the long room, and not far from where Foo Gong crouched beside the faded curtain, four men sat at a round table with glasses and bottles in front of them.

They were wharf rats, scum, mean men with faces scarred and marked by much evil. They, too, did the bidding of Sebastian Kay. Foo Gong whispered a warning in his stilted precise English.

"The big man coming from the door—the red-haired one! Sebastian Kay will pay well if he is—hurt."

The leader, a big negro with a white

scar running from eyebrow to chin across his ebony face, nodded and grinned. Ah Moon slipped away.

Johnny-Be-Blowed was coming across the crowded floor shoving an ungentle way through the milling dancers. A half-drunken pearler swore hoarsely as he was shouldered aside.

"You ugly baboon! Y'watch yer step before—"

Johnny-Be-Blowed caught him with a backhanded slap which tumbled him in a heap a dozen feet away. The cheap music stopped suddenly in the middle of a chord. The smoke grimed air had become tense and electric. At their table the four men waited, their eyes on the approaching pair.

Johnny-Be-Blowed and the Pitcairn Kid were a half a dozen feet away when it started. The big negro threw with a vicious overhand swing, but he had thrown a second too soon. The bottle flashed through the air, grazing Johnny-Be-Blowed's temple, and caught one of the dancing girls in the forehead. She screamed as she dropped. Knives flashed with sinister light as the four leaped forward.

The big hall thundered with sudden uproar. Johnny-Be-Blowed stabbed at the big negro's face with iron-hard knuckles which cut to the bone. The man went down, his eyes glazing even as he fell. A gun roared with a nasty *crack* and then Johnny-Be-Blowed heard the hoarse bellow of the Pitcairn Kid's shotgun as the latter went into action.

The girl, who had been hit by the flying bottle, was screaming hoarsely. A light flickered and went out leaving the end of the hall in growing shadow. A rat-faced youth tried to hurl a knife, but the shotgun thundered again and the man died clutching at his throat.

Another man went down as the Pitcairn Kid fired from the hip. Johnny-Be-Blowed whirled, his eyes searching. The last of the four men who had sat at the table darted into the crowd, his face white with the fear of death. The Pitcairn Kid laughed and stuffed fresh

shells into the smoking breech of his shotgun.

The two Chinos stood by the faded curtain, stunned by the whirlwind of death which had swept down on them. Johnny-Be-Blowed's face was as grim and hard as chiseled flint as he looked. Deliberately his hand dropped to the gun at his hip. It flamed twice, the reports blending into a single explosion. In the crowd a man cried out in shrill terror. The two Chinos dropped against the wall.

"Watch this pack of rats, Kid," snapped Johnny-Be-Blowed harshly. "If they make a move, break them wide open!"

"Right!" The Kid's voice was cool, amused. The twin mouths of his gun swung slowly back and forth as he watched.

JOHNNY-BE-BLOWED ripped aside the faded curtain which hid the door. The heavy brass lock hung open from its staple, but the door was latched from within as the big man tried it cautiously. He thrust his automatic into its holster and stepped back a pace. The room had grown quiet with a deathly stillness.

Suddenly, from behind that sinister door, a woman screamed once—then again. The thick wood muffled it, but it was unmistakable—the terrible, chilling cry of a woman who had been confronted with unbearable horror.

The door splintered into match wood under the driving smash of Johnny-Be-Blowed's shoulder. A wave of hot and stinking air struck his face as he crouched inside the room. What he saw sent cold fury blazing into his eyes.

The girl lay in the chair, her head thrown back and her eyes staring with fascinated gaze at the man in front of her. Her face was white, bloodless. Across the starkness of her soft skin and running from shoulder to elbow was a terrible livid mark which gleamed in the yellow light of the hanging lamp.

Sebastian Kay blinked stupidly. His

right hand still held the iron which had branded the helpless girl. Behind him the brazier was a glowing mass of red hot coals.

For an instant Sebastian Kay flinched under the black fury in Johnny-Be-Blowed's lined face. Then his lips twisted in his sneering smile.

"What? Ees eet that you are not dead yet? Soon! Soon!"

He leaped like a cat, swinging the hot iron over his head. Johnny-Be-Blowed's yellow eyes were grim, purposeful. The half-caste's blow glanced off his raised forearm. His steel fingers clamped about Sebastian Kay's wrist. The latter spun about wildly, a sudden gleam of fear darting into his narrowed eyes as he felt his left arm forced up in a torturing hammerlock. He struggled frantically, kicked out in a spasm of frenzy as the pain clawed at his elbow.

Johnny-Be-Blowed held him like a man might hold a squirming dog. Slowly his grip tightened. Slowly Sebastian Kay's wrist was forced higher. Great drops of sweat stood out on his yellow forehead. He cursed with terrible curses. The lamplight gleamed on the knotted muscles in Johnny-Be-Blowed's back and shoulders. Inch by inch the half caste's wrists crept up across his straining back.

Crack!

Sebastian Kay screamed hoarsely and fell forward on his face, his broken arm dangling limply beneath him. Johnny-Be-Blowed yanked loose the straps which bound the girl, lifted her to her feet. Then he bent over the quivering figure on the floor. Sebastian Kay's eyes were open. They glared at the white man like those of a mad dog.

"Stand up, you yellow slime!"

The half-caste did not move. Johnny-Be-Blowed yanked him to his feet, spun him into the chair where the tortured girl had sat. Sebastian wet his lips with his tongue. Johnny-Be-Blowed stood in front of him, thumbs hooked in his belt, face expressionless.

He said after a long minute, "You

tried to kill me last night, rat! For that I broke your arm."

Sebastian Kay spat insolently, but the fear still lurked in the depths of his eyes. In the corner, the brazier coals glowed redly in the shadow.

"Then you dared to lay a hand on a white woman. In this country yellow-bellied rats don't lay hands on white women. For that I'll mark you so that white men will know you, you filthy monkey!"

Johnny-Be-Blowed stepped forward suddenly and Sebastian Kay screamed with frantic terror. He had guessed what lay behind the stony blankness of the white man's eyes.

Johnny-Be-Blowed forced the half-caste to his knees in front of the smoking brazier. Sebastian Kay's screams were mad with stark horror as his head was forced down. The heat blistered the skin of his face. He could see the little tongues of red flame twisting like writhing snakes.

His voice died in a choking gasp. After a long minute Johnny-Be-Blowed released his grasp, turned his back on the quivering heap which had once been a man.

THE moon was far down in the heavens as Johnny-Be-Blowed lifted the unconscious figure of the girl and placed her in the stern sheets of the *Hester's* whaleboat. The night was quiet and peaceful. A mile away, the schooner seemed to be riding on a sea of silver.

The Pitcairn Kid was coming down the sand, his shotgun tucked under one arm and a heavy bundle under the other. He stepped into the waiting whaleboat. Johnny-Be-Blowed nodded.

"We're on our way," he said shortly.

"Right," answered the Pitcairn Kid. "Right as rain."

He looked at the spot where the girl lay with a bit of canvas thrown over her. A rude bandage swathed her arm from elbow to shoulder. Her hair tumbled over the torn shirt which she wore. Johnny-Be-Blowed met the younger man's inquiring gaze and nodded his head.

"Old Jim's daughter. Jim—was a friend of mine, in a way. Couldn't leave his kid in that sink hole."

The oars splashed gently under the hands of the four native rowers. The wind which blew from the land was heavy with the odors of the night. It felt cool on Johnny-Be-Blowed's face. He spat grimly as a keen edge of pain shot through his back. It would be long before he forgot this night's work at Port McCoy.

The whaleboat was almost out to the *Hester* when Johnny stirred again. He stuffed tobacco into his black pipe, scratched a match. In the glare his lined face was thoughtful.

"And it all started over a copper chest," he said harshly. "What was in the chest? What has become of it? I don't know. Probably won't ever know."

The Pitcairn Kid kicked at the bundle which he had carried down the beach. He, too, fumbled for tobacco, began to roll a cigaret in his slim fingers.

"There's the chest," he said shortly. "I saw Pearl Jim's murderer bury it under the big palm by the trail and I dug it up again. I'm funny that way."

He lapsed into morose silence as the whale boat slowly pulled alongside the waiting *Hester*.

Johnny-Be-Blowed and the Pitcairn Kid—here's a gun-team hunted by the law and the lawless from Canton to Cape Town. Follow the stormy trek of their blackbirder, the *Hester*, as told in the coming ACTION STORIES by William Chamberlain.

RANSOM



By MILES OVERHOLT

Author of "Lead Lullaby," etc.

We ain't got over it yet. Two-faced Joe rustled a city-bred yearlin'. Big Lip Barlow tried to shoot 'im loose. And me and Doug Turner was in the middle.



It was a nice, peaceable day. Doug Turner had just wiggled hisself around the outside of two fingers of George Chichester's kill'em-quick elixir and unrolled some words.

"A toast, gents and cow hands," he said.

"Make mine liver an' onions," busted in Pete Howard.

But Doug was busy at his toasting.

"Here's to a temperance dinner,
With water in glasses tall,
And coffee and tea at the end—and me
Not there at all!"

Which made it time by the Bull-thrasher Watch Company for us to shudder down another modicum of panther milk. And yet another'n.

And it was just like Sheriff Jim Caywood, the dang joy annihilator, to send a stuttering messenger to tell Doug and me, Hap Hazard, to dangle over to his office and bring our sensibilities with

us, at that serious stage of the afternoon. Which is carrying an order too far. But we shoved our way over, Jim Caywood being a feller you pay attention to, owing to his ornery disposition and other mirthful characteristics.

The peace architect was lying all warped and twisted up on the cot in his office trying to get an injunction to stop his rheumatism from raiding his joints. He didn't get up and bow politely when company came anyhow.

"I sent for yuh two wuthless rannies because I need a coupla sober men to run a little errand for me," he said, grinning sourcastically among his rheumatics, and then saying "Ouch!" to kinda take the curse off.

"Yuh didn't do anything of the kind," said Doug, "because yuh know dang well no sober man would be seen with yuh."

"I *am* kinda particular thataway," said Caywood. "That's why I want yuh fellers to tackle this job alone."

"What job?" we would like to be pleasantly informed.

"Read that." And the high sheriff passed over a yellow telegram, which Doug read aloud. Me, I never did like telegrams, anyway. They are nearly always yellow.

The message read:

Sheriff,
Rye Patch, Nev.

Search train No. 43, Coast Flyer, for kidnaped boy, aged 8, son of C. Hamilton Levering, Montclair, N. J. Believed in hands of two gangsters, and woman known as Platinum Sadie. Boy is blond, blue eyes, and is named Thomas. Reward of five thousand dollars offered by his father for his safe return. Arrest and hold kidnapers.

HENNESY,
Chief of Police.

"Me, I can't walk none," the sheriff gritted with what few teeth that would grit. "I'm deputizin' yuh ornery buzzards to board that dang train, due in about a hour, an' get that kid."

"Where at is yore deputy?" Doug wondered, doing my wondering with the same breath.

"Abe's over to Galt," said Jim. "Won't be back for a coupla days."

"Any doubt about 'em being on the train?" I asked, then.

"I reckon they're pretty dang shore of it," said Caywood. "Them high-class Eastern officers don't make many mistakes. Anyways, none that gets into print."

"An' for this lil' chore—" said Doug, grinning from 'ere to there.

"Yuh get half the reeward money," said Caywood. "Ain't that enough?"

"Uh-huh," we said. And then we went back to George Chichester's place to find out how many swallows it takes to make a summer, and spent that twenty-five hundred dollars six consecutive times. But the doggoned train whistled just as we had got settled down to our important research work.

So, without comment or other forms of advertising our business at the deepot, we went over and met the Coast Flyer, waving our hands to it like it was an old friend.

"Yuh get on the rear coach, Hap," Doug said. "I'll come through the train from the smokin' car. If'n yuh find em, don't do anything till I come along. I'll do the same at my end."

Which was the sense of the meeting, only that wasn't the way it worked out. Because we didn't have to do no such thing. For, just as the train stopped all outa breath, why, the dang kid hisself busted down the steps of a Pull and made a dash and a coupla hyphens across the track tor'ds the deepot.

He was running right at us, and I reached out and grabbed at his whereabouts. "Hi, that yuh, Tommy?" I inquired, personal. He answered the description on all counts.

"And not a moving picture," the kid yelped as he dodged and went right on past me.

WELL, just then a big crooked-faced feller leaped down the steps and come a-diggin' after the kidnaped boy, like a Sunday after a wild Saturday night. "Stop him!" he yodeled at us. "He's running away! Tommy, come back here!"

"Oh, yeah!" snickered Tommy, slipping outa other hands and pushing hisself tor'ds the beckoning hence.

"Grab that hombre," ordered Doug, turning hisself loose after the departing kid.

So I hauled off and grabbed Mister Gangster, Esq., by something loose and entangling, and brought him down to household size.

"Lemme go!" he screeched, trying to biff me on some good biffing spot. "The boy's running away!"

"Yuh don't mean to tell me!" I said, hanging onto him vociferously. "Out-smarted yuh, didn't he, yuh dang kidnap'er!"

"The little devil!" the gangster growled, trying to break away. "Lemme go! The train's starting!"

Then I heard a kinda shrill whistle, which wasn't made by the train, because trains don't whistle through their teeth,

and I knew that Doug had got his man—or boy.

But the big walloper I had been adhering myself to played a dirty trick on me. When I half-way turned my head to see where at was Doug, why, he up and kicked me in the shins, and I had to leave go of him to take care of my cussing.

Then he lathered hisself around the corner of the deepot, and the train, havin' nothing better to do, pulled out.

There we were.

I heard a shout and the clatter of hoofs, and there was Doug Turner and Tommy, the kidnappee, shagging outa town, while the crooked-faced gangster was throwing hunks of red-hot fatality at 'em with an automatic. Then, seeing Doug easing hisself outa range, the fightin' kidnaper climbed aboard a hawse belonging to some waddy or other and took after him.

Which seemed to be the proper moment of time for me to act as a kinda chaser for the afternoon's cocktail, so I went and got my mustang and joined the peerade.

But I lost the gunman somewheres, or he lost hisself, or something, and Doug wasn't nowheres in sight.

I learned later that the gangster's hawse got good and tired of all that foolishness, and turned acrost the hills and run back to town, taking his passenger with him.

I RODE back to town, too, but Doug hadn't been there or anywheres else, and Caywood didn't know what had happened. So I told him and he said it was good work, only it was all wrong, and for me to go find Doug and snag him back.

So then I rode over to the 7L7 ranch where Doug Turner and I make a mild pretense of earning our wages, but he hadn't been there none, either.

Then I got me an idea, and it took me by the hand and led me over tor'ds the cabin which Doug and I owned over on Flowering Mesa.

But before I reached the cabin along came Doug and Tommy.

We reined in to chin some.

"I was just coming . . ." Doug started to say, but nine, ten puncture berries came along and put a row of periods after the fourth word, and we unbuttoned our broncs and slashed back up the hill to the cabin quicker'n yuh could say grace.

Because there was a posse of about twenty men making the outlook discouraging for us, and we didn't want to stop and stage no deebate over any topics of the day. Not with bullets for gestures, we didn't.

By the time we got inside the cabin yuh'd a thought it was raining lead pencils. And was that kidnaped kid scared!

Say, he was grinning on all parts of his face, and hollering, "Whoopee! Let's kill 'em and scalp 'em!"

But we didn't do no shooting. Because why? Because we recognized dang near all them fellers, and they was cow hands and citizens from Rye Patch, headed by that dang crooked-faced gangster. He had gone and got him a posse somehow and was aiming to get back that kid.

We couldn't figger out how he had persuaded them roughnecks to come along and irritate us thataway, but there they was in all their pristine beauty.

"Aw, lemme have a gun, will you, Doug," Tommy begged. "I betcha I can knock some of those guys off their horses."

"Shore, yuh could," said Doug, "only we don't really wanta kill any of 'em, if we can help it. Yuh see, Tommy, ol' hoss, most of them fellers are friends of ours."

"Friends—yeah? I didn't know friends shot at you," said the kid, wondering.

"Well, these kind do. I guess they're kinda mistook," Doug explained. "Soon's they know we're rescuin' yuh, they'll lay off'n us."

"Is that one of yore kidnapers—that

crooked-faced gent which chased yuh?" I asked the lad.

"Yeah, he's a kidnap'er, all right," Tommy answered, grinning about something. "That's Joe Mix. I don't like him."

"I should think not," I said.

But we didn't have much time for conversation and discussion of interesting situations, because them rannies was encircling the cabin and pretty soon now somebody was going to start making history.

But Doug Turner had some kinda idea and was unwrapping it, and the first thing we knew he was waving a white handkerchief out the window like meb-be it was a dove or an olive branch.

The shooting came to a comma, or pause, and somebody yelled:

"Whatcha want?"

"We want to talk to Ham Beall," hollered Doug. "The rest of yuh hombres stay put."

AFTER unraveling some language for a moment or two, Ham Beall, foreman for the Lazy-K, came a-riding up tor'ds the cabin.

Doug went out to meet him, after orderin' Tommy and me to stay outa sight. So we stayed. But I heard Doug say:

"How come that kidnap'er talked yuh into jumpin' us?"

"Kidnap'er? Hell! Is he a kidnap'er?" gasped Ham.

"Caywood deputized Hap and me to rescue this kid from three kidnap'ers off'n the train," Doug told him. "We done got the kid, but that gangster got away from Hap. He chased us, but we outrun him. Then he musta gone back and got yuh fellers started."

Tommy was listening clost and grin-ning all the while. I never saw a feller enjoy being a prisoner so much in my life.

"Yeh," Ham was talking. "The feller said yuh an' Hap had stole the kid right outa his arms. Said he was lookin' after the youngster for his folks. Said the kid was a plumb salty little rascal an' made

him trouble alla time an' was jus' bein' ornery an' causin' a disturbance of some kind every time the train stopped—hop-pin' off'n the train an' hidin' an' runnin' away an' raisin' hell at all four corners."

"Why wouldn't he try to get away?" demanded Doug.

"Yeah," I chimed in.

"Hell! That's a different story. Sorry, Doug. I'll go back an' grab that pecker-wood an' take the boys back to town," said Ham.

A kinda wicked light come into the eyes of the kid, and a crafty sorta grin spread over his face.

"Sure, I was kidnaped," he said then. "Two-faced Joe was holding me for a big ransom."

"Yeh, we know it," I said. "But it'll be all right now."

"Yeh, but aren't we going to have any more fights?" wondered the angelic little feller.

"Yuh never can tell," I told him. "That Two-faced Joe is a bad egg, yuh can see that."

"Good!" said Tommy.

Ham Beall rode back to the waiting posse, and we saw him flip up his gun and take Mr. Two-faced Joe into camp. He seemed to unfolding the right sorta story to the posse, because a coupla wad-dies clumb down and wrapped the gang-ster up for mailing, and then they started back to town.

IT was dusk by now and the kid was hollering for something to eat, so we put up the hawses and throwed some chuck together.

"Might as well stay here tonight," Doug said. "Jim knows we got the kid, and he'll slough that gunman in the clink. Then we'll ride in early tomorrer and do us some collectin'."

Which suited Tommy first class. His main grief was that he couldn't kill him no possemen.

"Maybe they'll come out in the morn-ing, or maybe tonight, and shoot at us some more," he said, hopeful.

"Mebbe," grinned Doug.

"I'm glad there are no wimmen here," said Tommy.

"Why?" I asked.

"Aw, wimmen can't fight good," he said.

"Yeh. This kinda party is for men only," grinned Doug. "Yuh better hit the hay now. We got to get up early in the mornin'."

Of course, we knew different, but we let the kid think there might be some more excitement, he seemed to be so dang fond of death and disaster, so he went right to bed—with one eye left open. So he wasn't at all surprised—but we dang well was—when a coupla hours later about a million bullets began to scramble the cabin till you'da thought somebody wanted to wake us up or something.

"Whoever in hell is that!" barked Doug, the night being dark and full of other mysteries. Only we couldn't go and inquire, because whatever it was out there might be contagious.

We doused the lamp and tried to peek out, but it was too dark for much success in that worthy endeavor.

Then, after another round or two had been poured into the logs, and the window had lost a coupla panes, and other misdemeanors had been foisted upon an unsuspecting public, a voice came tooting in.

"Hello, the house!"

"Hello, yoreself," Doug answered. "What in hell's eating on yuh guys, anyway?"

"We want that kid," the voice answered, full of grit and grime.

"Yeah? So do we," said Doug.

"An' we're gonna have him!"

"That makes it an argument," hollered Doug. "So're we."

"Aw, shoot his face shut!" yelled Tommy, now plenty awake, and full of enthusiasm and blood lust.

"Who's talkin'?" Doug wanted to know.

"None o' yore damn' business," came the reply, in no gentlemanly manner. "They's ten o' us out hyar. We done

got yore cabin surrounded on all sides. Are yuh givin' the kid up peaceful, or do we take yuh apart?"

"What do yuh want with the kid?" Doug asked then.

"Fer the same reason yuh want him," answered the loud speaker.

Nothing was making sense, and Doug was getting tired of the conversation, anyway, it being kinda hawse and hawse.

"Try an' get him," he said, slamming the door right on a coupla harsh words and squashing 'em.

Which was the signal for the dangest lot of shooting yuh ever met up with, and I could have got along entirely without it for years and years.

"Was that Two-faced Joe's voice?" I asked the kid, and he said he didn't think it was.

"I got it!" said Doug then. "I've been trying to place that voice. It was Big Lip Barlow."

"Not that outlaw!" I kinda gasped, being a fairly good gasper after sundown.

"Shore was. One of his men was in town, I betcha, and found out there was a reeward for the kid, and Big Lip decided to get in on the pay-off."

Which made it a perfectly delightful evening. Oh, charming. Yuh must come over sometime and bring the kiddies.

"Well, we got to do somethin' about them fellers," I said. "Barlow doesn't do much foolin', He's got a kinda one-track mind."

WE filed the kid away under the bunk where the bullets wasn't apt to strike, and then me and Doug went to work trying to see could we properly entertain our guests of the evening.

I took the window, and Doug found him a peep-hole where the chinking had fell out between the logs, and we shot at the flashes, but couldn't tell about the casualties, because we didn't have any dispatch messengers.

"Shucks, they won't dare shoot too clost for fear of hittin' the kid," Doug said, after a while.

"They'll know we got him parked outa danger," I argued.

"I betcha they try to burn the cabin," then said Doug. He would think of something disheartening thataway.

"Shore, to force us out," I kinda choked, my throat being full of emotion and two scared tonsils.

But it was early springtime and everything was green and the cabin had a dirt roof on it. Still, if'n they could get clost enough. . . .

Which was the time for me to play Santa Claus in reverse. So I went and clumb up the fireplace chimbly in a aimful manner, and just in time, too.

For just as I had talked my head into the notion of going over the top of the cobblestones—and I musta looked like Amos-'n-Andy—why, I caught a feller strikin' a match and getting all set to light a bunch of papers right at the corner of the cabin.

I dropped a bullet down through the middle of his head, and, owing to the shooting in general, nobody but me and the feller know it. Then I ducked down and waited, holding onto where I was at by an eyebrow and a prayer.

But I could hear them outlaws speaking closter, and then, after Doug had shot hissself hoarse for a minute, I heard a kinda screech and figgered Doug had built him a corpse.

By this time another brave pilgrim had come to see what was holding up the bonfire, and I reached over and whanged him full of physical ailments.

After that there came a kinda lull and I started to wish we had gone into some other line of endeavor. But I musta wished too heavy, because I slipped and fell down that dang chimbly and nearly busted somethin' of importance, barking my shins which had already been kicked silly by that Two-faced Joe.

Doug, I saw, was sitting on the floor holding onto hissself in a kinda determined manner, and then I knew that I had fell for some good purpose. He had been shot in the chest.

Tommy was all excited by now, he

having stayed under the bunk mebbe eight seconds in all, and was trying to say something, and half crying, but I was too busy to pay him any attention. I went and bandaged up ol' Doug and found he wasn't killed any, but fulla sharp-notched pains and different sized groans.

I got him to the bunk, and the kid began to blubber, and the bullets rattled unhealthily about us, and I would have given eight dollars if it had been a nightmare instead of a deep-rooted fact, which nobody can deny.

The chore of hoss-doctorin' Doug took half an hour or more. And then I smelled smoke. Even my nose had to take part in the evening's performance.

So I clumb back up the chimbly and yes sir, there was the fire eating its way modestly up the side of the cabin, only not an awful lot. But it would be plenty in a minute, and I began to think of the various other amusements I would rather be enjoying at the moment.

A feller was sneaking away through the shrubbery, so I whammed a coupla pellets of pugnacity at him, and he fell over on top of his face. Then I ducked down the chimbly like a jack-in-a-box and about seven million leaden hornets began to sting them cobblestones where I had just been at, and if that kept up, pretty soon our chimbly would be only a smoke hole.

So, just to make everything all merry and bright, I slipped and fell down the chimbly ag'in, skinning my shins all over once more, and adding to the gaiety of the evening.

QUICKER than yuh could say the Declaration of Independence backwards, I broke the broom stick off'n the broom, drove a nail into the end of it and hoisted a bucket of water up the chimbly and tipped it over, not showing my head, because I would need it to think up other bright ideas before morning.

I could hear a kinda sizzling, and I knew I had reached the fire. The only trouble was, there wasn't any more

water. Except down in the spring. And now what?

A new bullet patter began puttering about the cabin on all four sides and, by golly, I was pretty near in a panic. Quite a serious depression, at least. I tried to hurry down the chimbley and, just to make it plumb unanimous, I slipped and fell in the same spot, skinning the same pair of shins in the same place, and hurried over to the window to make Barlow and his gang believe I was the Army of Occupation. Which I dang well was.

They was moving in closter now, and probably the fire was making swell headway, and everything was just too cute for anything.

And then, just when I was about to tell Barlow to come in and cut hisself a piece of cake and help hisself to a kidnaped boy and a coupla crippled cow hands and whatever else he saw handy, why, there was some new kinda shooting coming from another direction, and in a minute I heard Barlow yell to his men: "Let's get goin', fellers! That's a posse!"

So they got going, and I took me my first long breath in three hours.

Then I waited for the posse to come up and hear a dang good story about a hero which done his best in the face of heavy odds and discouragement and what-not, but no posse showed up. Which is no way for a posse to act when the hero is all set to tell it all, let the chips fall where they may.

After mebbe an hour, though, there come a kinda heavy bump on the door, and I snuck over and edged it open a mite. Nobody was there. But I could see in the starlight a kinda white something tied to a rock, and I reached forth and drug it home to papa.

Then I snuck around the corner to kick away them burning embers, only when I got there they wasn't embering. My water act had gone over, and the fire was out. That's the kind of a visiting fireman I am.

There didn't seem to be anybody in

sight—outlaws, posses, dead men—nobody. So I went back into the cabin and lighted the lamp so's I could see what the dang rock had on its mind.

Doug was about one-eighth conscious, and the kid was plumb asleep alongside of him, so they didn't count.

Well, sir, there was a piece of paper tied to the rock, and the paper carried this here knowledge:

Keep the kid for two days. Great stuff! We'll cash in plenty on the kidnaping. Idea just occurred to me this afternoon. Don't worry. I'll take care of the consequences.

JOSEPH F. MIX.

The son of a gun! Trying some new kinda game! He thought he would still horn in on that reeward money, I figgered. But how'd he get away from the posse? Gosh! I was too dang tired and sleepy to answer that one. So I blew out the light and fell over on the floor, skinning my shins a trifle on Doug's gun which had fell there, but I was so used to it by that time that I probably couldn't have gone to sleep if I hadn't skun 'em.

It wouldn't have made any difference if the defenders of Shanghai had moved in on us. I couldn't have done anything about it for the next four, five hours.

TOMMY, the kidnaped kid, woke me up too soon. He said he was going out and kill a coupla men for breakfast, and did I want to come along and see how slick he done it.

So I got up and bathed Doug's wound and bandaged it ag'in, and then wrangled some breakfast.

Doug was kinda deelirous and in no shape to travel, and I done me a good deal of pondering for a while, not reaching any kinda sensible conclusion, and wishing Caywood would tend to his own dang business and let me do the serious drinking. Anyway, I was tuckered out, what with one thing and another and doing night chores, and I had me a headache that was big enough to go to school.

Tommy had Doug's pistol out some-

wheres and was hunting him a man to shoot, so I had to go herd him back to camp, and by the time all this had took place it was afternoon.

But, shucks, Doug had to have a doctor. And I didn't dast leave him by hisself. And I couldn't leave the kid to watch him for fear Barlow, or Two-faced Joe, or somebody would come and get him. And I couldn't take him along and leave Doug alone. . . .

Figger that one out, Mr. Einstein.

I kept me an eye on the trails, hoping some cow hand or somebody not in the kidnaping industry for the moment would come along so's I could send word to Doc Gentry to come and take care of Doug, but everybody in the world seemed to be shunning our place like mebbe it was a viper.

I looked all around the outside of the cabin, but the outlaws had carried their dead men away, and me and Tommy, we didn't have a speck of fun scalping 'em.

So the best I could do was to work on Doug all I could and hope somebody'd come out and rescue us.

Doug didn't seem to be getting any worse, and his fever had kinda gone down, so we stayed over another night. Tommy wanted to stay, anyway, hoping, he said, that a band of blood-thirsty Injuns would attack us, by way of variety, so he could use Doug's gun on 'em and mebbe accumulate him a few scalps. Or somethin' equally preecarious.

After supper, we barred the door and blew out the light so's not to attract no more trouble than could reasonably be expected, and I slept me a swell night full of slumber.

Doug was feeling better next morning, and managed to eat a little, but Tommy was getting restless.

"Shucks, this is no fun," he said, kinda disgusted-like. "Can't we go rob a bank, or something?"

"I was just thinkin' of that," I told him. "If'n Doug's able to travel after a while, mebbe we'll ride over to town and see if we can cut 'er."

Well, that tickled our little visitor, and

he strapped on Doug's gun and got all set. Only Doug wasn't any too able to ride, and we just sat around for a while, taking ideas apart and putting 'em together.

And then along about noon we got us a visitor. Abe Reynard, Caywood's deputy, had got back from Galt and Jim had sent him right over to our cabin. Abe held out a envelope.

"Jim said to give yuh this," said Abe, eying the kid.

It was a telegram, which read:

Sheriff, Rye Patch, Nev.

Disregard order to search Coast Flyer for kidnaped boy. He was only lost and has been returned to his parents.

HENNESSY,
Chief of Police.

And did I turn red! Embarrassed no end, that's what.

"Then, who is this tough hombre?" I asked, pointing to Tommy with a trembling finger.

"Gosh, I dunno," said Abe. "Mistake somewheres."

"Mistake! Hell, it's a holocaust!" I quavered, watching my twelve hundred and fifty dollars go slithering away on the wings of Despair.

"Looky here," I said to Tommy. "I thought yuh said yuh was kidnaped!"

"Aw, can't you take a joke?" he wanted to know, grinning and twirling Doug's six gun, which, I had seen to it, was empty.

"Who the heck are yuh?" I demanded then.

"Who, me?" grinned the kid. "I told yuh: Little Tommy Tucker. The kid that sung for his supper. You must have read about me in a book."

Which is all the sense I could get outa him.

"I'll go send Doc Gentry over to see Doug," said Abe, then, getting up.

"What became of Caywood's prisoner, the feller which was with the kid?" I asked Abe, but he didn't know.

"Caywood didn't say a dang thing only to hustle over hyar with that telegraft," he said.

TALK about yore crossword puzzles. I didn't have enough cross words to answer it, lemme tell yuh. But Two-faced Joe came with Doc Gentry later in the afternoon, and that helped some. In fact, it helped considerable.

"Sorry you were hurt," he said to Doug. "But it makes it all the better for me, really."

"Yeah? Well, I'm glad it was a wind-fall for somebody," said Doug.

"Was yuh the posse which scared them outlaws away night before last?" I asked Joe, and he answered:

"Were those outlaws? Fine! Better than ever! Yes, I was alone. Couldn't figger out who was shooting at you, but I don't know much about this country. And I wanted to leave you that note."

"Yuh shore cash in on other people's troubles," grinned Doug Turner, my partner in kidnaping and other criminal pursuits. At which Two-faced Joe only grinned, and turned to the kid. "Tommy, ol' kid, you started something, didn't you?"

"Yeah! And I'll start something else if you get funny with me," he answered, pulling Doug's gun. "Whatcha got to say about it? Huh?"

Mix grinned some more. "We're taking the train this evening," he said. "And I'm going to tie you to the seat in the car and keep you hog-tied all the way home."

"You and who else?" wondered Tommy.

So, in spite of the wild-eyed kid's protests, Tommy was put aboard Joe's pony in front, and they got all set to leave us.

"Much obliged, boys," said Two-faced Joe. "You'll be hearing from me. I had a talk with the sheriff. He understands everything."

And we didn't know whether that was a threat or a warning. But we was glad to get out of it as easy as we did—if we *was* out of it—for we mighta got from seven hundred years to life for that kinda crime.

We didn't go to see Caywood. We didn't want our feelings hurt. Besides, old man Wortham, our boss at the 7L7 made us stay on the ranch when we got there that night.

And it was more'n a week later, when I went to town after the mail, before we learned who Tommy was. A letter addressed to Doug and me explained it. The letter read:

GENTLEMEN:

I enclose company check for \$2500, the amount you would have received had you really rescued that kidnaped boy, if he had been kidnaped. The publicity Tommy Cooley received through your accidental kidnaping was worth far more than that to the Super-fine Film Company. Tommy's next picture—is to be entitled: "Kidnaped." I hope that you get to see it.

Very truly,

JOSEPH F. MIX,
Director of Publicity.

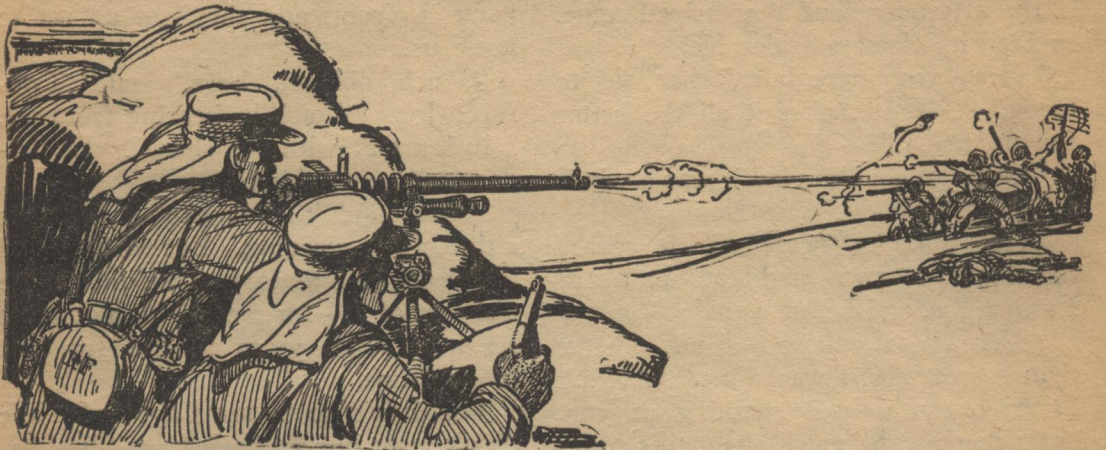
IMPROMPTU MATADOR

PUEBLA had turned out full strength for the bull fight on March 13, 1932. The *señoritas* had thrown their brilliant *mantillas* over the railing. The bull snorted so that the dust of the arena blew up clouds. His pawing hoofs showed that he was mad. His tail went up suddenly, he charged and leaped over the *barrera*, hooking the crowd right and left.

Lieutenant Vicente Gomez Garcia brought the beast down with several shots from his revolver. The crowd applauded him, and insisted that he march around the ring in the manner of bullfighters who have especially pleased the spectators.

The *presidente* of the *corrida de toros*, however, had Lieutenant Gomez arrested, because he had shot without proper regard for the safety of the crowd. One policeman was seriously wounded during the shooting. That's what you get for interrupting a bull-fight in Mexico.

THE BLADE OF JUSTICE



By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Whispering Rubies," "Blood and Ice," etc.

A scimitar moon hanging in the Arab sky. . . Tribesmen riding down from the hills, fanned by the hot breath of desert revolt. . . And a crimson score unsettled in the hounded ranks of the Legion.



CONSTANTINE GOTTORP, the big Russian from the Land of Seven Rivers, was really responsible for the whole mess. Murder—fit subject for a bunch of Legionnaires

lounging in the barracks room off duty. And that huge hulk Gottorp would be the one to begin the bragging.

There we sat—cross-legged on the floor, draped over the table's edge, on boxes, water kegs, and the fight-battered remains of chairs—chatting casually about slitting gullets and cracking backs like so many tea-guzzlers roasting the manners of a truck driver trying to break into society. The fetid blast of the wind, hot off the Sahara, choked our breathing. Our sun-stung eyes winked away the painful salt tang of sweat running down from under our *kepis*. No thought of the morrow when the whole outfit might be hacked to pudding under the vicious blades of the

avenging Bedouin. Lolling around, rolling cheap cigarets interminably, idly polishing and oiling Lebel rifles or bayonets, we tried to forget outpost monotony in gossip.

Even Sergeant Victor Guillaume, stamping into the room with the perpetual scowl darkening his face, failed to stifle conversation. He lounged over there in the corner—his eyes, black buttons in a red beefy face, blinking at us malignantly—forever hoping to catch a hint of mutinous talk.

He looked some manner of poisonous heathen idol, hunched there on the bench, his stubby paws folded over his bulging belly, cigaret smoke writhing up like incense from his mouth—a mouth twisted villainously by the bolo scar that slashed through its middle. Sneering and despising us, he listened to our talk. Sneering and despising him, we ignored him and chattered on. Someone happened to mention Moscow.

"Moscow!" Constantine Gottorp

leaned across the table, grunting. "Saint Mitrophanes of Voronesh! But that is where I killed skinny Maklakoff, the money-lender. Cheated me out of four kopeks, he did, and almost out of killing him—"

Words skipped from the big Russian's blackened teeth. His battered hands gestured agile description. Sweat dribbled down his forehead, glistening in the shadow of his *kepi* visor. He told his murder story well, and his comrades in the room listened. A man qualified to chat of murder, this Constantine Gottorp. Was a time when he had worn the Order of Saint George and led a troop of Caucasian cavalry wilder than any Cossacks.

"And so," he concluded his yarn amid mumbles of approval, "old Maklakoff dropped dead from fright just as I raised my knife to stab him. Screamed and fell at my feet. And I stabbed him anyway. Once for every kopec. Four times through the stomach!"

His story was not a confession. It was a boast. Tor Trygvasson, the old Norwegian who had been with the Legion at Tonkin and Madagascar, could not let the challenge go unanswered. "And you had to run into the Legion to escape?" he chuckled. "So did I, my friend. So did I." So did he, he explained he had taken the life of a city official whose life needed taking. He told of the shooting in an off-hand manner that brought grins to the lips of his hearers. My grin, perhaps, was a trifle wan. Old Tor had such mild blue eyes, and he had been my first friend at Sidi-bel-Abbes.

HONUS STRAUSS, the German, passed up his chance with a grunt, though we all felt the former Prussian Guardsman with the shrapnel scars dotting his pudgy cheeks had a story to tell. But Miguel Paz, the delegate to La Legion from Ecuador, told of a throat-clipping with a Spanish flair; and Abkarian, the Armenian, described how he had throttled two sleep-

ing Turks with a zest that would have given a Boston Armenian Relief Society pause to falter. Whereupon the lot fell to me.

As a recruit of the Legion I could hardly falter at stories of life-taking. Yet it was one thing to see my comrades drive a bullet through the skull of a Berber vandal, and another to hear them nimbly recount the homicides that had driven them into the God-forgotten army for shelter. Yet a Yankee should own to some sort of killing with which to impress his fellows. Perhaps I should concoct a tale; tell them I had killed my aged grandmother by suffocating her with a Sleepwell Mattress, or something. But I could only spit out of the window and polish a button on the sleeve of my *capote*.

"It is the turn of La Guillotine," suggested Gottorp, turning to the little white-beard at the end of the table. "Since the American will not tell of his murder, La Guillotine will tell us about his. Speak for once, little *cochon*, and explain to your brothers why you have run into this soulless service. A killing, or a woman. More than likely it is both, eh? Come, *cigale*. A story. Put up your knife, and out with it."

Jests and taunts promptly pelted the silent little chap, but never a word escaped his flowing beard. A strange character, this little man. I had first encountered him in Ibn Alramacram's gin mill up in Sidi. Ibn Alramacram's was a haunt for Legionnaires, a box stuffed with tobacco smoke, dope fumes, polluted chatter, dancing vermin. A place where the occupants yelled and fought, lusted, scrabbled, belched. I had wandered in one night to kill monotony (the hardest foe your Legionnaire has to kill) and drowned myself in the contaminated atmosphere. Men shoved and swore and lurched about me like restless demons waiting the train to hell; but in a corner, mouse-quiet, sat this little Legionnaire.

Paying no iota of heed to anybody, he sat there, his deep brown eyes fixed in

a sightless gaze at nothing, a mystic smile fixed on his lips. In his lap a huge, bright knife. At hand a slim blue bottle. Occasionally he would drink, but most of the time he let his hands wander over the ponderous blade in his lap, patting, tapping, caressing. The man beside me nudged my arm, indicated the little Legionnaire, and touched a finger to forehead.

"That one, stupid recruit, is La Guillotine. He is in your company, I see. A madman. Never speaks above a whisper, and seldom then. Never fights, except in battle, and then like a savage. Always carries that big knife. Always polishing it, whispering to it, sharpening it. Mad. Quite mad. Yes—"

NO doubt about the madness of this little fellow titled La Guillotine by his penchant for carrying that big blade. The thing was heavy as solid lead, and a Legionnaire's pack is weighty above description. What with pack and knife and Lebel rifle, La Guillotine marched under an incredible load. Besides, the knife—an African weapon known as a *coupe-coupe*—did not belong to Legionnaire equipment and was therefore *unreglement*. I was told the officers had protested violently against the little soldier's mania at first. But his ability with the weapon in battle had won him the permission to keep it.

As long as he could march his fifty kilometers a day, what matter? Moreover he was seldom in the *salle de police* for poor soldiering; let him keep his crazy silence and his crazy knife. The knife, I had been told, La Guillotine had captured during a campaign in the jungle against the Dahomey wildmen, in the days before everyone had forgotten his name, age and nationality. In the days before he had become the crazy pig, the mad lizard, the silent little ant, and La Guillotine.

Now, as usual, La Guillotine made no reply to the big Russian's raillery. He sat with his beard falling down his chest, and his eyes smiling at the monstrous

chopping-sword across his knees. I wondered if he had been listening to the rest of us, or had been sitting entranced by the sheen of his precious blade. A strange object of human devotion, and I was beginning to grow uneasy about the uncanny little creature.

Once, when we had stood alone in the night, mounting guard in a cotton-thick silence under a roof of hot, flashing tropic stars, he had turned on me gravely, and said in flawless English: "My American friend, I am not mad. I am forgetting."

We had talked no more.

I had liked him ever since; and feared him. The others, I knew, feared him and liked him, too. All, of course, save Sergeant Guillaume, who neither liked nor feared any common soldier in the service. He went out of his way to bully us all, but to La Guillotine he was particularly brutish. Perhaps it was because the little man was so quiet, so seldom guilty of rule violations. At any rate the amiable sergeant would impose on the quiet little man all manner of noxious tasks. La Guillotine would submit to the bullying with the patience of Job, and Sergeant Guillaume would hate him the more. Now the non-com swaggered out of his corner, and thrust his unlovely face into lamplight.

"One would not expect this mouse to have ever been guilty of killing without a dozen bayonets to back his courage," he sneered, giving La Guillotine's snowy head a friendly pat. "But, no! As for the rest of you penny-a-day *lezards*, you are about as clumsy with your murderings as you are at escaping ordinary arrest. Pah! You kill, and are forced to fly into the Legion to escape the law. A fine crew of soldiers! Sty-sweepings, that is what you are! Bones of Boniface! You are forced to rush into our ranks, and you die like flies on the desert sand. Now a man with a brain will kill and not be hunted by police. He kills and comes out the better man. He kills and reaps gain. Ho, ho! You dogs have killed to reap a lovely death

by Arab steel. Or, more likely, a death in the Penal Battalion would better serve. Let me tell you of a real killing, you dogs who brag out your ignorance." An evil chuckle escaped his twisted lips. "Listen—

"Suppose there are two brothers. A father who is a fool leaves his fortune to one of them, a weakling who babied himself into the parental graces to win the money. The other brother, disinherited, is angry. But rage does not trick an able brain. The angry brother wishes to kill the sneak who has played the good son to win the fortune. Does he stab him, shoot him, leave fingerprints on a thousand objects for the police to find? Does he commit the idiocies of your pig brains? But no! Not he!

"He wins the confidence of the brother; goes to live with him in his house; finds out where his brother keeps his notes and money. And then one night he sets this house on fire. He has prepared the house for the flames—oil on the floors, rubbish here and there where the draft will find it. The door to his brother's room is locked. But from the outside! The clever brother climbs to a roof of the flaming house, and, in the eye of a crowd watching, enters his brother's room through a window. Ho, ho!

"He dashes to his brother's safe and removes the notes and money. His brother lies near the door where the smoke has felled him. To make sure, he clubs his unconscious brother over the head; rushes screaming back to the window; climbs out through the flames; howls to the crowd that his brother cannot be saved. Nor can he be saved. The clever one clammers to the roof just as the insides of the house crash like a collapsing furnace. Do you see, stupid pigs? There is a real murder. This man has done away with his sneaking brother, relieved him of the money, and in the end is rewarded by the cheers of the populace for attempting to save the sneak's life!"

THE sergeant paused, letting his piggy eyes rove around the room. If he had intended to make an impression with his yarn, he had succeeded. Every soldier there recoiled from his scowl. All save La Guillotine, who sat with bowed head, studying the glimmer of his chopping sword.

It was hot in that room, foul with smoke and the odor of sweat. The big brute's story had made me a little ill; and set a desert-soggy imagination stirring. Could it be that the sergeant wished us to believe him the scoundrel of his story? Wished us to believe him capable of that infamous fratricide, and therefore a man well able to handle such lowly beings as the common soldiers under his command?

And was it my imagination, or was I really watching La Guillotine rise to his feet, turning to face the sergeant?

A brittle silence mantled the barracks room. La Guillotine's surprising conduct robbed the rest of us of breath, and Sergeant Guillaume was glaring angry challenge.

"Well," he snarled. "Well, little rat, what have you to say?"

A sense of impending drama tightened the muscles under my belt. Something queer was going on here. Never had we seen so bright a gleam in the eyes of the strange little Legionnaire. A gleam that matched the glimmer of the lambent lamplight flashing down his sword. For a second I thought he was going to strike the face of red dough leering down into his bearded one. Instead he spoke in a low tone to voice the curious remark:

"Sergeant Guillaume, I always thought you were a Frenchman. You are an American. And so am I—"

The sergeant took a quick step backward. For some reason the strange, irrelevant speech had smacked those bloated cheeks a smoldering crimson. A gasp escaped the scar-twisted lips—

And then the train of action suffered violent interruption! Quite suddenly we were bouncing off our benches, grab-

bing for Lebel rifle and bullet belt, shouting hoarse oaths, snatching up our gear. Growing hubbub filled the darkness ambient the barracks with clamor. Bootheels pounded across the drill ground outside. Strident cries rose through the hot night. And clear above the clatter, winding and echoing through the turbid, troubled dark, sang the clean, fine melody of the bugle calling us to arms.

Surprise attack!

FOR several months the Moslem tribesmen of the region had been resentful of the Tricolor rippling in the torrid winds that marched across the alien roofs of our tiny desert outpost. Many of these bearded desert nomads, seen as shrouded ghosts stealing fast across the shifting sand seas hemming our ramparts in, were members in good standing of the Islamic Brotherhood of Akhwan. This fraternal order of Mohammedan fanatics was by no means reconciled to the idea of an imperial Cross riding over an imperial Crescent, and the good brothers were anxious to spend their lives in frustrating such a possibility.

Brown Moslem eyes stared angrily at the three-colored flag of France marking an invasion of law and commerce and white faces into the lands once ruled by the Apostle of Allah. And the zealots of the Akhwan brotherhood stormed openly against French penetration. It was known that certain holy men who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, kissed the Kaba stone and quaffed the brackish waters of the Zenzem, had been busy inciting revolt among the tribes. And as a hail of withering steel drummed against the wooden gates of our fort that night, and lusty Moslem battlers sent a shrill "Allahu Akbar!" to the stars, it seemed as if the whole Sahara had risen to wipe us off the world, at last.

"Blood of the Saint!" shouted Constantine Gottorp, galloping along at my elbow. "It has come at last! The up-

rising! We will have to fight now, Yankee, or tomorrow we will be buried up to our necks in sand with our eyelids cut out and only a desire to die. Ho, ho!"

A smart crackling of gunfire punctuated his cheering commentary, and, as we fled for the firing-step along the south wall we were treated to the pleasant sound of our own Hotchkiss gun going into action.

Our low walls rose atop a sandy ridge, overlooking a sweep of billowing desert. But during the past week raging wind storms had built a rim of dunes off our south wall, and it was from this high vantage point our attackers delivered their first series of salvos. Arab bullets rained down on our drill ground; drummed a tattoo on the frame walls of barracks and post-houses. That south wall was no jolly place to be stationed.

As the big Russian and I, along with the others of our squad, gained the firing-step, a screaming streak of lead sped at us from the dune. Swinging Lebel rifle to shoulder, I sent a lance of bullets whistling up the sands; caught a glimpse of gray figures creeping like a row of phantoms down the purple-shadowed slope. Flickers of yellow fire lapped at intervals out of the phantom line. Bullets whistled over our dodging *kepis*.

Not always did those bullets go over our heads, however. The fight had not progressed two minutes before Honus Strauss sat down with a stifled "*Ach du lieber Gott im Himmel!*" and a red flow dribbling down his left jowl. At the same time a runner came from the other side of the post to announce the flank attack of a large body of cameleers, and the death of the commandant, Captain Marcel d'Arcy.

"Good!" snarled old Tor Trygvasson, who had replaced the German at my side. "We are now under command of Lieutenant Meilhac. A gentleman—"

"More than probably," chuckled Gottorp, "he was shot from behind by one

of us—" And he ended his words with a taut oath as a bullet brushed the *kepi* from his head.

For the fire was growing unhappily accurate, and the enemy line closing in. Guns swinging, we returned volley for volley, but the gray rim of phantoms came on. Gun-butts hammered shoulders sore. Metal barrels grew hot to the touch. Loading and aiming like the trained automatons we were, we sent a rain of steel to meet a rain of steel. Sweat blinded our eyes, streaked our chins. The pale moonlight played tricks on the sand, and we fired at illusions, the while our rampart walls presented admirable targets for marksmanship.

I HAD heard in Sidi that the desert-men were idiots with rifles, but these phantoms in gray cloaks, dancing and weaving among the shadows on the dune, were no novices at gunnery. The screams of pain, yowls for water, shrill curses that began to rise from the ranks within the outpost told me that the Moslems were getting too near for comfort. Our officers cursed and raved.

"If you lousy *lezards* knew how to shoot," Sergeant Guillaume could be heard to bellow, "we would save our throats. Fight, cowards! Faster! Fire faster! Name of Saint Sebastopol!"

I had forgotten the sergeant, and his voice brought back the scene in the barracks room. Gasping, leaning against the parapet, hands busy ejecting hot shells from my drained rifle, I found myself pondering his evil story and the curious incident staged by La Guillotine. Blinking sweat from my eyes, I hunted the little Legionnaire along the line. As a row of heads dodged a volley from the dune, I saw him last in line on the firing-step, calmly engaged in loading his massive gun. His monstrous sword leaned against the wall at his elbow, and as he swung his rifle to fire again he paused to smile at the knife. Just that hasty glimpse I caught, and it sent an apprehensive shiver down my spine. Then I was busy with my

rifle, until Gottorp, the Russian, staggered against me and went down.

"Through the shoulder," he moaned, as he squirmed at my feet. "Only a flesh wound. Ahhhh! Like a tearing hook—"

Sergeant Guillaume loomed through the weaving powder smoke.

"Get up!" he screamed, booting Gottorp with a brutal toe. "Up, coward!" His face was masked with grime; eyes bloodshot.

I heard myself shouting furiously. "Quit kicking him, you—"

"Dog!" he screamed, flinging around at me. "You rotten, lazy *salopard!* Shout at an officer, will you? You yellow Yankee son of a camel, I'll teach you!" He raised a fist. I dodged. The Legionnaire on the ground rolled over and caught at the sergeant's feet. Shrieking oaths, the big non-com floundered to his knees. His voice bellowed above the sound of battle crackling about us. "Lousy *lezards*, I'll kill you both—"

His automatic spouted. But he did not hit me. His bullet stung past my cheek and missed me by the breadth of a hair. I saw him go tumbling on his face, and dancing out of his reach, glimpsed the white beard of La Guillotine emerge from the shadows.

"Coward yourself," the little Legionnaire had cried out. "I pushed you then, and if monsieur the sergeant wishes to feel the strength of my blade he will try once more to murder an honest man and kick a wounded soldier—"

Anything might have happened right at that moment. And it did. A sudden, desperate yell went up from the shadows about me. A wild cry swirled down the smoky wind. "*Allah Akbar!*" A score of bandaged heads ducked over the wall above me, and the next second an army of cloaked tribesmen was swarming over the rampart.

IT was every man for himself, then. Whipping around with my gun-butt, I stabbed a brown face hard across the mouth, ducked a savage knife-thrust,

and went sprawling. A dead Arab spraddled down on top of me and obligingly took two bullets intended for my benefit, and I was up once more, battling shoulder to shoulder with the frenzied little white-beard who swung a blade like a lightning bolt.

God only knows how we rescued the wounded Russian and got ourselves out of that tough corner, for Allah certainly intended it otherwise. There must have been a dozen Moslems around us, and they fought like inspired demons. The Moslem who dies fighting an Unbeliever is promised a throne in Paradise, all the wine he can drink, and the company of beautiful maidens who live in pearl houses and never grow old. Those desertmen surely strove to attain this happy ending. They charged without fear into the mouth of my flaming pistol, and dove like tigers at the flashing blade of La Guillotine.

La Guillotine! Standing over poor Gottorp, he whisked his giant chopping-sword like an avenging angel. Blood from a forehead scratch leaked into his white beard. His eyes glowed like lamps. He was the very soul of war, and his sword a whisking, glinting death that slashed and chopped and hacked until the gang of attackers numbered three and gave way.

"To the barracks!" he shouted, turning to me as I stooped to yank the Russian to his heels. "The men will be holding there. Quick! These devils are coming over the walls like water—"

Touch and go we darted for cover, dragging the groaning Russian between us. Guns barked about us, blazing like monster fireflies dodging through the darkness. Somewhere we stumbled over a trio of dead Legionnaires, glaring mournfully at the waning moon. Somewhere we passed an Arab bowed as if in prayer on a rug of bloodied sand. Somewhere we came across Tor Trygvasson and Miguel Paz, fighting hand to hand with four desertmen. La Guillotine darted into the fray, *coupe-coupe*

glinting. Then the Norwegian, Paz, La Guillotine and I were running together, with Gottorp in our midst.

"Where," yelled Tor Trygvasson, "is Sergeant Guillaume? I saw him running like the devil for the other side of the post—"

A squad of tribesmen charged us, and we were busy until a crowd of Legionnaires rushed from the darkness to our aid. About that time a blatant clamor augmented the general uproar, and the soldiers raised a cheer.

"The guns! Those thrice-cursed Hotchkiss guns were all jammed. Now they fire! We will drive these devils back to the desert, now!"

Rud-dud-dud-dud-dud-dud! rattled the machine-guns. Lebel rifles were still whanging regularly about the gate, answered by the sharp spang of the Spanish Mausers arming the Moslems. In the darkness the confusion was terrific. We ran into a squad of Legionnaires who almost shot us down, and hesitated to shoot at a group of invaders, thinking them Legionnaires. Strauss, the German, came running up with his jaw bandaged, and Paz almost shot at the cloth-wound head.

"Hunting for you," the German yelled. "Lieutenant Meilhac orders a charge on the Arabs surrounding the barracks—"

THE lieutenant himself came pounding out of the darkness, surrounded by staff men. A red rag circled the crown of the gallant little officer, and an open cut on his chin scattered blood down the chest of his tunic. Only a military genius could have martialed order out of the infernal riot, for the sudden rush of the overwhelming Arab force had flooded over the outpost like a tidal wave, and our ranks were being blown about like leaves on a windy corner. But Lieutenant Meilhac was everywhere; directing fire, charging knots of tribesmen, driving the enemy from corner to corner and over the walls. He molded our crowd into a

rank, and sent us scampering across the drill ground with fixed bayonets into a wedge of Moslems concentrated before the hospital barracks.

Cheering at the top of our lungs, Paz, Strauss, Trygvasson, La Guillotine and I flung ourselves at the enemy. Bayonets dived and stabbed and dipped. The Moslems stampeded. I found myself between Paz and La Guillotine chasing through a hectic turmoil impossible to describe. Shouts. Screams. Gunfire clapping us deaf. Bullets singing. Pistols tearing red holes in the dark. Choking dust. Stinging smoke. Confusion.

One thrust with bayonet, lunged, yanked. One jumped a body sprawled on the ground. One stumbled, parried a sword thrust, dodged a spurting gun, swung at a gray face. Men reeled, spun, yowled and floundered about one's feet. Blue *capotes* tangled with gray, mouse-colored cloaks. Blue *kepis* dodged and ducked through a sea of white hoods. The black night had become a howling whirlpool; the drill ground a floor for the red dance.

And now a carnival! The old barrack quarters—once a blockhouse—was relic of early days, framed of planking and two stories high. The invaders had massed around the sagging structure, thinking perhaps to gain it as a salient point from which to shoot down on its defenders. Now, as the Legionnaires directed a scalding machine-gun fire inward from the gate, the Moslems fled to the north wall of the outpost. But they set fire to the old barracks building, and the sun-baked boards went up like a box of tinder. As we drove the enemy back to the north rampart, the frame structure began to spit skyward tongues of yellow flame. In two breaths of wind the barracks was a bonfire.

IN a way the conflagration aided the sons of the Legion. Piling flames towered into the night, shedding a glow brilliant as noonday. The whole mad scene was promptly picked out in crimson. Under the blatant illumination of

the roaring fire men became distinguishable. Moslems who had been sharp-shooting from shadowy nooks were dropped by our swinging rapid-firers. A batch of tribesmen charging the gate were scattered by a counter attack. Legionnaires reformed decimated squads, and hurled themselves with bayonets flashing vermilion rays at the milling Moslems. Unable to face cold steel, the Arabs panicked. Yelling like fiends, the soldiers of France tore into the Moslem mobs, shredded them with gun-fire, flung them apart and tossed them back over the dripping rampart walls.

They rallied once at the gate, but our rescued machine-guns scythed them down. Once more our bugles blew defiance. The gate swung outward, and our men chased flying sandals across the red-painted sand. The bugles called again, and we poured back into the fort. Lieutenant Meilhac dashed us toward the barracks, but an attempt to save the building was futile.

Once more I found myself lined up with La Guillotine at one elbow and Miguel Paz at the other. Lined up in a rank of scarecrows, we stood with the fire scorching our bruised cheeks, and watched the last living evidence of the Moslem assault. Spark fountains sprayed a rosy tint against the sky. Brands exploded over our heads like tiny shells, as the red flowers grew and flourished on the walls of the wooden barracks. A febrile wind whispered out of the desert and stirred the flames to anger. From a muffled roar the voice of the fire gained the pitch of a steady, sullen shouting.

Held at bay, we stood in our pitifully depleted rank and watched the gay holocaust with something like awe brightening our eyes. The flames lit up the faces of such Arab dead as we had been unable to drag from the vicinity of the fire, changing them to gruesome masks. All the wine they could drink and ladies who lived in hollow pearls, indeed, for these unhappy warriors. Hot, colored smoke tumbled about us, and the bar-

racks would be hidden. Then the wind would toss the fog away, and we could see the face of the flame-eaten structure.

I looked at Miguel Paz, at La Guillotine. The South American was watching the fire with a merry smile, his swart cheeks flushed by the glow. La Guillotine stood like an image. His *kepi* was gone; beard and silvery head streaked with red dye. But his eyes were not on the fire; they roamed the panting line of Legionnaires. A questioning frown pinched the skin above his whisker-buried nose, and he began to juggle his wet and mighty chopping-sword from hand to hand.

A knife scrape across the back of my neck had me jiggling with pulsing pain, and I was about to ask the little giant of battle for a rag of bandage when he turned on me with the terse query:

"Where is Sergeant Guillaume?"

No sooner had the words escaped his beard than a mad yell went up from the soldiers about me. "Uncle of Satan! Blood of Saint Andrew! *There is Sergeant Guillaume!*"—"Look! It is the sergeant!"—"Name of the Deity! It is Guillaume!"—"Trapped in the barracks! Look, man!"—"He screams for aid! How did he git up there?"—"Now by the good Saint Boniface, he is lost!"—"There! There he is! That second story window! It is Sergeant Guillaume!"—"But he is a dead one, now! Blood!"

I STARED; gasped. The Legionnaires raised a desperate cry, pointing red-tipped fingers. Pointing at the wild, crazed face that stared down at us from a fire-wrapped window on the second floor of the flaming barracks building. The sergeant's face was ghastly in the wavering red light, his eyes bulging with terror. His twisted mouth opened to voice a despairing wail that was to haunt my nightmares for many a day. Distant as we were we could hear that soul-freezing scream, curling its frigid note above the undertone of the snapping blaze. "Help me! In God's name!"

And then a little bearded man bearing a glowing steel blade was sprinting toward the fire. His whiskers streamed over either shoulder and his pounding heels kicked back spurts of sand. Straight for the roaring mass of flames he fled, the voices of his comrades chorusing high. "La Guillotine! La Guillotine!" And before I knew it, my frenzied feet were vaulting me after him.

Impossible to catch him. Fleet as an antelope, the little Legionnaire raced into a swirl of smoke. Arm over mouth, I followed, yelling warning. But he did not falter. I saw him plunging across the floor of the smoke-hung canteen, making for the rickety stairs that led to the second floor. Those stairs were blazing cheerily at the bottom, but he bounded up the steps with the fire dragging at his feet and sparks scattering under his heels.

As he sprang up the fiery ladder he shouted the sergeant's name. Coughing, half-blinded by heat and smoke, battling off falling sparks, I stood at the bottom of the crumbling stairway, yelling too.

Luck alone let the little Legionnaire gain the top of those steps. As he jumped to the top step, the whole lower section of the stairs collapsed with a hot smash, and drove me dancing backward. I dodged a falling beam that burned like a torch; fled to the door for air, and looked up to see Sergeant Guillaume and La Guillotine face to face at the top of the ruined stairway. Brown smoke coiled about them like roily water; their cheeks glowed lividly in the flame-light. Sergeant Guillaume was screaming something. Short, shrill words. La Guillotine was raising his ponderous sword.

"Coward!" the little man shrieked in English. "Ran in here to hide. Trapped by the fire! Coward! And I never knew you because of your scarred mouth! And you never knew me because of my beard. So it was *you* that burned my house? You who stole the

money; won the glory of playing hero while you murdered. Ha! You confessed? Boasted? Ho, ho!"

A wail hung long on the sergeant's lips. "You!" he screeched. "You were not killed after all—" With a choking cry he lunged at the soldier in front of him. "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

La Guillotine's blade cut a flashing arc. *Zaff!* An awful figure crumpled down in a billow of smoke. A shiny red chopping-sword sailed down from above; clattered and rang close by my feet. La Guillotine followed; arms wide. It was a fearful jump, almost twenty feet. The sergeant had not dared it; and if I had not been there to catch him, La Guillotine would certainly have been killed. As it was the little man plunged into my arms like a catapult, and we went down floundering in a bed of cinders the while I broke three ribs and a shoulder blade.

Howling aloud, we staggered to our feet and fled for the door. Our garments were ablaze in forty places, hands and faces burned, hair smoking as we fled through the door of that inferno. And just in time. No sooner had we stumbled into the open and into the grips of our astonished comrades than the high plank ceiling of the canteen fell with a thundering crash to bury the entire lower floor, what was left of the stairway, and what was left of Sergeant Guillaume in a tossing sea of flames.

SLIM crescent moon, emblem of the Moslem world it watched, sailed lazily down a cool night sky of indigo, shedding peaceful silver shadows across the still sands. The vast sweep of gray Sahara, cradling our tiny outpost against its enigmatic bosom, slept. The tiny outpost dreamed, but kept a wakeful eye on the dozing sands, suspicious of the moods of Allah that might, in a twinkling, stir a shouting battle against it. This wakeful eye was marked in the persons of the two sentinels mounting guard along the rampart walls—a little,

bearded Legionnaire called La Guillotine, and a gaunt Yankee, with hospital pallor fresh on his cheeks.

Ten days in the sick bay had gone since last I had seen La Guillotine, and now, standing beside him with the night making us tiny, and the desert whispering, I found my mind flaming with the picture of him standing atop a fiery staircase, casting a curse and death on a howling wretch, and swinging a lightning blade. And La Guillotine spoke first, for I could find no word to say.

"But yesterday," he murmured quietly, "I was awarded the *Medaille Militaire*. You were in the hospital, but you heard, no doubt. Awarded the medal for my attempt to save the life of Sergeant Guillaume—"

Those were his first words to me, and they shocked me. I stared out across the moonlit sands and fumbled with my rifle. A pebble rustled under foot, and the echo of the sergeant's last wail came to me with the desert breeze. I said with an effort: "So you are an American? Yes. And you were his brother—"

La Guillotine wagged his head. "Yes, my friend. I am an American. But no. I am *not* his brother." He paused, and I could hear my foolish gasp. "You are surprised," he went on. "But listen. Once, back in the States, I had power—I was respected—I was trusted. So much so that I was appointed to the position of magistrate. As judge, I held men's lives in my hands—to protect, to punish, or to destroy. And I betrayed that trust. I sold it for a bribe. I took cash—and pronounced sentence of death upon a man I knew to be guiltless. My conscience," and here La Guillotine smiled wryly, "drew me to the death chamber as if it were an invisible hand. And there I *saw* the man I had unrighteously condemned. Saw him dragged in by grim guards. Saw him strapped into that chair. Saw him writhe, swell horribly, collapse. Saw him wheeled from the chamber back, through the little green door, limp under the white sheet. I

don't know why I went there. But I do know it was too much for me."

The little Legionnaire shuddered—a strange action for one so accustomed to the callous spilling of human blood. Then he continued in a soft voice. "I left America. You would have. I did. I joined the Legion to forget—to—" The soft voice trailed away, leaving only the thumping of blood as it pulsed in my ears. Then suddenly, that voice was droning on as if it didn't belong to the little soldier. "Once, in a fight, I captured that big chopping sword. The men named me La Guillotine. Ironic, was it not, my friend? For the guillotine is the sword of justice in France. Justice! And they named *me* La Guillotine! For a while, it drove me mercilessly toward madness until I saw a way out. I determined that if ever I ran across a man who had committed a sin against his fellow human being greater

than mine—that man would I sentence to death righteously—and carry out that sentence of death myself. That way only could I win the right to the name they had given me.

"Guillaume dragged out his story of perfidy, and I knew he must be the murderous brother. To make sure, I flung his villainy in his face at the last moment, pretending that I was the murdered brother come to life. He gave himself away. I—executed my own sentence of death, pronounced that day we chatted so idly in the barracks room. I killed Guillaume deliberately."

Abruptly his voice died. Breeze whispered over the desert, cooling my burn-scarred cheeks. I stared at the thin Moslem moon that looked so much like La Guillotine's carving blade. The little Legionnaire by my side touched my arm and chuckled deep in his throat.

"I shall keep the medal," he said.

RIVER SHARK

DAN BURKE, agent of the Pirandello Compahnia of Rio, had just stumbled out of the jungle onto the banks of the Xingu River of Brazil. One of his boys leaped into the water to bathe off the sweat of the jungle trek. There was a sudden piercing shriek, a furious quick struggle, and the brown lad disappeared from view. The crimson hue of blood spread on the surface of the sluggish stream. "Pirhana! Pirhana!" the other natives screamed.

Usually the shark is considered the terror of the deep, but he is a mild-mannered assailant when compared to the ferocious pirhana, a small fish that inhabits the rivers of South America. The pirhana never becomes much bigger than the perch of our waters, but nature has endowed it with an enormous cavern of a mouth lined with keen, dagger-like teeth.

When the unwary traveler bathes his trail-swollen feet in the river, he is attacked first by one of these viciously predacious fish, then, almost immediately afterward, a whole shoal will strike. If the victim does not retreat promptly he will be dragged under and torn apart by scores of these finny demons.

The pirhana is feared and dreaded by all beasts, even the mammals of the jungle. He is absolutely fearless, and will attack anything regardless of size. The shoal seems to sense immediately when one of its members has located a quarry. No sooner is the prey struck by a single pirhana than the water is thick with the frenzied fish, biting and ripping as though possessed with the killing lust. The natives fear them even more than the giant alligators that infest the same waters.

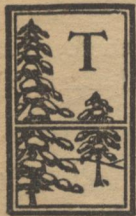
GUN-RUNNER



By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Author of "White Man's Bullets," etc.

This they learned from Jim Winston: pull a long-gun steal on a tejano and you pay in .45 coin on the short-range line.



HE cock-eyed little monkey crowding up against his right arm was a plant. Jim Winston didn't need a dictionary to tell him that. So was the dirty peon with the sleepy face and the alert black eyes under tilted sombrero. He was leaning back against the cantina wall, grimy hands folded over a lean belly, looking for all the world like a lazy goat herder in mid-siesta. And the pose would have foxed Winston completely, if it hadn't been for José Carmoro, bartender, patron saint, owner, swamper, and oracle of the Cantina Carmoro. A look of alarm flashing from his little pig eyes, a slight jerk of the thumb, and Jim knew all he could get without giving José away.

Looking the pair over out of the corner of his eye, Jim sized them up quickly. Pilas was providing him with variation, now. Once before the *alcalde* had set trigger artists on his tail. They

weren't good enough. At present, their mouths were full of daisy roots. They were followed, a couple of days later, by a one-eyed villain with surgical tendencies. The nasty fellow tried to operate on Jim Winston from the back with an unsterilized seven-inch knife. Those who missed Jim the first time always regretted.

The knife slinger spent the night in the juzgado nursing a broken jaw and a violently wrenched arm—that is, he spent it so until a .45 slug, fired most carelessly during a mild riot in Empiro's main street, put him out of the carving business for keeps. They found him in his cell the next morning, staring glassily up at the barred window. Envilio Pilas swore too feelingly when the unfortunate death was reported. "He might have told us much," was the *alcalde's* cryptic remark.

This time, Jim noted, there was a pig sticker and a gunman. Variety—the spice of life. O.K. Jim would make

it hot for the spice! Before the cross-eyed little one had time to set himself for blocking Jim's draw, the big American picked the tequila bottle off the bar as if he would pour himself another drink. Without warning, he made a swift pass at his holster. When the dirty little rat grabbed his arm with both hands, Jim hoisted him in close, whanged him over the head with the bottle. He made a limp shield, as Jim wheeled deliberately to face the snarling gunman up against the wall. He was crouched there, lank belly curved in like a bent spring, big forty-five jutting from his crooked arm and steady hand.

"Cabron," Winston called softly across the cleared space between them, "you are covered from under yonder table. And if you shoot, you but kill this, your amigo."

A flick of the gunman's eyes toward the floor where the by-standing customers had dived for table-shields at the first sign of fight. And Jim heaved the bottle, still in his left hand, straight at the curved belly before him. A surprised grunt, the roar of an automatically triggered Colt. Jim charged in swiftly at Lank-belly, the little cross-eyed one before him for shield and battering ram. The three came together in a confused tangle of tossing arms, pinwheeling legs, howls, and the thunder of random slugs. Then it was over.

It was a rapid and decisive battle.

Little Cross-eye was draped over Lank-belly on the floor. The Colt, still smoking, was in Jim's big right paw. And Lank-belly clutched at his own middle as if everything inside him were busted wide open.

"Can the yowling," Jim snapped. "Consider yourself lucky that I wasn't heeled. And beat it."

He leaned over swiftly, grabbed both the groaning Mexicans by the scruff of their necks. He dragged them over the splintery floor, burst through the cantina door with them, and flung them into the dust of the street.

And then, as he stood over them, fists

doubled, breath rasping, swaying slightly, he heard the voice.

"An American! And fighting in the street!"

The voice came from directly across the street. There stood the *alcalde's* adobe. And in front of it were three people, sitting their horses in the shade of the building. One was a woman—the one who exclaimed at him. Her proud carriage fairly struck him, contrasting with his own disheveled appearance. He, an American—the only American resident of Empiros, and this Yankee girl first saw him fighting with a pair of Mexican cutthroats in front of a *cantina*.

Next to her was a young man surprisingly like her in feature, slightly tanned, with the same proud, aristocratic head and blue eyes; yet with a bearing that marked him in any company as a born soldier. He was smiling, too, scornfully.

Winston's eyes narrowed as they fell upon the third figure of the group watching him—Envilio Pilas, the *alcalde* of the village. Pilas was grinning. Winston's jaw muscles tightened. He understood at once. Pilas had arranged this little scene.

WINSTON'S head was still light when he moved toward his horse, but he swung into the saddle with a natural grace. Before he touched spurs, however, he halted, and came very close to the two Americans. He was unsmiling.

"This is Mexico, not United States," he said softly. "I think—before you leave here, you may be grateful for one American who will condescend to fighting in the street—or anywhere else!"

He turned upon Pilas without waiting for a reply, and gestured toward the two prone figures still lying in the dust.

"There are your hired cutthroats," he said icily. "I hadn't a pistol, but apparently you instructed them not to stop at even murder. Hadn't you better send someone to pick 'em up?"

The *alcalde* started and his dark face purpled. His black heavy brows drew down threateningly. Under them, the round black eyes glowered with a rising flame.

But as he opened his lips to speak, Winston gave a sudden harsh laugh, touched spurs to his magnificent bay, and whirling, dashed up the street. In a few seconds he was hidden in a cloud of dust. The three stood looking after him. Into the girl's eyes had crept something of wonder, replacing the scorn.

"What did he mean?" she demanded.

Pilas shrugged. He had regained his suave poise.

"It is nothing," he said. "He is the American I told you of: Señor Winston. He is cordially hated as a trouble-maker by the people of this village, and there are numerous attempts to finish him off. He is pleased to suggest that I am behind the attempts."

"A trouble-maker?" the young man demanded, looking up. "Do you think he may be the man who is —?"

"Smuggling in the arms?" Pilas finished. "That is my belief, Captain Lyons. He has a large plantation and his men are all armed and drilled. It would not be a very difficult thing for him to begin a dangerous revolt."

"But to start a revolt he must have friends!" put in the girl quickly.

Pilas looked uncomfortable.

"He has, I suppose—some of his own caliber. The troublous element about Empiros, and the men on his ranch, who fear him."

Lyons nodded.

"The thing looks most likely," he said. "It is certain that the gun-runners have left San Francisco and equally certain that three times cargoes were landed at Ospirto. Ospirto is scarcely more than a dock, and it seems quite logical that the guns were brought somewhere hereabouts. From what I have seen and heard of this Winston, he's the likely man."

Pilas nodded.

"He is a grave trial to me," he said.

"I should like your government to interfere if it could. We of Mexican California like Americans here—of the right sort," he added, bowing gracefully to the girl; "but not this type. Winston has made of himself a kind of king. He can flout every law and be as big a bully as he pleases, secure in his trained men on the hacienda, and the power to defy what little armed force the government 'has down here."

The girl was silent. Lyons bit his lip.

"We were going to visit him, weren't we?" he demanded of the *alcalde*.

Pilas bowed.

"Si. His hacienda is just two miles out. And I am afraid that you will have to be dependent upon him for shelter while you are here. The *cantina*, as you see, is the only other place. . . ."

PILAS gestured deprecatingly toward the drab front of the hotel and bar-room owned by José Carmoro.

Lyons nodded.

"Winston's an American, after all, and we shan't bother him for long. I intend to give him a chance to quit and get out of there, anyway, first."

He looked at the girl.

"Only—I wish you hadn't come, Barbara."

She shrugged.

Pilas' dark eyes lighted.

"I am sure that your sister will be quite safe, Captain Lyons. I can offer her every protection within my power."

Lyons looked dubious.

"But if this Winston is the boss around here—"

"He will not be," said Pilas, "—for long!" As Lyons cast a quick glance at him, he added hastily, "It would not take you long, you see, as a representative of the United States Government, to make certain that Señor Winston is responsible for the arms being smuggled out of your country. And then—then I shall have him arrested at once and deported before he can protest."

"From all I can gather, though," put

in Barbara Lyons, smiling, "arresting him will be a task in itself."

Pilas smiled.

"There are ways . . ." he said.

But glancing at the two Mexican bullies in the dust, one of whom was just rising dazedly, the smile died in his eyes. He started out at a slow canter toward the hills, in the shadow of the Sierra de las Cucapos, where James Winston's plantation lay.

The mountains loomed up, gray and blue and mysterious, once the town was left behind. Beyond the mountains, to the eastward, lay the waters of the Gulf of California. Many miles to the north was the border between California and Mexico.

The territory about Empiros was almost forgotten by the Federal Government on the mainland. Sparsely populated, it was simply a part of Mexico. No troops were stationed there; there were only the irregular troops of Rurales nearby. The narrow isthmus, so patently unpatrolled, isolated as it was, seemed made for a revolutionary base.

Winston, if the man really were in this thing, thought Lyons as he rode on, was far from mad. Once a revolt got fairly started here, nothing on earth could check it; and the peasants, always ready for something new, would flock to the raised standard.

Winston could become a dictator, an emperor. And from the tales rife about him in Empiros, the American was a leader, a master, the sort that could harbor dreams of kingship and make them come true.

CHAPTER II

VISITORS

BUT Jim Winston, as he reined in before the square front of his big adobe hacienda seemed to be bent little upon dreams of kingship. There was a haggard look to his ordinarily piercing eyes and his jaws were tight together.

The wound at his temple had commenced at last to bleed; it had purpled and it still made him feel dizzy. Through the break in the skin, the blood oozed slowly forth and trickled unnoticed down his cheek.

But Winston had forgotten the wound. He was thinking of the girl and the look of scorn he had seen in her eyes when he had glanced up from the still figures of the two Mexicans. He had remembered for the first time in several years that he was, after all, an American.

He never remembered having seen a woman quite so beautiful, nor so proud and fine, as this one. She was different from the women who had come into his life. And she despised him—as well she might, he admitted, from her point of view.

When he slipped down from his horse before the square patio opening before the hacienda, a peon boy came running up to take the bridle. At his cry of solicitude when he saw the blood on Winston's cheek, another Mexican ran out of the house.

This latter bent upon Winston a keen look and ran immediately to his side. Although obviously an employee, he was dressed well and in expensive taste, and his dark eyes were full of concern. Winston smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It is not serious, Julio," he said. "It was too bad you were not there, though. They almost finished me."

"And you had no pistol!" Julio exclaimed. "I found it in your holster after you had gone. How many were there?"

"Two," replied Winston briefly.

He dropped with a sigh into a big wicker chair that was placed between two tall palms in the cool patio. With an ironic glance, he took in his stained and dirty clothes.

"I must have made a fine figure," he mused, as Julio deftly washed the wound from a basin he had brought, and bound up his employer's head.

"There are two Americans in town, Julio."

The Mexican nodded.

"I have heard," he said quietly. "They are Captain Lyons, of the United States Intelligence Department, and his sister, the Señorita Barbara."

"You find out things swiftly, Julio." Winston nodded slowly. "Do you know any more?"

"They—or the *capitan*, at least, has come down to trace shipments of smuggled arms which came from government arsenals—through Osposito to Empiros!" Julio smiled. "I believe you are suspected, Señor."

"No doubt," Winston agreed grimly. "They were in the company of the excellent Don Envilio Pilas. Pilas must want me out of the way badly. Those two men were bent on murder today."

Julio shook his head.

"I have warned you, *Maestre*. You should always have me—or one of the men—at your side."

Winston laughed.

"If I have to go about with a body-guard, I shall stay at home," he said. "But I am afraid that Pilas is going to make me angry before long."

He looked down at the rippling muscles of his forearm and his wide shoulders set back more firmly in the chair.

WINSTON was a big man, of powerful physique, yet built with the lithe grace of a jungle cat. In the World War, a dose of chlorine phosgene gas had threatened to make his strength a mockery when the stuff pierced his lungs. He had sold his effects and migrated to Mexican California, where the daily sun had done its healing well. He had at last recovered his own strength.

But he found then that he had grown attached to the plantation where he had recovered his health. Attached, too, to the men who worked for him all day long and who, at night-time, played and laughed and sang their native songs, as they worked.

He did not want to leave. He had

found a certain contentment there. The Mexican agrarian laws came into being and the loss of his property was threatened. Old Don Miguel Esposa, the *alcalde* of the village at the time, gave him what protection he could. But Winston, never willing to sit back and be protected, had formed his own men into a fighting unit.

Straggling bands of Mexican Indians, out after loot and plunder under the banner of patriotism, had found a hot reception at Winston's hacienda. When at last a machine gun arrived he was molested no longer. The Mexican Government, anxious to conciliate, had given him a new lease on his property.

And then, mysteriously, two months since, old Don Miguel, his friend, had been killed by a bullet which came from nowhere. Envilio Pilas, a native of Empiros, returned from Mexico City with official orders to take over the post of *alcalde*.

Since then there had been little peace. Arms came through from the coast and disappeared the same night. Pilas at first attempted to gain Winston's friendship; and when that failed, there appeared other ways. Twice the American's life had been attempted, previous to that afternoon.

Winston had not made an enemy in Empiros up to the time of Pilas' régime, so there was no doubt in his mind as to who lay behind the attacks.

But now, the United States had entered the thing, in the person of young Captain Anthony Lyons. And Lyons suspecting him of smuggling arms, a grave offense in an American expatriate. Pilas would have seen to it that suspicion fell on him.

Winston shrugged. Pilas was patently afraid of him. That was enough. It meant that Pilas knew who was the stronger. He could afford to wait. Here he was master. Even the *alcalde* feared him, and young Lyons was helpless.

The peon boy who had taken his horse came running around the corner of the patio.

"Visitors, *Maestre!*" he exclaimed. "Two men and a woman!"

Winston's head jerked up. Pilas must be bringing the Americans here! For what purpose? He got swiftly to his feet and turned on Julio.

"See that they are taken care of," he ordered. "If I must see that woman again, the advantage is going to be mine."

As he went inside the house and climbed slowly up the cool stairway, he added to himself, "I'm going to make sure that I'll never see that *look* in her eyes again!"

WHEN he came downstairs a few minutes later, his guests—Pilas, Captain Lyons, and the latter's sister—were seated in chairs Julio had dragged out in the patio.

Winston, however, was a different man. There was only the narrow bandage about his head to connote the affair in Empiro's main street. Shaved, cool and immaculate in clean breeches and shirt, and boots, he made a handsome figure.

The girl gave him a quick glance when his eyes sought hers, and then she looked away. There was an unwilling respect in Lyons' eyes, too, not so much at the clothes Winston wore, as at his air of instinctive, unquestioned command. Winston bowed coldly, turning to the *alcalde*.

"To what do I owe this extreme pleasure, Señor?"

Pilas got up.

"The Señorita Lyons, Señor Winston—and El Capitan Lyons, both your countrymen," he said. "There are so few Americans here that I thought, during their visit, your hacienda might prove hospitable. There is no place in town, and my home—"

"Your house," interrupted Winston smoothly, "is a sort of headquarters, I believe. My countrymen would not be comfortable, perhaps."

He smiled and turned to the two Americans.

"Had I known, in town, that I was to have this pleasure, I should have waited. But I am naturally most happy if you will accept my hospitality."

There was an awkward pause.

"Thank you," Lyons murmured stiffly. "We shall not be here long, I think. You seem well guarded, though, Mr. Winston. I noticed a machine gun in the barn as I passed."

Winston smiled, drawing down one eyebrow arrogantly as he glanced at Pilas.

"We are well guarded, Captain Lyons. An American in Empiros is either a king or a slave, and I made my choice some time ago. My hacienda, as Señor Pilas will vouch, is remarkably impregnable to attack—of any sort."

Barbara Lyons looked up.

"Is it so necessary?" she asked.

Winston turned again to the *alcalde*. "Ask Señor Pilas," he suggested.

Pilas tried to shrug, his brows dark. He straightened his tie.

"Señor Winston seems to think it so," he murmured. "Personally, I should not dare to have such a display of armament in a foreign country, for fear of suspicion as to my motives."

He shot a quick glance at Lyons, who nodded briefly.

"If one has sufficient armament, Señor Pilas," Winston laughed, "one can afford to ignore suspicion!"

Pilas' eyes flamed, but it was the only sign he gave of having understood. Lyons looked at Winston keenly.

Searching glances were exchanged.

At that moment *mate* was brought on a tray and set before the American to serve. The hot drink was a rare delicacy to Pilas and an experience to the two visitors. They imbibed with relish, and shortly afterward the *alcalde* took his departure.

Barbara was shown to her room and Julio despatched a boy to the village for the effects of the visitors, who had landed that morning at Osposito from a fruit steamer. Winston was alone with Anthony Lyons.

CHAPTER III

THREAT

THE two Americans sat a long time in silence, until Lyons finally raised his head. His eyes were very straight.

"Winston, there's a lot of strange things going on about here."

Winston nodded coolly.

"I'm glad you've discovered that," he said. "Do you want my advice?"

"Have you any to give?"

"One piece," Winston drawled. "That is—get your sister out of this country *pronto*. The strange things you've discovered are about to become stranger."

"My sister wouldn't leave," Lyons said, "and I can't believe things are as bad as you suggest. Besides," he added quickly, "how do you happen to be so well informed?"

Winston looked up.

"I keep informed, Lyons," he said. "Does it surprise you to know that I am informed as to the object of your visit here?"

Lyons flushed.

"It doesn't," he said, "in the light of what I have learned today. There's only one explanation: you're formulating an uprising!"

"Are you certain?"

"I have every reason to believe—"

Winston turned suddenly with what was almost a snarl.

"Lyons, you're a fool!" he exclaimed. "You have every reason to believe, you say. You mean you have the word of my one enemy, Don Envilio Pilas. But have you investigated Pilas? No. You've come here on a secret mission from your Government and yet within twenty-four hours the two men open to suspicion are each aware of what you are doing. You should be most successful!"

Lyons' blue eyes flamed angrily, but he held his temper.

"Pilas is *alcalde* of the village," he said. "It is hardly necessary to suspect

him of smuggling arms and planning a revolt. Besides, the trained condition of your plantation workers, and the excellent machine gun in your barn, take a lot of explaining."

He waited. Winston smiled grimly.

"And suppose I don't explain?" he murmured.

Lyons shot to his feet.

"Now we begin to understand each other. If you won't explain, I shall act. I have not the slightest doubt that you've received the arms and ammunition smuggled from a government arsenal. I shouldn't have accepted your hospitality if I hadn't intended to give you one chance."

"What's that?" murmured Winston.

"To get out! Leave things just as they are and get away from here. I shall take measures to recover the arms as soon as I know where they are. If you want a chance to get away, you'll have to tell me that."

"Otherwise—?"

Winston was still smiling.

"Otherwise, I'm starting immediately for the Rurales' post, outside Empiros, for military aid!"

Winston arose slowly.

"Did it ever occur to you," he drawled, "that if your suspicions were correct, I could prevent you from ever starting?"

For reply, Lyons' hand darted to his hip pocket and emerged with a shining automatic, which covered his host's chest. "Try it," he suggested.

Winston showed neither surprise nor resentment.

"You have courage, at least," he said quietly. "A man pulled a pistol on me at the same time, earlier today; you saw him and his confederate, I believe, lying outside the *cantina*. But you won't need that, Lyons. If you want to go to the Rurales, you're free to do so. Put away that gun."

"I have your word?" Lyons persisted.

"My word," Winston drawled, and as the gun was restored to his guest's

pocket, he called his peon boy and ordered Lyons' mount saddled.

As Lyons stepped up into the stirrups, Winston added:

"Give my regards to Captain Garcia, of the Rurales."

Lyons gave him a puzzled look, shrugged, and whirled his mount toward the roadway. Then he was gone.

WINSTON was prepared for the next development. He was in the library half an hour later, when he heard a horse drawn up outside and caught, through the window opening, a glimpse of Envilio Pilas dismounting, dressed up in all the gaudy finery of a *vaquero* on a holiday. He smiled and calling for Julio, bade the native wait, while he went into the wide, whitewashed entrance hall to receive the *alcalde*.

"Do I flatter myself that you have called to see me so soon, Señor Pilas?" he demanded.

The Mexican frowned heavily.

"Pleasant as that would be, I have not," Pilas retorted. "I want to see Captain Lyons—or, if he is not here, the Señorita Barbara."

"And as you have just observed Captain Lyons riding through the village, you are quite certain he is not here, eh?" Winston finished smoothly. "I am sorry, but the Señorita Barbara is not at home to visitors."

"Who decided that?" Pilas demanded abruptly.

"The idea is all mine," Winston smiled.

Then he grew serious and took a step nearer to the stocky figure of the *alcalde*.

"Look here, Pilas, Lyons is making a fool of himself and I don't care how far he develops that ability. But his sister—she's not for you and I'm not going to see her molested, *Sabe?*"

"Perhaps you think her happier in the company of a renegade *Americano?*" Pilas sneered.

"She is not in my company—and I don't intend that she shall be in yours!"

the American retorted. "We understand each other, Pilas, and when you're ready for action, you can have it. But in the meantime—*vamos!*"

Pilas threatened to burst asunder as his wrath made the cords in his neck bulge and swell. But before he could speak, Winston became aware of a step on the stairs, and he swung about to find Barbara Lyons descending, cool and vividly feminine since she had changed from her riding clothes into a loose gown of green.

"Am I under discussion?" she demanded coolly.

"You are," replied Winston abruptly. "You will please return to your room until it is over."

Her head went up.

"I am not accustomed to orders, Mr. Winston!" she exclaimed. "I am coming down."

Pilas glowed. Winston hesitated for only a second. Then:

"Julio!" he called. As the Mexican appeared, he gestured toward Pilas. "See that our most excellent *alcalde* does not follow me," he said briefly.

Julio nodded and took up his post at the foot of the stairs, while Winston darted past him. Barbara Lyons gasped as she became aware of his intent. He halted on the step below her.

"Will you do as I have asked you?" he demanded. "Or shall I have to use force?"

RESENTMENT and anger flamed for a second in her blue eyes. Then she was cold, haughty.

"If Señor Pilas has come to see me," she said, "I am going down."

Without another word, Winston swooped forward when she started past him. The girl found herself caught up lightly in his arms, swept helpless off her feet. Pilas smothered an oath. Julio stirred, but kept his eyes on his countryman.

Before the girl was really aware of what had happened, she found herself inside her room. The door closed be-

hind Winston and the key turned in the lock. The American went slowly down the stairs and faced the *alcalde*.

"You may observe," he said, "that I am master in my hacienda. Also, as I said, we understand each other, Pilas. And so—may we not say *Adios!*—until we meet again?"

Pilas' black eyes were alight with hatred. He turned at last on his heel; but as he reached the door, he whirled.

"And we *will* meet again—oh, very soon! *Americano!*" he hissed.

Winston bowed mockingly.

"I believe you," he said.

He waited until the sound of the *alcalde's* hoofbeats were lost on the road. Then he turned to Julio, who was at once his lieutenant, confidante and foreman of the plantation.

"You observed, Julio," he murmured, "that Señor Pilas promised us a speedy meeting. He is ready to strike."

"How soon, do you think?" Julio asked.

"At any time, so far as I can see." Winston considered. "In the first place, there will be no more arms coming through, since obviously the United States has discovered the smuggling. That is why Lyons is here. Pilas, therefore, has nothing to wait for—and everything to gain by striking at once."

"You mean—" Julio breathed, glancing up toward the door behind which Barbara Lyons was imprisoned.

"Exactly. There is now a woman in the case and Pilas intends to have her. I grasped that when I first saw them together. And the woman will be leaving this part of Mexico within twenty-four hours!"

"It is time, then, for us to move, too, eh, Señor?"

"It is time," Winston agreed. He lit a cigarette nervously. "Julio, somewhere in the Valle del Malingo, Pilas has been storing the arms that have been smuggled in. I think tonight we had better find them."

"I shall have the men ready," Julio said quietly.

THEY had moved, as they talked, out into the patio, and now, straight ahead of them, the slopes of the Sierra de los Cucapos loomed. Winston's eyes, narrowed speculatively, followed a meandering trail which led to a break in the seemingly impregnable wall of mountains.

Beyond that pass lay the Valle del Maligno—the Valley of the Evil One, so termed by the natives of Empiros for generations. Winston termed it the Valley of Madness; the natives shunned it, and in its brooding, gravelike silence he had felt often that anything might happen.

Years since—centuries ago, perhaps, there had been a city there, set in the valley between the high palisades which towered up on every side. The natives of the city had built in stone upon the stones of the valley and lived by cultivating the rich slopes outside their home.

Now there was no one who even remembered the city, and it was a thing of crumbled ruins, chalk-like bones of a former magnificence, given over to rats and bats and decay.

Winston stared at the pass leading into the hidden valley. He nodded slowly. Somewhere in there, he was certain, Pilas had stored arms for the intended revolt.

"Tonight," he said to Julio, "arm all the men. We will enter the Valle del Maligno!"

CHAPTER IV

FLIGHT

WINSTON'S plans were well formulated. If Lyons returned, he intended to divulge them to him and permit the American to accompany him. If he did not return soon enough, it mattered nothing.

He had long suspected Pilas' activities; he had suspected the man since Don Miguel had died from an assassin's

bullet and Pilas had taken his place immediately. Once or twice, at night, his men had seen bands of Mexicans toiling up the slopes toward the black pass that wound into the valley.

Before Lyons had come, his suspicions had been fairly well formulated. Now he knew. And he knew his plans, too.

If he could enter the valley and confiscate Pilas' store of arms and ammunition, the revolt would be crippled before it got under way. There remained, of course, the question of searching for the hiding place; the city itself, in decay, was not large, but there were numerous passages under the ruined walls, built there by architects of a vanished race. It would require a thorough scouring of the valley.

There was one other hope, too. Somewhere in the valley lived an old priest who existed as a hermit amid its desolation. There seemed just a chance that Padre Montescar might know something of where the arms were stored. Winston had never seen the old man but he felt that he could convince him of his purpose.

The long, eventful afternoon was drawing to a close, and in the *patio* the shadows had lengthened. Winston stood irresolute for a long time after Julio had left him there. From the kitchen came sounds of dinner preparations; soon he would have to face Barbara Lyons.

He dreaded it. If she had despised him before, she must hate him now. The scorn that he pictured in her blue eyes made him bite his lips with anguish.

Why had all this been necessary? Why, when he met this one girl of all others, hadn't he had the opportunity to meet her at his best? Never could he live down the impression of brutality he had created by two successive acts.

At last he shrugged and turned toward the interior. But he halted as Julio's hail reached him, and swung about to find his lieutenant running toward him from the direction of the

corrals, another Mexican puffing to keep pace with him.

"It's begun!" Julio gasped. "They're starting for here already!"

"What do you mean?" Winston turned upon the second man, one of his plantation workers whom he had detailed to stay in the town and get what information of Pilas' movements he could. The man was very excited.

"Señor Pilas returned to the city two hours ago, *Maestre*," he said, "an' at once there was talk. Everyone was excited. Then I hear someone say they are march for Señor Winston's hacienda today!"

He paused.

"So I get on my horse an' hurry home the shortest way, an' on the road I see Pilas and his men—about t'ree miles from here, *Maestre*, in the woods!"

"How many of them?" Winston demanded brusquely.

"Maybe two hundred."

Winston nodded thoughtfully. The news was not particularly surprising; but Pilas had outmaneuvered him in the first clash. Two hundred men—the *alcalde* had not waited to gather up his whole force, which Winston estimated must be nearer five hundred. He hadn't arms for them, anyway, until he could march them to the valley; so he had simply scraped together those who were armed and was forming them.

Undoubtedly his intention was to make a surprise attack on the hacienda. Once Winston were out of the way, the rest would be easy. Probably the telegraph lines were already cut.

WINSTON'S eyes narrowed. He had underestimated Pilas. This move was a strategic one. Even now he doubted if he could form the eighty men employed on his plantation in time to meet the *alcalde's* advance.

Pilas was after the girl. Winston's jaws came together. His plans were formed.

"We cannot risk a fight here with the lady in the house," he said to Julio.

"Form the men, but keep them out of sight. Take to the hills if necessary; but on no account risk a battle until I can take charge. I am going to take Señorita Lyons to the Rurales' barracks. *Sabe?*"

Julio nodded.

"I understand, Señor. But—shall I go with you?"

Winston shook his head.

"You can do more by taking command in my absence," he said. "They will not attack the hacienda if there is no one to guard it. But when I return—then we will move!"

"*Bueno!*" Julio saluted brusquely as Winston turned back toward the house. His mouth was set in a grim line.

He buckled on his holster in the hall and called to the peon boy to saddle his own and Barbara's Lyons' mount post haste. Then he hastened up the stone steps to the second story, halting before the room he had assigned to the girl. He fitted the key into the lock, turned it, and then knocked.

Barbara Lyons appeared on the threshold, her face pale, but her eyes shining and her lips curled with scorn as she looked at him.

"We've got to leave here at once," Winston said, without prelude. "Pilas is forming his men and marching for here. We've just got time for a get-away."

She looked surprised.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," she said. "If Señor Pilas is coming here, it is probably in his official capacity as *alcalde*—to release me!"

It was Winston's turn to be surprised. In the excitement of the moment and the necessity for swift action, he had not realized what Barbara's attitude would be. What reason, after all, had she to believe in him, when she already believed him to be a blackguard, a trouble-maker, at odds with the forces of law and order in this part of the country?

His jaws clamped sternly. This was no moment for argument and there was

no possibility of his ever convincing her in time to make an escape.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I see it's impossible to make you understand. Pilas is coming here to release you, all right—but if you fall into his hands, you'll have a lifetime to regret it. Miss Lyons, you've got to come with me, whether you trust me or not. I'll explain later."

"Why should I go with you?" she demanded.

"Because I have said so!" he retorted, his eyes narrowing sternly. "I've had to use force once and I shall use it again if it becomes necessary. You may as well come peacefully."

Their eyes met and held. At last, before the dominant strength behind his, her glance fell.

"I will go," she said. "But I must have time to change these clothes. I can't ride in this dress."

"You have exactly three minutes," Winston said, and shut the door.

SHE appeared within the time allotted, still pale, a trifle weary, but proud as ever.

"This is kidnaping," she said. "Sooner or later my brother will find you—and then you'll have a man to deal with!"

They were in the lower hall. Winston suddenly stopped and caught her arm.

"Look at me, Barbara Lyons!" he commanded. Against her will, her eyes rose to meet his. "Do I look like a kidnaper?" he demanded. "I'm taking you directly to the post of the Rurales, where your brother has gone. And what's more," he added sternly, "you trust me, whether you want to admit it to yourself or not—if you didn't, I couldn't have forced you to obey!"

Her red lips quivered ungovernably. Her eyes fell. She looked away.

"I suppose—you are right," she faltered. "I have no reason to trust you, but—I want to!"

Winston felt the blood leaping

through his veins at the halting confession. His face took on a new strength. He had her trust, her acknowledgment of that trust. Now nothing on heaven or earth should harm her!

The boy came up, leading two horses: Winston's sorrel and Barbara Lyons' bay. He helped her to mount without a word and then swung himself into his own saddle. Julio came around the corner of the patio and saluted.

"I have armed the men, Señor," he reported. "Pilas' gang is marching straight for here now. I have scouts along the road."

"Where have you got our men?" Winston demanded.

"In the gully, well out of sight."

"Good!" Winston exclaimed. "Be sure you take the machine gun; don't let them get their hands on it. Get in a good position and show no signs of fight unless they attack you. They won't come near you, I'm certain."

He motioned to the open road.

"*Si, Señor!*" Julio glanced up the road anxiously. "Now you must go. Some of them are mounted and once they find you gone, it will be a close race."

Winston nodded to the girl, grasped Julio's hand, and dug in his spurs. The two horses got away to a swift start, dashed down the path into the roadway and turned northeast.

"We don't dare go through Empiros," Winston said, glancing back over his shoulder to where a cloud of dust, curling up through the dusk, gave warning of Pilas' advance. "He's probably patrolled the town."

Barbara gave him a puzzled glance, but said nothing, sheering off beside him as he spoke. They found themselves on a dusty path which ran for a short distance almost parallel with the main road, and then, as the lights of Empiros, like fireflies, twinkled ahead, verged sharply eastward.

They had not progressed far on this road, however, before shouts and the swift beat of hoofs could be heard be-

hind them. Pilas had discovered their absence and he and his mounted men were in swift pursuit.

Winston, digging in his spurs harder, made out their cries as they rounded the first bend in the highway and thundered on. Then he strained to hear more; there was confusion behind, and for a moment the sound of the galloping hoofs was stilled.

The sudden silence, as every sound of pursuit ended without warning, made Winston frown. What could it mean?

CHAPTER V

CUT OFF

THEN Winston had a flash of recollection. There was another short cut ahead, between this point and Empiros; if Pilas was certain that they had taken this branch path, he could cut them off. He looked back nervously over his shoulder, but though there was a moon, none of its light fell through the interlacing trees which had closed in on either side of their path when they had branched off the highway.

Patches of moonlight shone through in spots like daubs of silver on the turf. Winston strained his eyes ahead.

He told the girl of his fears. "If they come upon us," he said, "leave me and ride—just keep on riding, anywhere, rather than fall into Pilas' hands."

"But why?" she demanded.

He turned to her briefly.

"Pilas is doing what your brother and you suspected me of doing—fomenting a revolt. I've known it for weeks, but I didn't like your brother's attitude. And tonight—because circumstances had forced his hand, he made his first move."

She said nothing but he guessed at what her silence meant. She believed him now, he knew. Winston's eyes were fixed on the road, peering around each new curve for what lay beyond.

The silence disturbed him more than he would admit to his companion.

On his return from the Rurales' post, Anthony Lyons had ridden through Empiros, wide-eyed at the patrols in the streets; and then, galloping hard for the hacienda with a swift presentiment growing in his mind, he had charged straight into a body of horsemen with Envilio Pilas at its head.

There was a wild shout to halt, and Pilas' men drew up in a scattered, disorderly mass along the roadside. The *alcalde* swung about and trotted back to Lyons, who had halted. It was this cessation of pursuit which had alarmed Winston.

"You are going back to the hacienda?" Pilas demanded.

Lyons nodded, gesturing toward the men. "What does all this mean?"

"It means," replied Pilas quickly, "that Señor Winston has kidnaped your sister—and I am in pursuit."

As Lyons gasped, he went on quickly:

"You have just come through Empiros; was there a sign of them on the road?"

"None! But tell me—"

"Never mind. They have turned off here, then," Pilas decided. "There is a short cut ahead. We can beat them." Without paying Lyons any further attention, he swung upon his men and with a series of rapid commands was off along the main highway.

Lyons sat his mount stunned for a moment. Winston had kidnaped his sister. . . .! A few hours ago he could well have believed it; but he had begun to doubt his own suspicions since his visit to Captain Garcia of the Rurales, who had laughed him to scorn when he demanded a posse to arrest the American.

But now, in the face of Pilas' announcement, his doubts returned. Winston was king here—perhaps Garcia was either afraid or hand in glove with him in his conspiracy. His jaw set and he glanced down the road over which he had come: Pilas and his men were just

riding out of sight around a curve in the highway.

The *alcalde* had said they must have taken this branch that left the road a few feet beyond. Suppose Winston became warned and turned back? Digging in his spurs with sudden decision, Lyons loosed his pistol, carrying it in his hand, and galloped down the road Winston and his sister had taken.

The trees closed in about him; silence fell, except for the beat of his hoofs, dull thuds on the soft path. He rode on, his eyes strained ahead, the pistol butt clamped tight in his bridle hand.

SUDDENLY there was the pound of hoofs along the path ahead. Lyons slackened his pace, his blue eyes narrowing to slits. The pistol came up. A path of silver moonlight fell through an opening in the trees ahead. He reined in just as two riders tore around a sharp curve in the road and the sound of shouts and thunder of hoofbeats came from behind them.

It was they!

"Halt!" he cried, and his pistol gleamed.

Winston had no time to draw. Lyons was too close and unrecognized at this distance. Behind them galloped Pilas' men, whom he had heard enfilading through a gully which intersected the wood road. Winston's horse charged forward and he pushed the nose of Barbara's mount aside as she cried out.

"Stand aside!" he cried, and plunged for the lone horseman at top speed. Over his shoulder he flung at the girl, "Keep going! I'll catch up if I can."

"It's—Tony!" she screamed, but too late.

Winston's horse met that of the other American before he heard her words; the automatic spurted red flame again and the shot sped harmlessly overhead. His arms went out as the two horses recoiled from the shock and he and the other man tumbled to the ground together.

Barbara's horse came to a stop and

Winston groaned as he saw her running back. The pounding hoofs of Pilas' troop were very close.

"Run!" Winston cried, as his fingers fastened about his assailant's throat. A fist came up out of the dark and caught him on the side of his jaw; his head swam.

Through a mist he became aware of Barbara's cry, "Tony—stop!" even as he caught sight of the black mass of horsemen bearing down upon them. He realized that the man in his hands was no longer struggling; and turning, beheld Pilas on a big horse just above him.

Lyons struggled to his feet, his pistol out, calling to his sister. That was the last Winston remembered. Before he could reach for his gun, he was surrounded by a circle of plunging horses and something heavy flashed before his eyes, descending with a dull pain against his head.

He sank to the ground, in blackness.

IT might have been minutes or hours later that he awoke; he could not tell. It seemed that he had been struggling with the black fog of unconsciousness, fighting his way back to sensibility, for æons. At last he heard a familiar voice in his ear and cool water splashed lightly across his forehead.

He opened his eyes. The man bending over him, dishing out palmfuls of water from a sombrero on the ground, was Anthony Lyons. The latter smiled hopefully.

"Coming back?" he demanded.

Winston raised himself on one elbow uncertainly and noticed that Lyons had a handkerchief tied about his head. He glanced down at the sombrero full of water without replying.

"I woke up a half hour ago," Lyons said, "and crawled to the creek just beyond the trees there. Then I filled my hat and I've been trying to bring you to, ever since."

Winston nodded, frowning.

"I suppose, then," he ventured, "that you've found out what a fool you were."

Lyons looked away, his eyes narrowing and his mouth drawn with mental pain.

"Go ahead," he said, in a low, tense voice. "Rub it in—I deserve it, from you. I'll stand anything, just for a chance at that devil, Pilas!" He hesitated. "He left us both here and rode off with Barbara."

Winston nodded again.

"Of course." He propped himself against the bole of a tree and felt the strength seeping slowly back into his big frame.

"How did you happen to get here?"

Lyons told his story briefly, punctuating it with his own opinions of himself. When he had finished, Winston lit a cigarette.

"Just about what I expected," he said. "Do you know now who smuggled in the arms here?"

"Pilas, of course." Lyons frowned. "But I can't quite see how he expects to pull a real revolt—"

"He doesn't!" Winston cut in decisively. "He isn't a big enough man to even dream of a Dictatorship. He's simply going to rouse the surrounding country and then sell out to the Federal Government, which will be glad of peace at almost any concession."

"He'll grab my plantation for himself, loot the churches and the homes of any men rich enough to be worth while, and then get what he can from the Government for peace. It's an old game and it always works."

He bit his lip.

"Only—it wouldn't have worked this time. I didn't tell you, because I didn't like your attitude; but between Captain Garcia and me, we'd have nipped his plans in the bud at the proper moment."

"Is it too late now?" Lyons demanded. "There's Barbara, remember—in his hands. What will it be—ransom?"

"I don't think so."

Winston shook his head.

"Pilas, after his own snakelike fashion, is in love. He'll probably force her

to marry him, hoping, at the conclusion of this affair, to settle down on the loot he's got, and become a real *hacendado*—a landed gentleman, with plantations and wealth."

"Marry him!" Lyons echoed. "*That greaser?*" He got to his feet, his features distorted. "Oh, Heavens, what a fool I've been. Winston, help me, won't you? She's got to be saved—from that!"

Winston stood up, a trifle unsteadily. He faced the other man coolly.

"I'll help you, all right, Lyons," he said. "If you weren't here, I'd do it myself. Chiefly because—no matter what you think, if Barbara says yes, she's going to be *my* wife!"

Lyons looked at him frankly.

"A few hours ago, I should probably have struck you for that," he said. "But—as I say, I've been a fool. Now—if Barbara says yes, I'll be happy to see my sister married to a man-sized man!"

"Thank you," Winston murmured, and turned toward the main roadway. "They've probably gone into the Valle del Maligno, where Pilas has stored his arms. We'll get horses at the hacienda and head for there."

CHAPTER VI

VALLEY OF MADNESS

THE hacienda, when the two men approached, was deserted and forlorn in appearance. The wide patio and the hallways were dark and the narrow grilled windows were like sightless eyes. About the patio and the gate were strewn bits of wreckage which showed that Pilas' men had passed, like vandals.

But they had not halted for long, fortunately, before the chase had gone on. The interior was not seriously wrecked. Bayonets had been stuck through some of the fine lounges and divans and in the music room, a tall, ancestral oil painting of the original owner had been slashed down its center with a sabre.

Winston shrugged. "They must have felt badly at having to move on. Think of all the damage they *didn't* do. . . . But they're planning on coming back; that's certain."

They were standing in the dark hallway when a form darkened the entrance. Winston put his hand over Lyons' mouth as the latter felt for his pistol.

"*Maestre!*"

The American stepped forward and scrutinized the face of one of his oldest servants. "Ah, Francesco!" he breathed. "Any news? Where is Julio?"

"I am in charge, *Maestre*," the old Mexican said in Spanish. "It was hard to restrain the men in the gully while those vandals tore through this house . . . very hard. But they are still there, awaiting thy word."

"Good. And Julio?"

Francesco chuckled his reply.

"He followed Pilas' army, *Señor*, fearing that you might be captive. If he found you there, he intended to return and attack."

Winston nodded.

"Very good, Francesco. Hold our men until either Julio or I return. We cannot attack now, because Pilas has the lady captive and we don't dare. I want a horse."

Francesco shook his head.

"All but one were taken by Pilas and his men. The last one Julio took, *Maestre*. These are bitter days."

Winston looked at his companion.

"That means we'll have to find our way to the Valley of Madness on foot," he said.

"But you are going there?" Francesco interposed. "The foot soldiers are on their way there now."

"We'll have to get around them then," Winston said. "I've got to go, Francesco. Wait for orders here."

He started out, but the old peon caught his arm.

"One thing more, *Maestre*. Among Pilas' men is young Felipe, my son; he joined them in the dark, as they were passing, and they will never know. I

sent him, thinking you captured, in the hope that he might help."

Winston gripped the old man's shoulder.

"You did well, Francesco. I shall not forget. And now—*Adios!*"

"*Queda con Dios!*" breathed the old servitor, as Winston and his companion set out toward the path which led to the pass in the mountains.

A HEAD of them, indistinct, but yet visible in the moonlight, they could make out a long column of men toiling up the slope toward the pass. In order to avoid being seen by any of this band, they kept to the shadows along the side of the road, where a little gully ran. They were soon close behind these men, for the latter moved slowly.

"Take to the side," Winston said, as they were almost upon Pilas' foot-soldiers. "We've got to get there before they do."

He scuttled off into the dark on the side of the road. The gully contained a narrow stream which trickled through its center and was quite choked with growth. Crossing this stream, the two Americans found themselves well screened from view on the farther side. Within a few yards of the toiling little army, they were quite unseen.

"Only about a hundred of them are armed," Lyons whispered.

"There were two hundred armed at dusk," Winston returned, "but part of them were mounted. This must be the whole of his force, and they'll be issued arms and ammunition as soon as they get inside the valley."

Lyons glanced up at the black mouth of the pass that led into the valley, a jagged, forbidding knife-slash in the hog-backed palisade. "It's a perfect place from which to start a military movement," he breathed. "There's only the one entrance?"

Winston nodded. They were approaching the pass. He pointed to where a tiny trickle of a path scaled the palisade to the right of them.

"From the top there, one can overlook the valley," he said. "But no one could get in from there; it's a sheer drop, and the defenders inside could pick off any men who tried to slide down by ropes or ladders."

"Big guns could solve it, of course, if big guns could be got up there," Lyons observed.

Winston laughed.

"I haven't seen a big gun since I've been down here!"

He caught his companion's arm; above them now, loomed the black bulk of the pass; a tiny trail circled in front of them and disappeared between two great shoulders of rock.

The two Americans paused, crouched in the bushes alongside the trail. Below them, out of sight, the foot-soldiers still straggled along at a snail's pace. But in the mouth of the pass, wide enough for no more than two men abreast, a lone guard stood outlined against the pallid blue of the starry sky.

It seemed as though he stood upon the edge of the world, for behind him there was no sign of earth; only the sky, vast and far off. And he commanded an excellent vantage; the guard could see for several yards down the narrow trail.

"We'll have to take a chance on walking straight up," Winston whispered. "He'll never suspect two men when he's expecting more revolutionists any minute. When we get up there—go!"

Lyons nodded, tight-lipped. They started.

When they were no more than ten paces from where he stood, the lone sentinel threw up his carbine and the two approaching him heard the bolt click. Winston kept on, head down, Lyons beside him.

There was a sudden question.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

They moved forward. Shading his eyes with the brim of his sombrero, Winston raised his hand, and said, gutturally:

"*Amigos!*"

"Halt!" came the command again.

IT was a tense moment. But a few feet separated them now. Winston affected to halt, but moved forward a shuffling step. The muzzle of the carbine was almost between his eyes.

"Now!" he exclaimed, and in the same instant struck the gun aside with his hand, leaping forward and down.

The weapon clattered to the rock as Lyons swung past him. There was a fierce impact as the latter's fist struck home to the jaw and Winston's fist went to the fellow's stomach. He crumpled. Instantly Winston bore him to the ground and held him.

They stripped the man of his belt and bandoleer, tying hands and feet securely. Then, stuffing his own bandanna in his mouth, they threw him into the darkness bordering the pass. Winston stood up and looked behind them.

The toiling army was still crawling upward, but quite visible now. He turned. Lyons was silent, surveying the scene spread out at their feet; the chalky gravestones of what had once been a beautiful city.

The Valle del Maligno was less than a half mile in width and the city itself occupied only part of that stony, arid ground. There had never been any cultivation in the valley; its floor was of smooth rock, and this the ancient inhabitants had quarried in primitive fashion for some of their buildings. The rest were of adobe; but all had fallen, through centuries of neglect, into a vast and senile decay. Here and there a wall stood up; in one or two places a roof still hung precariously though most of its supports had crumbled away.

Débris and boulders littered what had once been a long, wide street, carved and leveled out of the rock surface. Only a suggestion of the street remained. The moon, standing directly overhead, painted the weird scene in shifting blues and purple, giving it the ghastly aspect of a nightmare city.

All was silent as a grave; shadows bathed the edges of the houses and the broken buildings were a square quarter-

mile of dusty alabaster painted with a wash of blue.

"I have come here sometimes," Winston half whispered, for the silence of the place affected even him, "when I wanted peace. You can't find it anywhere like this, and I was sick of wars and men. Don't you realize why I stayed down here—where I was at once a king and a hermit?"

"I think I understand," Lyons answered soberly. "This is a creepy place, though. I don't wonder the natives fear it—particularly at night. One might expect a ghost to come starting out of one of these fallen buildings—they're like tombstones."

"They are—the tombstones of a vanished race," Winston agreed. "No one has ever taken the trouble to rebuild or to live here, because it's useless. There's plenty of good planting ground outside and this valley, as you see, is purely a rock surface."

Lyons nodded, his eyes sweeping over the city. "But Pilas—there seems no sign of life down there."

"It's deceiving," Winston replied. "Those walls are higher than they appear. Pilas could have his entire force inside the temple and we couldn't see them. The walls of the temple are standing on three sides." He hesitated. "Let's go down."

They started down the narrow path cleft in the rock surface—a path that had been worn smooth by the passage of many feet, and which led directly to the opening of what had been the main street of the city.

CHAPTER VII

DISCOVERY

THE city was enwrapped in false shadows, yet Winston did not dare to show himself in the chief thoroughfare. Before they reached the terminus of the path, he branched off and led the way about the rear of a series of broken-

down adobe structures strung out in a long line from where a more imposing brick edifice stood.

He and Lyons were progressing on a slight rise of ground which, farther on, merged with the sheer cliff face. In places, they had a clear view of the deserted street, through the fallen houses; at other spots, broken walls arose and cut off even the light from the moon among the shadows of the paliade.

Suddenly Lyons caught his arm, pointing. Winston followed the direction of his gaze and they saw a lantern zigzagging among the ruins, and he made out two or three dark figures about it.

"Possibly they're heading for the place where the arms are stored," Winston whispered. "It's worth while to follow them, I think."

Lyons nodded. Cautiously, they circled through an alley cluttered with débris, hesitating before they crossed the comparatively open space between the two rows of buildings. But there was no sign of human beings. From up the street there came the snatch of a song and a burst of ribald laughter.

"Pilas' men are in the ruins of the temple," Winston said, when the sounds quieted. "I imagine he's feeding them liquor—to work up some courage. This is going to be a busy night."

Lyons said nothing. They crossed the opening and lost themselves in a graveyard of fallen adobe. The lantern glimmered beyond the ruins of these buildings lining the street, amid the darkness beyond, where one or two huts were strung out lonesomely.

Winston circled as the lantern ceased its zigzag course and appeared to come to a halt. Diving out of the waste of architecture, he and Lyons found themselves in a darkness quite similar to that on the other side of the gully, and their feet struck a path which arose at a slight incline threatening to bring them out above the place where the lantern had stopped.

Winston came to a sudden halt. Pilas' voice fell upon his ears. He clutched Lyons' arm.

"Listen!"

They crouched in the dark, waiting.

"I HAVE told you that I need you," Pilas was saying to some one there. "It is enough. Here, I am master!"

In reply there came a voice, cool, collected, drained of fear or doubt.

"In this place," it said, "there is no master but the Lord!"

"It's the hermit priest!" Winston whispered hurriedly. "What the deuce does Pilas want with him?"

"Words mean nothing," Pilas said, after a pause. "My men are afraid of this place; they call it the Valley of the Evil One. Your presence will quiet them. And if you don't come—" He broke off with a short, harsh laugh.

"I shall not come," replied the quiet voice.

"No?"

There was a pause; the click of steel came to Winston's ears. Pilas laughed again.

"One of these on each wrist, good padre, and I think your decision will change. Alfredo!"

"*Si, señor,*" came a frightened whisper, and the chains clinked more loudly.

Winston crept forward cautiously along the ledge, Lyons following stealthily in his wake.

"Shall we break in?" the latter demanded.

Winston halted. They were just above a little adobe hut set against the wall that the slope made behind it. In front of it a lantern had been placed on the ground, and in its light, Pilas' swarthy, brutal face could be seen. Behind him were three men: Winston recognized one of them as the *alcalde's* lieutenant and familiar, one Varibas. And seated on the ground, clad in loose linen garments unpressed and poor, was the hermit priest of the valley.

The latter showed no more fear than

his calm voice had indicated. He was an old man but robust for his years, and the crown of his noble head was devoid of hair except for a fringe of white about the edge which seemed only to add to his gentle, fine dignity. He was looking up at Pilas without apprehension.

The latter stepped closer and in his either hand there rattled short steel chains, somewhat like manacles, which could be twisted about a wrist to cause exquisite torture.

"Shall he break in?" Lyons whispered again, as Pilas took a threatening step forward and his men watched with starting uncertain stares.

Winston shook his head.

"We're lost if we do," he said, "but I suppose we'll have to if it goes too far. Wait!"

"Will you come—and give your blessing to my cause," Pilas demanded slowly, "—or would you like to try these?"

The old priest shook his head.

"Torture cannot move me," he declared, "and I cannot give blessing to any cause which may mean bloodshed."

PILAS gave vent to an oath and started forward. Varibas was at his side; the latter was a big, hulking brute of a man and without the fearful imagination in the soldiers. He fastened one of the strips of steel chain about the old hermit's wrist while Pilas twisted the other.

Together, they gave the chain a slight twist and Pilas grinned at the short breath of pain which their victim could not repress.

"Are you still certain, padre?" Pilas mocked.

The priest closed his eyes and nodded. The steel twisted again and his head went back silently with pain. Winston gave a start as Lyons' breath came between his teeth.

At that instant, a dark form shot out of the dark and hurled itself upon Pilas, a knife flashing in the moonlight. Win-

ston drew his pistol and then gave a gasp of surprise.

Pilas and Varibas, who had sprung to his side, were grappling with Julio!

The steel fell from the old priest's wrists. Julio's knife was wrenched from his hand and fell clattering to the ground. Winston's finger was on his trigger and Lyons had drawn his pistol. Julio was held helpless between the two soldiers as Pilas drew off with an oath.

"*Valgame Dios!*" he cried. "You shall die like—"

There came a cry from below them, on the path, and Pilas turned as two men rifles trailing, came running up.

"What is it?" he demanded of them impatiently.

One of them saluted awkwardly.

"Our men have all arrived," he reported.

"It was your orders that you were to be notified as soon as they came."

Pilas hesitated, then glanced at Julio.

"Business first," he murmured, with a grim smile, and stepped close to Winston's foreman. "You are one of the excellent Señor Winston's *compadres*, eh? I remember. Well, I have taken one thing from him tonight; when my work is finished, I shall have great pleasure, *el perro*, in demonstrating several new methods of torture to you."

Laughing at his own irony, he turned to his men and gestured to the two prisoners.

"Tie them up," he ordered. "Then, you—Alfredo, stay here to guard them. Be certain that they are well taken care of!" he added, menacingly.

"*Si, señor.*"

Pilas turned on his heel, followed by Varibas and the two slovenly soldiers. They picked their way across the fallen stones and masonry and disappeared.

Winston laid a restraining hand on his companion's arm. "There will be only one left in a minute," he cautioned.

Briefly, the two prisoners were tied up, each silent. Then Julio and the priest were thrown on the ground, side by side, and one of the soldiers went

away. The remaining one, whom Pilas had called Alfredo, looked dubiously at his charges, as though not too enthusiastic about his task.

"LET'S go," whispered Winston. "No pistol—we can't afford to risk a shot!"

Together, they descended upon the astonished guard. Winston's arms were around the fellow's neck, preventing him from making an outcry, and his palm was clapped across the opened mouth. Lyons caught the rifle, tossing it aside, and then flattened him out.

Julio exclaimed with surprise and relief. In another minute his bonds were slashed and they were tying up the prisoner. Padre Montescar was silent while they untied him, with the same quiet dignity with which he had submitted to capture. But he breathed a sigh of relief as he stretched his arms.

"You have done well, my sons," he said gently. "But you must leave this place at once. Señor Pilas is a desperate man, in need of many prayers for his salvation."

Winston laughed shortly.

"Pilas' salvation isn't going to come through prayers, Padre," he said. "I suppose you know he is planning a revolt?"

The priest nodded.

"You undoubtedly know where he has stored his arms, then, since you have been here all the time," Winston went on. "In the interests of humanity, will you tell me, so that I can destroy them?"

Without replying at once, the priest looked up and then got to his feet, peering into the American's eyes. After a long moment, he nodded.

"You are a good man, I believe," he said. "For humanity's sake, I will take sides in this thing."

He pointed toward where the temple stood, beyond the wreckage of fallen houses, its walls still comparatively intact and its roof caved in.

"Beside that temple, there is a stone house, fallen in on all sides, where some

dignitary must have lived. The lower floor is still fairly well preserved; and in the rear, there is an opening—a long tunnel, into a series of cellars. It is an evil place—but it is there that the arms have been stored."

The old hermit paused and shook his head sadly.

"Arms and munitions: evil things. . . . These are evil days. But virtue will triumph. It has never failed."

Winston turned to Julio.

"I am glad I found you, *amigo*," he said. "You have a horse?"

"*Si*. I left him on the slope, outside the pass.

"Good. Get started, Julio—go to Capitan Garcia of the Rurales and tell him to come at once. In the meantime, I shall try to spike their arms."

"*Bueno!* And our men, señor?"

"Our men are not mounted; Garcia's are, and they can get here more quickly. Bring our men up when you can. But be cautious—and warn Garcia that Pilas has his entire force here now. Our chief hope is in a surprise attack."

"*Si*."

Julio turned to the old hermit.

"*Adios, padre!*"

The priest raised his hand.

"*Deus vobiscum!*" he said in Latin as Julio bowed his head, "go with God."

Julio disappeared in the darkness. Winston turned to the old recluse.

"Shall we accompany you to the mouth of the pass, padre?" he asked. "It is safe no longer in here. Pilas will be back."

The priest shook his head.

"This is my place," he said. "I remain here."

"But they may torture you!" Lyons put in.

Padre Montescar looked up with a benignant, patient smile. "They tortured Job," he replied quietly. "This is my place and I am not afraid, young sirs. I thank you for what you have done. Now go to your duty—with my blessings!"

Winston nodded.

"Very well," he said. "I understand. But you are a brave man, Padre. *Adios!*"

Side by side, he and Lyons picked their way among the ruins until the old hermit was out of sight, and the temple loomed up in front of them, its wide, fallen archway facing the street and disclosing an arena of fallen stones inside. Men moved about within, too, and there was a great deal of shouting and laughter.

CHAPTER VIII

CORNERED WOLVES

WINSTON pulled his companion down beside him and they crouched in the friendly shadow made by a doorframe. Across the littered street stood the remains of one of the brick buildings; they could see that in the back and at both sides, the walls had fallen completely away. Facing the street, with a last shred of dignity, part of the facing still stood, with one wide doorway and sightless window openings. It was desolate ruin.

"That's the place," Winston said. "The passageway to the cellars is in the back, the padre told us."

He glanced toward the entrance of the temple, inside which the mounted men had gathered and had now been joined by the others.

There was a chorus of shouts and then Winston was silent as they died down for Pilas' voice.

"The Rurales first—the telegraph lines are cut and the country is ours. And after the Rurales—I promise you—comes Winston's hacienda!"

"*Viva!*" came from three hundred throats. "Death to the Americano!"

Winston grinned.

"They don't give a hang about what happens to the Americano, as long as they have a chance to loot," he murmured.

Lyons shook his head.

"They're in an ugly mood. I'd hate to fall into their hands right now."

Winston jerked erect. The street was deserted.

"Let's see what we can do about messing up their stores," he said.

"What's your plan?" Lyons demanded, as they moved stealthily across the street.

Safely hidden by the shadows about the base of the building, Winston halted.

"I'm not certain," he said, "except that I'm hoping there's enough powder there. We may be able to blow up all their ammunition and supplies. You see, there's scarcely two hundred men armed right now, and they, improperly. But once he gives out all the stuff he's had smuggled in, he'll be able to stand off the Rurales and my men, too."

Lyons nodded.

"Let's go, then. If we can get to the ammunition at all, we can blow it up."

They reached the rear of the building without discovery, for Pilas had neglected to place patrols around the temple, and Winston discovered the black, wide mouth of the passage which led to the cellars under the house. The lower floor, as the hermit had said, was intact and built of sheer rock.

They discovered the explanation for this once they had entered the dark, damp-smelling passage. The whole thing had been carved out of the rock foundation of the village. "I'm beginning to have a lot of respect for the blighters who lived here," Lyons murmured.

Ahead of them, hidden at times by the crazy turns in the tunnelling, gleamed a light. "Take it easy," Winston whispered. "If Pilas has any sense, he's got a guard here somewhere."

The flooring, which had been trending perceptibly downward, now took an abrupt rise, and they halted. Ahead of them, not twenty feet away, was a lantern fastened to the rock by means of a stone which held its handle. Lyons felt his companion grip his arm. They stared.

UNDER the lantern, on a boulder sat a man, a rifle across his knee. He was peering uncertainly into the dark, in their direction.^{5V} Behind him was a rude, high doorway, reaching almost to the ceiling of the tunnel, and close beside it was a narrow, grated window.

The two intruders hesitated. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Winston made out, in the dark passageway beyond the lantern, a great, high door of rude lumber which appeared to mark the end of the tunnel. Behind one or another of those doors, he reflected, the arms were stored; the first seemed more likely, because it was there that the guard sat.

"Can we risk a shot?" Lyons whispered.

Winston shook his head.

"It might be heard—and besides, I can't quite bring myself to shooting from the dark!"

"Nor I," Lyons agreed. "Let's take the chance, then."

They proceeded carefully, making no noise, while the sentinel stared querulously into the dark. Suddenly, when they were only a few feet from him, he started to his feet and shouted.

"Who is there?"

His rifle came up with the words. In the same instant, Lyons darted forward past his companion and bore the man to the ground. Winston followed, wresting the rifle from his hands and bringing down the butt sharply. The guard's struggles ceased with a low moan.

Lyons straightened.

"Quick!" Winston said. "We've got to investigate both these places and get to work. They'll be coming in, any second now."

The door at his elbow, he discovered, was fastened from this side by a large spike driven through two holes in a projecting bar of wood. Even as his fingers fumbled with it, Lyons, who had gone to the window grating, gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Barbara!"

"Tony!" came the girl's voice.

Winston threw open the door and the lantern light fell over his shoulder. He was in a narrow, close cell, with a pile of straw in the farther corner its only ornament—and in front of him stood Barbara Lyons!

The girl's hair was dishevelled and her riding clothes were torn and dirty, Winston noted, as Lyons hurried past him and swept his sister into his arms with a glad cry of joy. After a moment, Anthony Lyons' rapid questions became coherent.

"He simply brought me here," the girl said, in reply. "Flung me across his saddle and left you two lying there. He put me in here and stationed the guard outside.

She shuddered.

"I—I think he intends to—marry me!"

Lyons smothered an oath. Winston stepped forward.

"Forgive me," he said, "but there's a lot to be done. If we don't get out of here at once, we're lost."

"Of course!" Lyons exclaimed. "Ready, Barbara? We'll make a bolt for it."

For reply, she started to the door. Her companions followed.

"I'll come back," Winston said, as they neared the mouth of the passage. "I'll get to the supplies alone and finish our job, if I have time."

He touched Lyons' arm.

"You take Barbara direct to the pass. It won't be long before the Rurales come through, and then you can get her out."

The other pressed his hand.

"Good enough," he said. "I'd like to stay, but Barbara's safety comes first. And once she's safe, I'll try to get in before the final curtain."

"It hasn't rung down yet," Winston replied grimly.

His prophesy was proved in the next instant. At the mouth of the tunnel, Barbara Lyons halted with a cry of consternation and her two companions brought up on either side of her. Pilas

and his men, a shouting, crowding mass, were pouring out of the temple and hurrying toward the tunnel, Pilas and Varibas in their van.

Winston hesitated for only a second. To go back was impossible. Pilas would discover them at once, as soon as he saw the unconscious figure of his guard. They had to make a break for liberty.

"There's only one way!" he cried. "Follow me!"

His pistol was drawn and he made a dash, with the words, from concealment. Without hesitation Lyons and his sister followed, the former firing point blank into the mob as he broke free from the concealment that the passage mouth offered.

FOR a moment, consternation seized the advancing revolutionists. Even Pilas and Varibas stared open-mouthed at the spectacle of the three Americans running from them at top speed. Winston was leading the way to where a little shelf of rock behind a low wall offered a slight vantage from which to make a stand.

Unless Pilas delayed for several moments, it would be impossible for them to escape from his sight; their only hope, therefore, lay in finding some place where they could make a stand until the Rurales should arrive and create a diversion. He darted for the ledge and his companions followed him, crouching low behind the broken wall.

Pilas had already started after them. With a shout, he drew his revolver and called to his men to follow. Varibas was in his footsteps, and one or two other men, armed, came after. Soon the entire mob was in pursuit.

Winston's first shot whistled hungrily past Pilas' ear and the leader of the mob ducked precipitately for cover, calling on his men to do likewise. Lyons fired carefully and one of the cavalymen toppled backward as he attempted to scale the wall.

"Take cover!" came Pilas' command. "Take them alive!"

A spatter of shots on the rock surface behind the three Americans disregarded his command. Winston fired again, at a man who was creeping toward them from the side, and the fellow rolled over with a groan. He was still alive, however.

The Mexicans had all obeyed their chief's commands by now. Among the litter of stones and broken-down masonry they were creeping forward gradually, seldom offering a target, moving closer and closer to the shelf of rock. Shots spattering from every direction forced Lyons and his companion to take cover. Barbara was well hidden, silent and resigned.

Winston glanced at her averted profile, white and set, and felt a thrill of pride in her. She showed no sign of fear; she was too proud.

Even as he turned away, Lyons gave a cry that commingled rage and warning. Winston looked up just in time to see a mass of men coming at them from both sides, emerging out of the dark and running along the pathlike break in the cliff face. They were almost upon them.

The men in front, covered as they were, rained a perfect hail of fire. Lyons was firing quickly; one man toppled over just as he reached the wall. Winston fired twice, and saw two Mexicans stagger backward.

Then there was confusion, a nightmare of struggle and blood and whirling bodies, curses, knives—flashes of pistol fire. And above all there was Pilas' constantly reiterated command:

"Alive!—Take them alive!"

Winston's pistol was clicking on an empty chamber. He turned savagely, crouching over Barbara, and hurled it full into the face of a native just scaling the wall in front of him. The fellow staggered backward, clutching at a companion, who fell over on top of him.

Lashing out with both fists, in a whirlwind of fury, Winston sent two attackers groaning to the ground. Some one came flying through the air and

landed on his back. He bent double, hearing in his ears, Lyons' despairing cry:

"I'm—done!"

Then there was only a whirl of arms and legs and vicious, snarling faces, and Winston went down with five men on top of him. Darkness clouded his senses as his forehead struck the rock, and after that, he knew no more. Only his cracked lips formed the name:

"Barbara!"

CHAPTER IX

BLACK CLOUDS

SOMETHING warm and soft touched his forehead—ages, later, it seemed. Winston opened his eyes with difficulty, wondering where he was, and he looked up into the blue, melting eyes of Barbara Lyons.

She was bending down over him solicitously, and as he waked, a slow flush mounted to her cheeks.

"Did you—?" he began, and then, recognizing the flush, stammered—

"Where are we?"

She shook her head with a mute gesture.

"I'm so sorry—for everything, Jim Winston!"

He looked about him. They were in the same cell in which he and Anthony Lyons had discovered Barbara. How long ago had that been? The question on his lips was silenced as Winston caught sight of Lyons himself, propped up in a corner, his dark eyes watching them. Lyons shook his head and tried to smile, but his lips were cut and blood flowed down his cheeks from a long gash in his forehead.

"No go, old chap," he murmured. "They've got us this time—and properly, too, I fancy."

Winston closed his eyes for a second. His head was acting horribly and the bandage was off his temple. He felt weak and every muscle in his body at-

tested to the horrible battering it had received. Barbara's cool hand passed across his forehead.

"I'm sorry—Jim," she murmured. "You did all you could. If it weren't for us, this would never have happened."

"Yes," Lyons put in, "it's all our fault, Winston. I don't know what good it can do us to be sorry, but—"

"It's no one's fault," Winston replied, sitting up with some difficulty. "Beside, it's spilt milk. What sort of a fix are we in now? I've been out for some time, I gather."

"They brought us back here," Barbara said. "You and Tony were unconscious. They just dumped you in, and Pilas said he'd be back."

Winston nodded. He felt the girl shudder at the thought her words connoted. He looked up.

"He's coming—for you, I suppose," he ventured.

Slowly she inclined her head. Winston propped himself against the wall and closed his aching eyes again. Outside in the passageway men were passing and repassing; occasionally one would stop, and glancing through the grated window, make some jeering remark before he passed on. They were getting supplied with the ammunition stored beyond, Winston thought, preparatory for the final stages of the revolt.

Had the Rurales come? he wondered. Hidden here in this subterranean darkness, they could never know. He supposed they had not yet arrived. Well, it was too late now.

A SLOW lethargy encompassed his muscles, extending to his brain. To move would be a great effort, he thought hazily. And then he became aware that Barbara Lyons' cool slim hand was in his, and he looked up.

She was still looking at him, tenderly, and he felt a wave of strength flow through him. "Barbara!" he whispered, wondering if it were his own lips that spoke. "I'd go through it all—and more, if it would make you safe."

"I know," she said softly. "Does it matter—knowing that I care more about what happens to you?"

Lyons' eyes were closed. Winston sat upright.

"Matter?" he repeated. "Barbara, it's worth dying for!—just to hear you say it."

Reverently his head bent and his lips touched the hand he held in his. He felt her free hand touch his hair.

Then a wave of recollection swept over him. They were helpless. On the threshold of this wonderful realization, they were to be separated for eternity!

He could find no possible hope. Even if the Rurales came now, it would be too late. They would walk into the trap that Pilas, with three hundred well-armed men would make for them. The men from the hacienda would not arrive until later, when the Rurales would be disposed of.

Pilas had won at every point. He would wait for his enemies to walk into this trap and finish them off by sections.

Jim Winston bit his lip. His plans had been well laid. He had sacrificed them for Barbara's safety. That was how Pilas had gained the upper hand. And yet, he told himself fiercely, he would do the same thing over—for her.

He clutched her hand tightly, as though by his very strength, he would hold her to his side forever.

"There's only one thing," he said, slowly, "—that's to put up a fight till the last minute. Anything may happen here—in the Valley of Madness!"

Lyons' blue eyes met his and from his corner he nodded understandingly.

"Righto!" agreed the army officer. "Lots of things may happen. No time to give up the ship yet."

Barbara smiled mistily into the semi-darkness. She knew they were both lying for her.

There was a heavy voice of command in the passageway outside and Winston looked up. Some one fumbled with the bolt of the door and it opened. The guard in the alley stood back as Pilas

filled the aperture, looking from one to the other of his prisoners with a grim, triumphant smile.

"So . . ." he murmured. "My three birds, and quite happy in the same nest. It will be a shame to separate you."

He leered maliciously.

"What's up now, Pilas?" Winston drawled from his corner. "Do you still think you're going to get away with all this?"

"It looks that way does it not?" replied the *alcalde*.

He stepped closer to the man who was his enemy.

"One thing is certain, my brave Americano—you won't stop me!"

As he spoke, his toe jabbed Winston's side. The latter's eyes narrowed but he looked up without anger.

"Perhaps not," he said, "but have you considered that Captain Lyons is an officer in the United States Army? You're going to have to do a lot of explaining to your own Government before any injury to him or his sister can be forgotten."

"You are too hasty, young señor," Pilas grinned. "You forget that if Captain Lyons had not come down unofficially, he could not have entered Mexico. As it is, whatever happens to him will be explained to his Government as a regrettable accident which overtook a man meddling in other people's affairs."

He glanced at Lyons.

"And I feel certain that the excellent capitan will not be on hand to say otherwise."

LYONS nodded without interest. Pilas raised the riding stock he carried in his hand and touched Barbara's shoulder. "Come up here," he commanded.

Her eyes lighted angrily but she obeyed. Winston bit his lip with rage. Pilas faced the girl.

"You," he said quietly, "are coming with me. So is your brother. It is well, is it not, to have the family on hand for—the ceremony?"

"The ceremony?" Lyons gasped, and Barbara paled.

"Exactly," Pilas nodded. "The ceremony. The good Padre Montescar will be waiting to perform it. I am going to honor your sister by making her the wife of the new master of Mexican California!"

"Wife—!" Barbara gasped, and fell back against the wall.

Lyons staggered uncertainly to his feet.

"You hound!" he cried. "I'll see you—or her, dead—first!"

"You will see neither," Pilas retorted. "When the ceremony is over, perhaps, you will have the opportunity to precede us—only we hope we shall not join you very soon after."

He turned his mocking, glowering eyes upon Winston.

"You, Señor Winston, are being saved for the festivities . . . when my men get drunk enough to enjoy—torture!"

In the depth of his black eyes was a livid flame which forced the impression of his words upon the brains of his hearers. Smiling, he turned to Barbara, and caught her wrists, while the guard entered the room, his carbine held ready.

"Come with me, señorita. When it is over, we will call upon this renegade Americano!" As he spoke, he smiled and his arm went out, about her shoulders, pressing the girl close to him.

Lyons strangled a curse and sprang for him at the same moment that Winston shot to his feet, his eyes ablaze.

"You hound!" cried Winston. "I'll kill you!"

Lyons stopped short as the carbine of the guard was jammed into his stomach. Even as Winston got to his feet, Pilas brought up his arm, and the riding crop he carried descended with crushing force against the American's head. Winston staggered, then fell to the floor, stifling a groan of agony.

"You will lie in your corner—like the dog you are!"

Pilas laughed and Barbara bit her lips upon a little cry of helplessness. As

Winston turned his eyes upward, she shook her head.

"Please!" she begged him. "You have suffered enough for my sake!"

"And he'll suffer more," Pilas promised. The toe of his boot came up and caught the helpless American in the jaw. Winston sank back against the wall and covered his eyes. His head reeled.

Mercifully, a sort of blackness blotted out the sight of his two companions as they were herded from the cell into the passageway. Through a fog, he heard Barbara's choked:

"Goodbye—Jim—dear!"

His head reeled with agony. Every muscle in his body ached with a separate pain and his numbed brain seemed cracking. For a long time he lay there, aware of the shuffling of innumerable feet through the corridor, back and forth. He wished they would stop.

A ray of hope came in the thought that Padre Montescar would never perform the horrible mockery of a ceremony. Barbara would never belong to that beast—never! He had already seen the old priest remain unmoved in the face of torture. Nothing would ever force him to do this thing. Nothing!

CHAPTER X

THE TURN OF THE ROAD

WINSTON opened his eyes. Would that constant shuffling of many feet never cease? The movements of the men going toward the chamber where the arms were stored were like the pounding of the hammers of pain through his bruised and battered body.

Even as he waited there, the door to his cell was opened and Varibas stood in the doorway. Pilas' bully looked down at him; but Winston was too weak to move. Varibas held in his hand two thongs of tough rope, and behind him were two men. What now?

The Mexican moved toward him, smiling evilly.

"Did you know, my friend, that this was a torture chamber in the other days?"

Winston did not reply. It seemed that there could be no more torture to terrify him. Pilas had done his worst when the door had shut behind Barbara.

Varibas bent over, grinning, and fastened the thongs he carried into the wall. Winston saw that there were iron rings fastened into the rock at either end of the cell. And between—there was just about space for an outstretched figure!

He closed his eyes.

"Over here!" Varibas commanded, and the two Mexicans picked him up bodily and threw him against the wall.

"Our Generale has decided that you may go to sleep unless you are given something to think about," Varibas went on.

He fastened the cords about Winston's wrists.

"It would never do, you see, for one so watchful as yourself to fall asleep!" He chuckled at his own crude wit.

Winston submitted without a move to what they were doing. His hands were crossed at the wrists; and the cord slipped over them, drawn tightly, was attached to the ring in the wall above his head. Then the cord slipped over his ankles and drew tight. He was flat on the floor, outstretched, able to move only his head.

Varibas stood up and surveyed him.

"That is an excellent job," he said at last. "I do not think you will sleep now, eh?"

As Winston did not reply, he turned to the door.

"I will be back very soon," he promised. "Those ropes—they may loosen, and I would not have it unpleasant."

His soldiers laughed and the door slammed behind them. There was the echo of their mirth in the corridor; and then, after a moment, only the sound of the shuffling feet, less numerous now, as the last of the ragged army filed by for their arms.

Winston threw back his head and looked at the window, at the succession of dull brown faces slipping back. Suddenly his weary, pain-filled eyes lighted at the sight of one face more familiar than the rest. The passage was not well lighted; almost immediately the face, which had seemed to pause before the grilling for an instant, passed on; but Winston did not know whether he had dreamed or actually heard the whisper, "When I come back!"

Could it be—was it possible—? Felipe, old Francesco's son had marched up to the valley with Pilas' men. Could it be he? Hope fanned the waning strength in Winston's pain-racked body and he strained his eyes for a second glimpse of the man.

But then, what good could even Felipe do him? There was a guard at the door, probably; and if not, there were some men still in the passageway. Felipe could never get in here.

His eyes lighted, nevertheless, when the face of the young Mexican appeared again. A hand came to the grating; something flashed in the fitful lantern light of the corridor. Winston's breath came quickly: it was Felipe!

"I will be waiting, *Maestre!*"

With the words, the face disappeared, and Felipe's shuffling feet disappeared after the others down the passage. But before it had gone, a flash of steel sailed across the room, to land with a light clink near Winston's head. Alone again he looked down.

A long knife lay on the stone flooring, less than four inches from his head. He gazed at it longingly. The desire for life and action had reasserted itself. He felt stronger already. In some way he must reach that knife, slash his bonds, before Varibas returned. Once Pilas's lieutenant came back, the weapon would be discovered and his last chance at liberty vanished.

PAINFULLY, he reached for the weapon with his head. His nose just touched it; carefully he moved it

nearer, until he could grip it between his teeth. When he had accomplished this, the hilt grasped firmly in his mouth, he gave vent to a short ejaculation and his eyes brightened.

Next Winston drew his head back, aiming carefully, and breathing a little prayer as he let it fly. It struck just under his fingers; by twisting, he could reach it. As Varibas had prophesied, the thongs had stretched. They had given just enough to permit him to grasp the knife hilt between thumb and forefinger.

But the cord was about his wrists; Winston found that he could not twist his hand enough to cut at the longer piece that was attached to the iron ring. Working the weapon carefully, he at last got it between the first two fingers of his right hand, and gave a sigh of triumph.

The rest was simpler. Carefully he sawed at the long cord; at last it broke away. The same action served to release the loop which had bound his wrists together. His hands were free!

With a brief exclamation of satisfaction, Winston cut loose the bonds at his feet; then he looked about him speculatively while he rubbed his arms and flexed his muscles, finding some of his old strength returning at last. He was none too soon. Steps sounded in the end of the passageway, which had been silent since the last Mexican had gone out in the wake of Felipe.

Glancing about, Winston threw the knife into a corner and flung himself on the floor, his limbs outstretched as they had been when Varibas left him. He caught the cut cords between his fingers and his ankles: in the poorly lighted place Varibas would have to look closely to detect the ruse.

The door opened. Winston rolled his head and groaned. Any distaste he might have had for the job he had set himself, was dissipated when Varibas gave a harsh laugh.

"Ha! That is the first admission of pain we have had, *mi amigo!*" he chort-

led, and stood over his captive. "Is it still so pleasant to be king—in another man's country?"

Winston did not open his eyes; but through his half-closed lashes he had observed that Varibas wore no pistol. Well, that was a small matter. He groaned again, and moved feebly.

"The cords probably need tightening," Varibas breathed. "They are most uncomfortable when they loosen, eh?"

He bent down over the ring at Winston's head. In the same instant, the American moved. Varibas felt his feet jerked out from under him as the cords he had bent to tie, caught at his ankles, and a driving fist met him squarely in the jaw as he toppled backward, breaking off the cry of alarm on his lips and knocking the back of his head fiercely against the stone flooring.

Winston knelt astride the man who had come to torture him and stuffed down the throat of his unconscious captive the handkerchief the latter had been wearing at his neck. With action, his strength was returning. Glancing up, he discovered the corridor to be empty.

He dragged Varibas over to the side of the wall in the same position he had been lying a moment since, and fastened the thongs in the same manner. The bully lay stretched out at full length. Winston smiled to think of the astonishment that would empurple the gross features when Varibas awakened.

But there was no time to be lost. Winston started out, finding the entire length of the subterranean passageway completely deserted; and then, at the entrance he paused.

Where to go next, now that he had freedom?

He could make a safe exit from the city, he felt certain, for Pilas' men were all within the amphitheatre of the temple; he knew that from a wild cheering that assailed his ears when he got to the mouth of the passage. They were being mustered in, probably, with plenty of *aguardiente*, before action commenced.

He could escape safely; probably he could intercept Garcia's men and plan a better attack later. It was the most feasible plan. And yet—there was Barbara.

Though he had convinced himself that Padre Montescar would not consent to such a ceremony as Pilas proposed, he still dared not think of the girl in the *alcalde's* hands. For a long time he hesitated.

Ahead of him loomed the side wall of the temple, broken down sufficiently to afford a foothold to its summit. He decided to climb up there and take one look inside—enough to convince himself that she would be safe until his return. Then he could go on and do the most logical thing there seemed to do—get help from outside the valley.

CHAPTER XI

INTRIGUE

WINSTON found a foothold in the temple wall and crawled toward the top. The surface was jagged and rough; it cut at his hands and knees, but he did not notice. The moon, for a moment, had disappeared behind a fleecy scud of clouds; but upon the sides of the palisade forming the rear wall of the temple, a brilliant, orange and red glow attested to a huge bonfire inside the amphitheatre of the edifice.

Winston at last reached the top of the wall, where a broken beam stuck out for a few feet where it had fallen beneath the weight of the roof. He lay there, flattened out, his eyes fixed on the scene below.

It was a weird vision, there in the outlandish glow of a huge bonfire near the altar. Even the bonfire seemed out of place in this grave-like hollow where men of a vanished race had once come to worship. Rows of stone benches, spread in semi-circles, had fallen in most places; but upon those still standing or on the ground, the beginnings of Pilas'

revolutionary army sat or sprawled in various stages of disorder.

But the eyes of every man were on the scene being enacted at the altar at the farther end. This space, too, had crumbled in decay, but it was still raised from the rest, wide and broad enough to accommodate a whole troop of men. Winston's eyes burned as he took in the sight.

Pilas stood there, talking directly to Padre Montescar. The latter's mien was dignified, aloof as always. Between them stood Barbara Lyons, pale and white. Back of Pilas, Anthony Lyons was standing, the blood still oozing from the wound in his head, and one of the *alcalde's* men held a pistol at the small of his back. The eyes of the American were burning.

Suddenly the shouting from the tiers of benches ceased, as Pilas raised his hand in an abrupt gesture of command. Everyone waited with bated breath. Winston strained forward.

"You shall marry us—now!" the *alcalde* boomed in his heavy voice. "It is my command."

There was a space of fearful silence. Winston suspected the attitude of the men and he knew that Pilas must feel it. They were rough and brutal; but after all, they were like children, as all their race before a Man of God. They would never permit even their leader to coerce him with force.

Pilas sensed this in their expectant, hushed waiting. He gave a contemptuous glance over the assembly and then turned back to the hermit of the valley.

"I shall not force you, Padre," he said. He caught Barbara's wrist and drew her toward him. "I shall not force you," he said again, more slowly—ominously, Winston thought. Then he turned to the girl.

"But if you will not marry us, the sin is upon your head. She is mine—with or without your sanctification! Now—!" He drew back triumphantly, while the priest stared.

"Do you dare *not* to marry us?"

PADRE MONTESCAR took a step backward and Winston gasped. Pilas had played a trump card. The hermit now did not dare to refuse. The old man shook his head helplessly, putting out his hands in a little, futile gesture as he turned from the girl to her brother.

"I have no choice," Winston heard him say. "I must do as he says."

Barbara bowed her head and Lyons took an uncertain step forward; but the pistol drew him back. Winston fell back into the shadows, staring at the scene, his breath coming quickly as he realized what was to happen.

Padre Montescar had held out to the last; before this last trick he did not dare refuse any longer. And Barbara—*his* Barbara, was going to be consigned to the arms of that beast forever!

"No!" he muttered fiercely to himself, as rage and fury sent the blood pounding through his veins. "Never!"

Forgotten were the Rurales and the plans he had made. It was too late now for anything but a last fight. He felt that he had to come to grips with Pilas—to find the man's greasy throat between his fingers before the end.

The end was here; there was no doubt of that. There remained but a last fight—a fight in which, if he could ever get to Envilio Pilas, he would remove that menace forever.

Winston was scarcely conscious of crawling down the long broken wall and emerging in the rear of the temple, in a small cramped space between the sheer wall of rock which towered upward and on the side of the edifice. He appeared at the back of the amphitheatre, ignoring the crowds around him, his eyes on the scene being enacted on the altar.

Slowly he moved forward, his gaze fixed on Pilas. He was unnoticed at first; then, as the Mexicans sitting about became conscious of his halting progress toward the front, they stared for moments in drunken stupefaction. The sight he made seemed an impossible thing—a mirage out of the quantities of

aguardiente that had been consumed that night.

Winston kept on as though they were not there. When he was approaching the altar, he was aware of Padre Montescar's raised hand and the first words of the benediction. Suddenly there came a shout, from behind him. The few men in front turned and a pistol flashed in the light from the bonfire which he was just circling.

"It is Winston!" someone shouted.

The words seemed to release the spell that had come over the assemblage. The hermit's voice ceased and Pilas whirled. Lyons gave a cry of amazement and Barbara, turning, fixed him with a questioning, fearful stare.

"Jim—go back—go back!" she cried.

But Winston shook his head, his features expressionless and still fixed upon the *alcalde* of Empiros. Besides it was too late to turn back now. Once his halting, deadly slow progress ceased, the spell that held the mob of armed men behind him would be broken.

He was nearing the platform.

"Winston!" Lyons shouted. "Is it the finish?"

Without glancing at him, Winston inclined his head. His eyes suddenly narrowed as Pilas raised his hand commandingly. He wished for a pistol; he could end the man's career then and there. Pilas' voice rang startlingly loud, galvanizing the men in the temple amphitheatre out of their spell.

"*Valgame Dios!*" he cried. "Get Winston!"

Something of fear invaded his eyes for the first time as he got a full view of Winston's set, graven face. He fumbled for his revolver. At that instant, the American shot forward.

A PISTOL cracked from the platform but the ball whizzed harmlessly by; and Lyons, in the second that followed, whirled while his captor was engaged in aiming again. Lyons' fist came up in a sharp, fierce blow, and the Mexican staggered backward. Lyons

followed, and while the man stood, half dazed, he wrenched the weapon from his hand and brought down the butt across his head. Then he turned.

In one leap, Winston had gained the altar. The hermit of the valley stood back, appalled before the ferocity of his swift attack, once he had started, and Barbara gave a little cry at the look in his eyes.

Even as his feet touched the higher surface, Winston's arm shot out, in the same motion, carrying all the momentum of his leap behind it, and the blow caught Pilas alongside his jaw. The pistol fell to the ground.

The *alcalde* fell backward, groaning, and Winston followed him with the eagerness of a beast of prey. At last his hands were about the thick throat; at last he heard Pilas' gurgling cry of fear and agony.

Then, suddenly, the crowd of Mexicans in the temple burst from their amazement and there was a concerted rush for the altar. Lyons fired three times in succession as the first wave came on, and as three men dropped from the van, it halted. A scattering volley of shots came out of the mass.

"Come on!" Lyons shouted. "Two Americans—let's see how many of you go first!"

One of the braver of the crowd started forward and took a shot at Winston. The latter turned; Pilas' limp body dropped under his hands, groaning. Winston recovered the pistol the *alcalde* had dropped and fired at the Mexican who had shot him. The man sank back into the arms of his comrade with a groan.

At that, the rush started again. There was a cry from behind Winston.

"Two Americans—and I!"

Winston and Lyons turned in unison to see Padre Montescar rush to their side. He placed himself firmly between them, weaponless, and held out his hands.

"If this is going to be to the finish, I've decided I prefer a good finish to

the prospect of having to commit that job!" he exclaimed, with a gesture toward where Pilas lay outstretched, groaning and quivering as he fought back to consciousness.

The mob shivered convulsively and started with a low moan toward the altar. This, Winston told himself, would be the last rush. They seemed not to understand what the priest's action had meant.

"And I, *Maestre!*"

Out of the press of faces, there leaped a lone figure. Winston gave a cry of welcome and caught Lyons' arm as the latter raised his pistol.

"One of my men!" he explained hastily. "Good work, Felipe—may I live not to forget!"

Felipe dropped to one knee, and bringing the carbine he carried to his shoulder, commenced a steady fire into the advancing mob. But the latter was very near now. One man scaled the altar and fell backward as Felipe pulled his trigger.

Another fell before Winston's downward fist. Three more came on the crest of a wide, black wave of yelling, open-mouthed faces, to crumple before the fire of the defenders before the crowd covered the platform.

Winston felt himself being forced backward by the very weight of the press of bodies all about them. Felipe was clubbing his rifle; his other two companions were still standing, back to back. Between them was Barbara.

Knives gleamed at close quarters. Winston saw Felipe reach up with his free hand and drive a red blade downward with a grunt of satisfaction. Padre Montescar gave an involuntary cry as the point of another entered his shoulder near the neck. In reply, he lashed out with a bare fist that carried his antagonist and two men behind him backward. Winston grinned.

Through the hazy wave of surging bodies, he caught a glimpse of Pilas' swarthy features, perspiring and reddish as he exhorted his men.

CHAPTER XII

FLAMING CARBINES

SUDDENLY there was a cry from the wide entrance to the temple. Winston heard it but he paid no heed at first. He was too occupied with Lyons, who had received a blow in the face and was slumping toward him. A clubbed carbine came up and caught him under the jaw. He felt Barbara's arms about him.

It was she who first understood what the cry meant.

"The Rurales!" she exclaimed suddenly.

Winston aroused himself from the fog which was beginning to envelop him. There came a succession of startled yells from the Mexicans surging about them, and Pilas' voice, shouting rapid commands, just as the swift staccato of rifle fire resounded through the temple, in strange, abrupt contrast to the turmoil within.

Winston looked up as the Mexicans fell backward, leaving a few dead in their tracks, before a band of twenty mounted men who dashed through the doorway, sabres flashing in the weird light, pistols spitting flame. On either side of the doorway, Winston saw that Garcia had dismounted half platoons of his men, who, kneeling, were keeping up a hot rifle fire.

The mounted men, small in number as they were, forced the astonished revolutionists back and back, until the wall of the palisade prevented them from retreating further. Then Pilas, who had been shouting orders in a rapid stream, seemed to control them.

A dozen dropped to their knees and sent a sheet of flame toward the horsemen; as two of their number swayed dizzily in the saddle, and three more, unhorsed, dashed back to the shelter of the doorway, the mounted men returned to cover.

Winston realized in the same instant,

that Pilas still held the upper hand. Garcia's troops of irregulars numbered no more than fifty men and their chief value was their unerring horsemanship and individual ability at fighting from the saddle. Pilas had more than three hundred men, all well armed, and he had the advantage of cover and readiness.

The old temple, after all, was to see the end of this battle fought out under the stars. Unless Julio—but what could Julio do? With eighty men he might possibly come up in the rear of the temple and they could catch Pilas between two fires. But even then, Pilas' force far outnumbered them, and it seemed as though the *alcalde* had protected the rear wall.

During the cessation of fire which followed the first charge of the Rurales, Garcia brought his men to join the group on the platform. Lyons had recovered. The young officer turned to Winston.

"I am here, *amigo*," he smiled deprecatingly, "but I think I am perhaps too late. Your man Julio was discovered as he went through the pass and they sought to head him off before he reached my barracks. That is the reason."

Winston nodded. "It seems as if this night would never end. We've got to simply keep on fighting until—it's over." Both men smiled.

"*Quien sabe?* That is the duty of life," Garcia shrugged, "—and who knows what may happen in your Valley of Madness?"

His men were already flattened out on the altar platform. They had flung a few bandoleers of ammunition from their backs onto the floor. Winston glanced at them, recollecting that Pilas, from his present position, had unquestioned access to the apparently unlimited store of ammunition in the cellars. He smiled grimly.

Pilas' men were, for the most part, out of sight; Winston suddenly became aware that a number of them had slipped out from the under base of the palisade.

They were probably rounding the building.

He became certain of this a moment later, when, from the wide entrance through which the Rurales had come, there burst a hail of rifle fire, simultaneous with a sheet of flame from the men at the farther end. They were caught between two fires. As the shots died down, he heard Pilas' laugh.

"All my enemies in one nice little trap, eh, *señors*? I should be grateful for your walking in thus!"

IN the lull which followed this sally, Winston, crouching low in the shadows, felt a cool hand slip into his. He turned to find Barbara by his side. She was smiling bravely up at him. He shook his head.

"It's been a long fight, dear," he whispered. "I'm sorry I haven't done better."

She pressed his hand hard. "No man could have done more," she told him. "When I saw you walking toward this altar—alone, I thought your sufferings had made you mad!"

"I was mad," he retorted, "at the thought of you and that devil. It's never going to happen!" he ground out, and she understood.

"There is no hope?" she murmured.

Winston looked up as Garcia crept toward them. "Has Pilas cut off all outside communication?" he demanded.

Garcia nodded soberly.

"The telegraph wires are cut and most of the poles burned. We're absolutely cut off. I sent two men northward to ask for help; but Pilas has mounted men riding all over the country, in scattered bands, and I doubt if anyone can ever get through."

Winston bit his lip. "It doesn't matter much, I suppose. No one would get here in time, anyway."

Garcia looked from Winston to the girl, and shaking his head without a word, moved away.

At that moment, there came a single, warning shot from the wall of the tem-

ple. It was the signal for a perfect hail of fire which swept down upon the altar from every side. In the slow dying of the bonfire, Pilas' men had crept forward under cover of the stone benches, and they were now very close.

A number of them, the better shots, were on the top of the wall, and a few more were in the entrance to the temple. Garcia's men sent back a feeble return volley, which was greeted by jeers, and two of the Rurales rolled over in the firing that ensued, without a sound.

Winston picked up a rifle and fired at one of the sharpshooters on the wall. Lyons followed suit. A man dropped, sprawling, arms outstretched, to the ground.

"This looks like the finish," Winston said.

He turned to his companion.

"I think we understand, Lyons, that Barbara isn't to fall into Pilas' hands again."

Lyons' blue eyes met his and he nodded.

THE firing ceased for a moment, and out of the stillness there came Pilas' voice, from the rear of the hall.

"Captain Garcia!"

Garcia, remaining under cover, grunted an acknowledgment. Pilas went on. His voice was clear.

"In order to spare useless bloodshed, I hope you will realize that it is only a matter of minutes before my men can overwhelm you."

Garcia made no reply. He waited.

Pilas laughed.

"*Bueno*," he said. "You see I offer to spare you and your men if you will surrender."

"Upon what terms?" Garcia demanded, standing up without fear of the rifles which covered him from every point of the compass.

Pilas came into view, outlined in his white ducks against the black wall of the palisade.

"I shall keep you and your men imprisoned for perhaps forty-eight hours,"

he said, "until my plans are matured. Then you shall go free."

He hesitated.

"Your friends, though—I want!"

"You mean—?"

"Señors Winston and Lyons—and the woman! The rest can go free!"

Garcia hesitated only a second. Then, in a single motion, he fell forward, flat on the ground.

"Fire!" he commanded. "Señor Pilas, take cover!"

Even as he spoke, his men obeyed. A sheet of flame spoke from the platform. From his vantage, Pilas let loose a string of commands. The altar became a hail of lead from every direction. Winston was loading and firing so rapidly that the barrel of his carbine scorched his palms.

Pilas' men were creeping forward swiftly now; while the men on the wall kept up their fire. They were obviously ready for the finish. Once Winston and Garcia were out of the way, nothing stood between Pilas and his goal.

CHAPTER XIII

REWARD OF COURAGE

WINSTON turned wearily as the man beside him coughed and then rolled over without another sound. He already suspected that they had been warned not to shoot at him or Barbara. Pilas was certain of himself; he could afford to spare these two for later.

Barbara was seated behind a flat, up-turned piece of masonry, the head of Felipe pillowed in her lap. Blood flowed from Felipe's throat, which her handkerchief kept swabbing off. She looked up at Winston and for a long moment, their eyes held. In each there was a message of undying devotion.

Winston turned back to his task. The carbine he held was hot. He reloaded, aimed at one of the men on the wall, and fired. The fellow dropped, but his place was taken immediately by another

who crawled like a fly to the comparative safety of a flat position.

At that moment, above the desultory firing, Winston became conscious of another sound—the put-put-putter of rapid fire from far over his head. He found Garcia looking at him with amazement as a yell of fear swept through Pilas' men.

"Is it a plane?" Garcia demanded.

Winston looked up. Suddenly he gave a cry of joy and pointed. Terror gripped the revolutionaries in the amphitheatre.

Garcia and Lyons followed the direction of his pointing finger, to where far overhead, the edge of the palisades stood out sharp and distinct under the soft moon-glow against the pale blue of the sky. Above the edge appeared several dark figures; arms waved like semaphore signals, and the outlines of rifles came into view.

Silence gripped the temple. Into it came the voice of Julio, far off but distinct.

"Let's go—again!"

Flame spurted in a sheet from a black bulk along the cliff edge as Julio bent down. Winston stared.

The men on the walls tumbled down like poisoned insects under the shriveling blast, as the swift staccato reached their ears; and those in the center of the floor, unprotected from this rear attack, cried out for mercy or flung up their hands in token of defeat.

"Julio!" Winston cried aloud. "Julio's done the only thing to save us—he's brought the machine gun to the ridge!"

PILAS appeared for an instant, shouting orders which were disregarded in the panic which swept his men. Padre Montescar was on his knees, praying and unheeding of the tumult.

Garcia cried out to his men to mount and in an instant, a platoon of Rurales had recovered their horses from outside and entered the temple. Winston held up his hand, signalling for Julio to cease fire.

The machine gun was silent. Along

the edge of the cliff, the men from the hacienda were lined, flat on their stomachs, their rifles covering the crowd below. Winston looked up and caught a glimpse of Pilas' fearful, terrorized countenance, and the joy died out of his eyes.

"There's one more score!" he cried, and leaped from the platform just as Barbara reached his side.

She cried out to him but he paid no heed. The Rurales were riding through the litter of stone, rounding up the helpless Mexicans in the center. Pilas caught sight of the American and his heavy jaw dropped; he darted off into the dark behind the wall.

"Stop him!" Barbara cried out, as her brother caught her hands. "Can't you stop him, Tony? Suppose something should happen to him now?"

Lyons made no move. A glance at the big American, and the sight of Pilas' retreating back quieted any fears he might have had as to Winston's ability to take care of himself.

"Jim Winston is the finest example of manhood I have ever met, Barbara, but I'm not at all sure that you are wise in choosing his way of living."

For answer, the girl snatched a pistol from the hand of a man who would never have further use for it, and leaped from the platform to follow the man she had chosen.

Winston had disappeared into the darkness. The sound of heavy blows reached Barbara's ears, and the snarling of low curses. She hurried toward the

sound. Garcia called to her to stop, and turned to follow her as she plunged ahead to the fight.

Suddenly Jim Winston staggered out of the darkness ahead of them. A streak of blood was creeping down his cheek. His eyes were fiery slits, and his jaw set and hard. But his whole aspect changed as he noticed Barbara.

"Why were you following me?" he queried.

"I wanted to be on hand to see the finish," she answered simply.

Jim smiled happily, and made a little gesture to Garcia. For the first time, the latter looked down. Under Winston's hand was the limp, battered, and bleeding form of Envilio Pilas, dragging in the dust.

Jim flung the senseless *alcalde* from him as though the limp body were tainted. "You'll have to patch him up some before he can stand in front of a firing squad, Garcia."

The captain of the Rurales smiled grimly, and called to one of his men as Barbara and Jim moved away. Over his shoulder Garcia heard Winston say: "Now where's that padre? We've got minister-work for him to do."

The girl laughed.

Garcia's grim smile spread into a mile-wide grin as he watched the two hobbling away like a gigantic, four-legged crab. Barbara's arm circled Winston's waist, holding him up on the lame side. She was nodding vigorously, tugging him along, almost carrying him away—to that padre.

THE END

VIVE LA REPÚBLICA

AS proof that ambitious men oftentimes plan to establish independent republics in federal Mexico, there is this sign, copied from a bulletin board in Topolabampo:

"Para la captura, o vivo o muerto, de Miguel Buizcuadilla, él que fué alcalde de Ternera, y propone fundar una república independiente in Sinaloa, se pagará 250 dólares."

Translated this means: "Two hundred fifty dollars will be paid for the capture, dead or alive, of Miguel Buizcuadilla, who was mayor of Ternera, and who proposes to establish an independent republic in Sinaloa."

THE SKIN GAME



By **FREDERICK L. NEBEL**

Author of "The Coast of Hate," "The Darjeeling Diamond," etc.

It was dead man's choice for Dike. Behind, the furious demons of the icy wind howled for their meat—ahead, the tundra tamer placed his deadfall cunningly.



A GAUNT-FACED Cree with a bullet in his lung brought the news to Lac la Marthe. He came staggering across the blizzard-swept lake, mumbling to himself, breathing in choked gasps.

Twice he fell and the dark stain of blood marked the places. A six-dog team, dragging an empty sledge, snarled and watched and followed behind.

Ed Dike saw the Cree as he fell the second time. Ed barged out the door of the lonely post. Once of the Old Company, once of Revillons on the Bay, he was now the best known free-trader north of Great Slave Lake. He carried the young buck into the trade store and laid him down on a pile of skins.

"My best runner," he said thickly, and then swore under his breath.

Two trappers rubbed life into the wounded man's hands and feet while Dike gave him a shot of brandy and went about cleaning the wound.

He was saying:

"Take your time, Billy, m' lad, but tell me why you're in such a mess. I see your sled's empty. It looks like dirty work, I'm thinking."

The Indian, half-frozen, more than half-dead, was struggling for words. "I mak camp Grandin Lake. Shot get me lung. Men come from timber. Hit me on head. I dead long tam. I wak, furs gone. . . ."

He lapsed into unconsciousness.

"So that was it!" exclaimed Dike, rising. "It gets me, it does, the scum that's in the country nowadays. Billy, as good an Injun as ever a white man had working for him, shot and banged over the head and robbed. I not only lose a slice of money on them furs, but I lose Billy. Damn bums!"

He turned to one of the Indians.

"Joe, Billy's in bad shape. Maybe the mission doctor at Fort Rae can help him. Take your dogs and use my cariole—not your toboggan."

The Indian shuffled out and rounded

up his dogs. Bundling up the wounded Billy thoroughly, they carried him out and placed him in the cariole. Not half an hour elapsed since Billy's arrival and the mission of mercy upon which Joe started, bound east for Fort Rae and medical aid for his brother.

Directly after he departed, Dike went for his own dogs—nine big Mackenzie hounds that held several records for speed and endurance. Meanwhile Ajeri, his assistant at the post, was loading a six-foot toboggan with provisions and robes, aided by a number of breed trappers who had just driven in their pelts from the Land of the Great Bear, from Lac Ste. Croix and points between and beyond.

In the trade-room, Dike was struggling into a caribou-skin capote, muttering dire threats against a certain "damn darn cutthroat." Taking a thirty-foot whip from the counter, he slipped on gloves and mittens and strode out, his broad jaw set hard, a cool, hard glint in his eyes.

He said to Ajeri:

"I may be gone two or three days. Take good care of things. And, remember, go the limit on blackies, but no more."

The whip snaked out, ending in a sharp report. With a snarl King-O, the whale of a leader, leaped forward and broke his mates into a fast trot. Dike, running beside the sled, kept snapping the whip and urging them on. Once upon the frozen surface of the lake they had good going, and Dike laid a westerly course.

IT was an hour past noon, and the sun, a bruised red globe, was riding low over the southeastern bulge of the earth. At three the lake began to broaden out, and a little later Dike swung northward. As he traveled the shores converged until at last he passed through a narrow passage that merged into a sheltered bay. Speeding across this, he struck a waterway, followed it due north and came out upon Grandin

Lake when night was full upon him. Here he halted for a hasty meal of tea and cold bannocks.

He traveled by the moon and the ghostly flare of the Northern Lights, which played weirdly down upon the broad surface of the lake. The temperature plummeted. A stiff wind was working out of the northeast, blowing full in Dike's face. His breath, spuming out, fell back against his beard and froze.

His face was beginning to freeze. But frost-bite was an everyday occurrence in Dike's life. He often made the remark that he was born in a blizzard, and he'd been frozen more times than he could remember. Big, sturdy and rounding forty years, he had a name among men who admired him for his honesty and his cool courage.

At midnight he made the northern rim of Grandin Lake and camped for the night. The first touches of dawn found him on the trail, toiling with his dogs through a rugged country. He gave a grunt of satisfaction when he left the timber behind and found good going on Lac Taché. Two hours later he veered toward the eastern shore and led his team up to a clearing in front of a wide, high cabin. He went to the door, pushed it open and stepped in.

The room was almost empty. A French-looking breed lounged against a trade-counter. A heavy-set man, built low and wide, with a nose that sprawled all over his bearded face, sat in a split-log chair with his feet perched on the edge of the stove. His small, close-set eyes darkened beneath bushy brows when he beheld Dike. He removed one foot from the stove.

"Howdy, Dike," he said.

"Howdy, Pogue."

Dike kicked a stool up beside the stove and sat down, stuffing his pipe. "Hear you've got a new batch of prime blackies?"

Pogue frowned. "What about it?"

"Who brought 'em in?"

Dike took his other foot down from

the stove and leaned forward, shoving out his heavy jaw.

"What's that to you?" Pogue asked.

"Billy, my Injun boy, was shot over on Grandin the other night and robbed of a sled-load of pelts."

Pogue spat out of the side of his mouth.

"You mean to say I took 'em!" he jerked out. "You can't prove it!"

"I didn't say you took 'em," Dike came back coolly, his eyes narrowing. "Thought maybe you'd know who did. You haven't got a good name north of Athabasca Landing, Pogue, so don't look so damned outraged. The Company kicked you out for shady deals, you know."

"Now cut that talk out, Dike," Pogue lashed out. "You're as much as accusing me."

"I never said anything to accuse you. You accused yourself, almost."

Pogue had drawn his gun.

"I don't like the way you talk, anyway, chum. Just about turn and slide out. You ain't got nothing on me."

"If you're not guilty, Pogue, you're sure getting in a heat over nothing."

"Get out!" Pogue was boiling.

Dike calmly knocked the ashes from his pipe, drew his capote closer about him and without another word walked out. Outside, he turned his team about and swung down toward the lake. Looking back, he saw two evil faces pressed against the window; Pogue's and that of the French-breed who had been leaning against the counter.

BACK in his own post on the following night, Dike and one of his runners, a Dog-Rib named Toochoo, were convened in the little living-room behind the trade-store. Toochoo had been extending credit to the trappers in the country between Lac la Marthe and the Yellow-Knife, and Dike considered him a valuable man.

Dike was saying:

"I'm not forcing this run on you, Toochoo, you understand. But I need a

good man for the country between here and McVicar Bay. I'm sure Billy got shot by accident. They want the pelts, that's all. If you take that run you'll know there's dirty work afoot and you can keep a look-out. If they threaten to shoot you, let 'em take the pelts. For my scheme, I *want* 'em to take the pelts. Now it's up to you. You can take that run or leave it."

"Take," nodded Toochoo.

"Good man. Now here's the scheme." Briefly speaking in whispers, Dike outlined his plan.

Toochoo, his dark eyes impassive, listened. When Dike had finished, he rose. He was a stalwart fellow, of noble stature.

"For the honor of the trade," he said solemnly.

"For the honor of the trade," repeated Dike, and they shook hands.

Next morning, when it was still dark, Dike walked with Toochoo and his dog-team down to the lake, giving him last-minute instructions. With a farewell shake, Toochoo cracked his whip and swung off behind his dogs.

"Good man," muttered Dike.

Several days later a trapper who ran his fur paths in the Lac Taché country stopped in on his way toward the Mackenzie. He told Dike just what he thought about that neck of the woods, and swore he'd never go within a thousand miles of it again.

Someone had been raiding his traps for the past month, he explained with much blasphemy, and he'd be damned if he'd squat in a country where a man's traps weren't safe. Dike sympathized with him, sheltered him for the night, and saw him off next morning without airing his own suspicions.

On the tenth day after Toochoo's departure, he climbed to the look-out tower which he had built a-top his station and swept the lake with his glasses. Three times during the day he made the search, and on the third time, in early afternoon, he spotted far off to the west a dog-team and a man riding on the

sled. He left the look-out and went down to the lake.

Toochoo, with a bloody bandage showing beneath his plaid toque, drew up and leaped from the sled. Except for his trail equipage, the sled was empty. No furs!

"What now, Toochoo?" asked Dike.

"Made camp south shore of Lac Ste. Therese. Fell asleep. Banged on head. Furs gone. Big snow. No trail." He was concise if anything.

"So they got you before you reached Lac Taché, eh?" Dike clamped his jaw grimly. Then: "You did as I told you?"

Toochoo nodded.

"All right. Now I'm ripe for anything short of murder. Come, Toochoo."

Dike was grim as he stamped into his trade-room. He told Ajeri to load the toboggan and get out his dogs. He kicked off his slippers and put on several pairs of socks, duffels and moose-hide moccasins. He buckled his gun-belt outside his caribou-skin capote, practiced sliding the gun out of its holster, and finally was satisfied that it was in the right position.

Toochoo came in from the other room, pulling his toque over a fresh bandage.

"Feel all right?" asked Dike concernedly.

"Good," Toochoo shot over his shoulder as he passed out.

When Dike went out a moment later Toochoo had his snowshoes on and was standing up by the lead dog. Stepping upon his own rackets, Dike gave a few instructions to Ajeri; then snapped his whip.

DUSK was falling even as they started. Before they were an hour on the trail a flurry of snow smote them, and then a strong wind blew across the lake and the snow whirled in great clouds. But the outfit did not falter. Toochoo, his elbows pressed close to his sides, trotted briskly in the

lead, his head bent into the teeth of the storm.

King-O, mighty leader, the harshest taskmaster a string of dogs ever followed, tagged close behind the Indian. Dike, already covered with snow, ran tirelessly beside the toboggan, shouting encouragement to his dogs, cracking his whip over their heads.

The storm grew in fury, howling across the lake in reckless abandon. The outfit swung in and hugged the shore line, but it never wavered. They made a camp in the middle of the night on a wooded island in Grandin Lake. Next day they fought in the chaos of the blizzard, made bleak Lac Taché and halted in the afternoon to make final plans.

"I'll go into the cabin alone," explained Dike. "You watch by the window. Most likely he'll have his gang in on a day like this. If I think I need you I'll take off my hat and scratch my head."

Toochoo nodded agreement.

They went on. At a point on the shore a little below Pogue's cabin they left the dogs. Then they crept up to the cabin, Toochoo sidling over to the window which, though pretty well frosted, offered him a fair view of the interior. Dike pushed open the door and stepped in.

Pipe smoke hung thick under the rafters. Six men lounged about; tough-looking fellows. Pogue was again ensconced in his chair, his feet planted against the stove. He lifted drowsy eyes when the door opened, then sat erect and glared at the man who was wiping the salt-rheum from his eyes.

"Evening, boys," called Dike, coming forward.

Grunts greeted him.

"I see you're back again," drawled Pogue harshly.

"So I am."

Their eyes met: Dike's cool, level ones, and Pogue's querulous ones. Pogue rose, his big hand sliding to his right hip.

"Well?" he blurted.

"As man to man, I'd like to look over your pelts, Pogue," said Dike simply.

Pogue's lips writhed in a sneer. "The hell you say!"

"Just so. Another of my boys was robbed. I want to make sure you haven't got 'em."

POGUE was on the verge of drawing his gun. Then, crossing his arms, he threw back his head and laughed, turning to the others.

"Ha, boys! Dike thinks we've got his pelts. He's as much as accused me of stealing 'em! Let's show him some rough stuff."

He whirled on Dike with a roar.

But the trader from Lac la Marthe jumped back and swung out his revolver. He said—"Not a move out of any of you!"

Glowing, his huge face contorted with rage, Pogue stopped in mid-career. His followers, muttering, riveted their burning eyes on the man with the gun. Hands strained at knife-hilts and revolver butts.

"Raise 'em high," went on Dike. "I want to look over your pelts, Pogue."

He raised his hat and touched his head. The door opened. Silently, his rifle leveled, Toochoo slid in and over beside Dike.

"Into the store-room, Toochoo, and get those pelts."

"Wait," snarled Pogue. "How do I know he won't fake it? How does he know which is which?"

"He knows," said Dike.

Toochoo had passed behind the counter and into the store-room. The trade-room was deathly silent. The men, tense as drumheads, watched wolfishly for a chance to outwit Dike. The minutes passed. Finally Toochoo, frowning a little, came out. He shook his head.

"No find," he said.

Dike seemed perplexed. In the momentary movement of his eyes to Toochoo, a breed swept his hand toward his knife. Toochoo's gun cracked. The

breed slumped. That broke the tension. Another breed snatched at his revolver and Dike, shooting low, smashed his hand. Pogue, bellowing, had his gun trained on Dike when Toochoo, hiding behind the counter, blazed and sent it spinning from his hand. Knives came into play.

A greasy Indian made a panther-like leap for Dike, who ducked under, spun around and shot another breed in the act of drawing a bead on Toochoo. He emptied his gun and picked up a stool as he saw Pogue hurtling toward him with drawn knife. He missed Pogue and caught another fellow flush in the face. That put the third man out of commission. The other three were concentrating their efforts on Toochoo, who was hidden somewhere among the stores behind the counter.

Dike met Pogue and missed the wielded knife by a fraction of an inch. He hurled Pogue away and dove for another stool. Raising it, he crouched, while Pogue circled around him with drawn knife. A gun spat from behind the counter and an Indian hit the boards. The two others fired. Pogue, unable to hold back, leered bestially and hurtled for Dike.

The stool grazed Pogue's head, ripped open his left ear and thudded against his shoulder. He groaned, but he was a hard-case brawler, and he forced Dike to the floor, his one arm helpless, but his knife-arm still in fighting form. Madly he jabbed it down, blind with rage. The blade grazed Dike's bearded face and sank three inches in the hard pine floor.

DIKE caught Pogue's thick throat and struggled to force him up, but Pogue had worked his knee in his stomach and was pressing down with all his strength, while his one good hand was working feverishly for the brutal nose-grip. The cabin was foul with oaths and powder smoke. The two remaining breeds were creeping toward the counter, emboldened by no recent

challenge from Toochoo. Dike and Pogue were fighting to the death, locked in each other's grips, streaming blood.

Pogue had Dike's nose between his fingers and Dike had Pogue by the throat in an unbreakable vise. Finally, with a mighty effort, Dike managed to throw Pogue on his side and thus broke the terrible knee-to-stomach grip. He worked him to his back, still with the throat grip, and then lifted one hand long enough to smash him between the eyes. Grudgingly, Pogue's nose grip relaxed and Dike, grimacing with pain, tore his hand away altogether and again smashed him between the eyes.

Pogue flopped spasmodically—lay still.

Dripping blood, his nose already swelling monstrously, Dike lunged after the two who were stalking Toochoo. He leaped on the one fellow's back and cracked him on the ear with a short, chopping jab, tearing his gun from senseless hands. The other fellow lurched back and swung his rifle, butt to hip. A shot boomed from the other side of the room. The rifleman dropped in his tracks. Toochoo mysteriously appeared from nowhere.

"He'da got me that time," muttered Dike, wavering. "Where'd you come from? Thought you were back here."

He pointed to the counter.

Toochoo actually grinned.

"Got pelts," he said in Dike's ear. "Come."

Bewildered, Dike followed Toochoo behind the counter, then into the room where pelts were stored. The Indian scrambled up a rope that dangled from

a rafter, looked down to see if Dike were still watching, and reached up into the shadows under the roof. He tugged at something which finally gave way and came tumbling down. Toochoo worked his way toward the front of the cabin on the rafters, then dropped down near the door, thus showing Dike how he had fooled the two Indians.

Dike, opening the moose-hide bundle, found almost half a hundred pelts; silvers, crosses, one black-fox, marten, otter, and a few fisher-cats. Turning one of them over, he saw on the raw-hide the outline of a little circle, apparently imprinted with a heated instrument.

Toochoo, pulling his revolver from his belt, fitted the muzzle on the little circle.

"You sure branded 'em," Dike smiled, thinking of Toochoo's cunning. He looked about the post. The struggle of the fight had all but wrecked it. Pogue was shaking his head, and wiping the blood from his face on the back of his hand. Some of his henchmen lay motionless. Others were groaning, sickly fighting their way back to consciousness.

Dike threw his batch of pelts over his shoulder, and moved toward the door. Pogue surveyed him with one good eye. He blinked stupidly. "You've got your pelts, Dike. Now go to hell."

"Thanks, Pogue," Dike called as he stood on the threshold, "but if you don't hustle out of this country, you'll be waiting for me down there on the Devil's reception committee."





World Adventurers is a fraternal band of brother adventurers and globe-trotters from the four lanes of the earth, banded together in a genuine he-man association under the banner of *Action Stories*. To be a member, a man must possess the staunch heart of an adventurer, tried and tested on the far-flung out-trails, or have a real desire to be one.

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hind the "joy stick"—in fact, rubbed shoulders with danger in any form—you're entitled to enroll in the Brotherhood of He-Men.

To apply for membership, fill out the coupon below. If you are accepted, you'll receive a durable membership identification card, free of charge, a positive, automatic identification passport the world over. You are then permitted to wear the button pictured above, the talisman and symbol of the adventure crew. With *World Adventurers* in gold lettering on the black background along the rim, the button is a reproduction of the globe with the land in gold relief and the water in a royal blue enamel, a flashing design worthy of the organization. The price, post prepaid and registered, is only fifty cents. No membership or initiation fees. Members of *World Adventurers* are entitled to become staff correspondents to *Action Stories*—at regular space rates.

THROUGH the black water, hundreds of feet down, steel claws of a mechanical hand grope into the paths of powerful searchlights. A man, more like a fantastic monster in his heavy sea-armor, guides his weird man-made machine. Past jagged mountains of steel, down barnacle-encrusted ladders, into the tunnel interior of a great muck-covered ship. The claws grasp and hold. Tiny crystal bubbles break from the back of the man-monster's helmet. And hundreds of feet above him, tense men utter gasping cries of joy as they listen to his quiet words over the telephone.

Six years they have been at it. And now, the man in the depths tells the men on the surface of success. Davey Jones' locker is being robbed. The little humans have broken into it. Treasure is in their grasp.

Where the sea is green and the white-caps flash in the sun, where the diving pump clanks and wheezes and the winches creak under their loads, men braced against the rocking of their frail boats are watching silently. Far below them a black shadow heaves into view.

The winches keep turning stolidly. The shadow gains shape. The sunlight flashes on shiny metal. The steel hand breaks through the ocean's roof, dripping pearls of water and grasping a great fistful of glinting gold.

A cheer ripples through the workers. They strain at their posts to plunge their fists wrist-deep in the new-found treasure. But the pump clanks on. They must wait, for far below them, a man still needs his life-giving oxygen.

All over the world this scene is being

duplicated every spring. For untold ages hardy adventurers with the right kind of courage and guts and confidence have gone to the bottom of the sea to take back the gold Davey Jones has claimed for his own. Some succeed—more fail. And for the treasure alone no one would fight such overwhelming dangers. Better to stay at home and lose your money in an easier way.

Better to stay at home? Ask the men who manned the *Artiglio*. For years they searched the bottom of the sea for a great liner they knew was there. Then they found it. Lost it. Had their boats broken up in storms, lost their *Artiglio the First* in an explosion and saw twelve of their pals die a sudden death. But they wouldn't give up. It was more than gold they were after. And just this spring they finally broke into the bullion room of the *Egypt* and fished out nearly five million in gold alone. Was it worth it? Not in money they will tell you. But in adventure, yes!

And off the Virginia Capes another little band of die-hards are hunting another treasure. It is the steamer *Medina*, and the loot is jewels from Old Mexico. Twenty years the *Medina* has been there. And for twenty years men have gone to the bottom of the ocean to get the jewels out of her hold. But the old boat is still there and the men working above her still say, "Tomorrow, tomorrow we'll see success."

Maybe they will. You can't tell them that they won't. For men like them cannot see failure. They don't know what it is. They belong to the great

band of World Adventurers and they know that in living their lives the way they like, they are getting far greater treasures than gold can buy.

It is for men like these that *Action Stories* is meant. Men who like red-blooded adventure, men who bring back virile tales of the world's outposts to their pals at home. *Action Stories* has always been written by real adventurers and it will always be written for their true blood brothers.

Desert Man

DEAR BOSS AND GANG:

Received the 1932 cards, for which I wish to thank you. I have found that a W.A. card is recognized as quickly, for identification, as any of my passports!

Let me add a word of praise for Jack Climençon's article on employment in Central and South America. He has given you straight facts. So many people have the impression that all one has to do is to send the required amount of cash to certain so-called Employment Bureaus and they are off to a job in the tropics. Such jobs are only for a favored few, and if one passes all other requirements, the chances are ten to one that he will be turned down on physical examination.

Boss, I am seeking two or three partners who are stickers and willing to buck the hardships of the desert country for a while. I have purchased a claim in the desert of Southern California that promises a future. Men are taking a living out of that section right now, and each day it appears to get better. I want it understood though, that it is a gamble for anyone who tries it.

Water has to be hauled in from a distance of thirty-five miles, and this is the nearest outpost-town connecting with the outside world. Now if anyone is interested, let them write to me for more of the lowdown.

Please send me twelve application blanks as I intend to start a World Adventurers chapter here—and I'll make a go of it too!

JOHN W. RICE,

World Adventurer No. 2317,
P.O. Box No. 829, San Jose, California.



Secretary, WORLD ADVENTURERS,

Action Stories, 220 East 42nd Street, New York City.

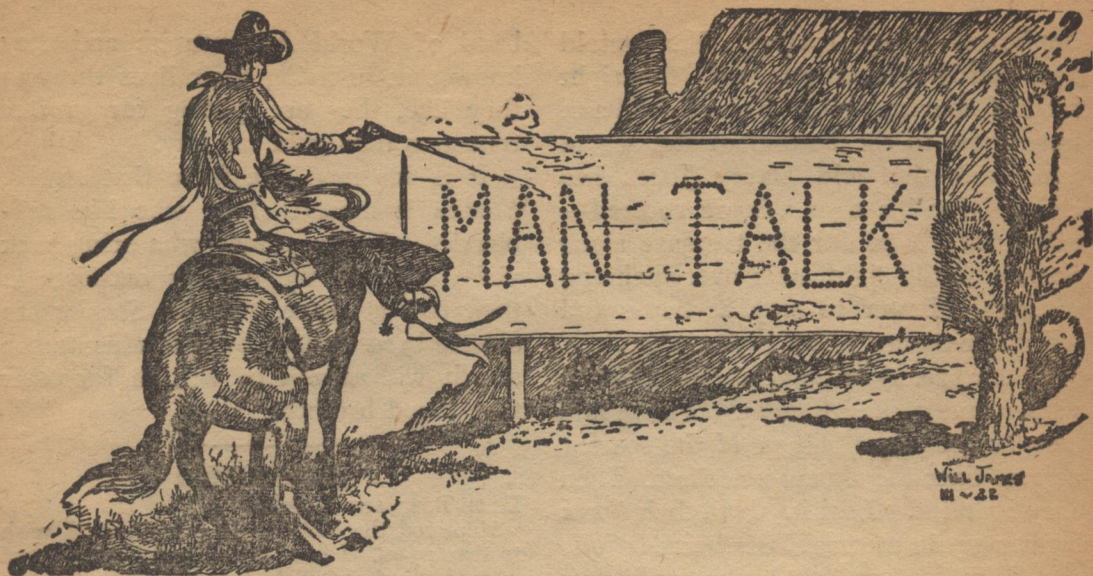
Please send me an application blank for membership enrollment in the World Adventurers. No initiation charge, no membership fee. Everything free to me as a reader of Action Stories.

7-32

Name.....

Street.....

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WHEN A MAN RIDES! That's when you can tell if he's real cow folks. If he's not, he forgets to lead his pony out. He clammers into the saddle and damn near falls out trying to pick up the reins he forgot. He shudders when his cayuse stomps off a fly, clucks at the nice horsey, and jogs and jolts away over the terrain with a foot or so of clear daylight showing under his pants.

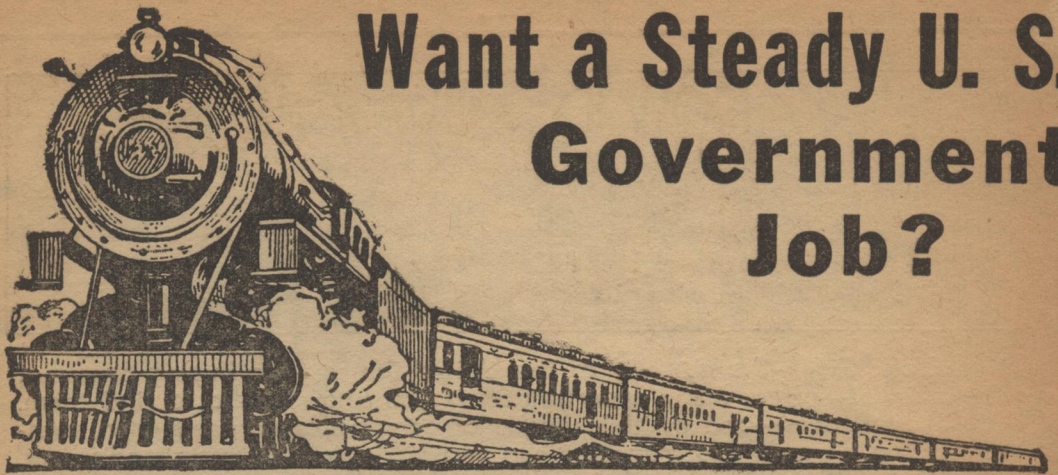
Contrast this with the genuine article. A quick lead-out. A pat on the old buckskin neck as he grabs up the reins. A foot in the stirrup, a light swing over the cantle, and there he sits like he was glued to the kak. Watch him gallop down the drag in a cloud of dust. There he goes—easing off into grassland. The only light you see between that hombre's britches and leather is when he stands in the stirrup to flip off his John B. and wave a "So long, boys, see yuh some more," before he dips into yonder arroyo out of sight.

No use trying to explain to anyone what the difference is. All we can do is present the two pictures accurately, and your own two eyes tell you which is which. Well, it's the same doggone way with writing men. There's some that fumble around trying to tell you it was a nice day, though the sun made one perspire a trifle. And there were some pretty trees down by the brook, and the little birds were caroling in the shade, and the fish in the brook had been snapping at water bugs all morning, so they were well fed and comfortable. And after four or five pages of this, a couple of smartly dressed young

gentlemen appear vaguely, stagger through a lot of uninteresting motions.

Now, if you haven't gone to sleep at the mere thought of struggling through such tripe, just run your finger down the line-up of hombres on the first page of this magazine. Remember their yarns as you do it. What did you get from each one of them? Why, you hadn't got a half a hundred words into those tales before you'd met some people—real men that you felt you could reach out and touch, that you could hear talking, that you could see. And not only that, you knew what those men were up to, be it fair play or foul. And furthermore, when you'd finished, you knew those men had *done* something!

Well, there's no sense elaborating on that. There's the picture, and you can take your choice as to what you'll read. If you choose the pale pink junk about the natty young fellows who, no doubt, twirl a mean cigaret lighter, then *Action Stories* is not for you. But if you're looking for a string of two-fisted, fighting yarns about men who live at a plenty fast clip and handle life with the gloves off, then have at it, gents. *Action Stories* is *your* book!



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HERE'S the tip-off. If you want to read drawing-room stories, pseudo-sophisticated tales about people who are sheltered from the hard jolts of life, who have someone to dress and feed them, whose problems are halter-broken for them, then don't put your money on the line for a magazine that carries the Fiction House Bull's-Eye. Because every yarn in every book carrying that brand is a hand-picked slice of action adventure, for, by, and about men who can stand up and take it—and dish it out. On land, on sea, in the air—wherever men are called upon to use their own two fists, their own alert senses and quick wits—and risk the whole stack of chips on the outcome.

Aces and *Wings* are still up on the ceiling as the flight leaders of war-air fiction. In *Wings*, Arch Whitehouse takes off with a story of a Yank pilot leading the Hun raider-fleet in a cloud-cracking story called "Hell's Helmsman." Other *Wings* fiction aces are on the line in this issue. *Aces* zooms to a new altitude record and opens with "Lone Eagle," a story of a fighting pilot who couldn't stay out of the air, by Franklin H. Martin, with the rest of the *Aces* favorites flying in regular formation.

Action Stories again rings the target in a cloud of powder smoke. If you are looking for excitement—if you crave red-blooded, he-man stories of action and adventure, ride the wet cattle trail through the Montana Bad Lands

with Walt Coburn and his "Trigger Tribe."

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AROUND NEW YORK

WITH
BILL EDWARD

New York City—the gateway to the United States—the buying center of the country—offers many opportunities if you know where to find them. Bill Edward does—and by this unique co-operative advertising plan, non-resident readers of this magazine can secure dependable merchandise and novelties of the right style and quality at the right prices.

A few specialties for this month are offered. Bill is your New York Representative and Purchasing Agent; call on him for any services he can render. Address all orders and correspondence to Bill Edward, 639 Graybar Bldg., New York City. USE THE COUPON IN ORDERING.

SMOKERS—WHAT A PIPE! Here's a real pipe. A treat for you and a temptation to General Dawes to discard his famous "underslung" for a pipe of everlasting sweetness and dryness.

I consider this the greatest achievement in pipe making of the Century, combining as it does, all the merits of the old corn cob with style, beauty, lightness and durability that present-day pipe smokers demand.

Economical?—well, I should say so. You really get 7 pipes for the original cost of the one and can have as many as you desire at only a few cents each.



The illustration shows the style and general appearance as others see it, but the smoker holds the secret of its value. The actual bowl of the pipe is concealed within a beautiful grained case of Bakelite. The bowl is the heart of any pipe and this particular concealed bowl is of specially shaped and fitted corn cob, the driest and coolest of pipe materials.

Tobacco never touches the stem and your saliva never touches the tobacco. When the cob bowl becomes rancid or burns thin, presto! unscrew the Bakelite bowl, throw away the old filler, insert a new one and you have a new sweet and clean pipe for only the cost of the filler, which is 5c. The stem is of hard rubber and straight. Notice the flat bottom bowl permitting it to stand when not in use.

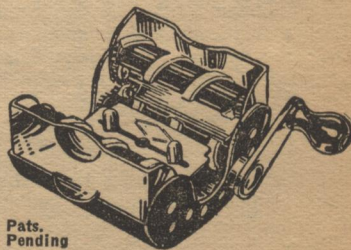
Bill Edward has made special arrangements with the distributor to fill introductory orders from readers of this magazine to include the pipe and six additional refills, and prepay the postage to any point in the United States upon receipt of only \$1.50—check or money order. Additional refills cost 60c a dozen.

Of course, you will want one. Take my word for it you will be pleased beyond your fondest pipe dreams. Use the Bill Edward coupon in ordering.

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Pats.
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AROUND NEW YORK

WITH BILL EDWARD

PAGE MR. RIPLEY —“Believe it or not”—I do, for with my own eyes I have seen and with my own cash I have purchased and to my own satisfaction I have proven—that for \$3.95 you can install a thoroughly reliable water heater in your kitchen, bathroom or any other place where an ordinary faucet and electric light socket are available.



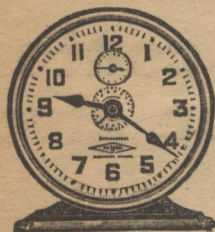
No more lacking of hot water—any hour of the day or night instantaneous hot water is obtainable by the single action of plugging into a light socket. Made of attractive white porcelain, sturdy in construction, beautiful in appearance, equipped with 7½ ft. rubber insulated cord with indestructible rubber plug. 10½ ft. cord is optional at 30¢ extra.

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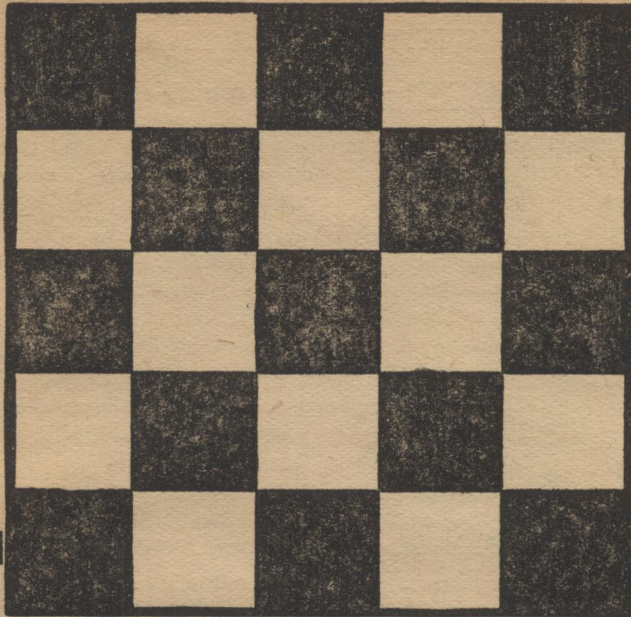
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in any ONE of the white spaces of this Prize Checker Board without touching the borders, black spaces or each other? Do this now and

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THERE are 12 white spaces in the "checkerboard." Try any one of these —see if you can write 36 "o's in one white space. If you can do this, send it at once.

This is the 44th distribution of prizes to be made for an old established company and details will be sent you if you can qualify in this "checkerboard" test. The prize money is already on deposit in the sixth largest bank in America! I will award 50 cash prizes totaling \$6,800.00 to help build good will in publicity and expansion campaign. Over \$27,000.00 paid in prizes in 60 days. Many more thousands of dollars set aside for future prizes to be paid in the next few

months. Highest prize in this offer is \$3,000.00. A \$500.00 extra prize (earned by promptness) will make total \$3,500.00 for first prize winner. Duplicate prizes will be paid in case of ties in final decision, but not more than one prize will be paid to members of one family or group of persons. Residents of Chicago or persons living outside U. S. A. are not eligible. No obligation, now or ever. Send no money. Take your pen or pencil right now and try this test. If you can make 36 "o's in one of the white spaces, then send it in a letter or on a post card at once. If you are successful in this qualifying test, you will be advised immediately.

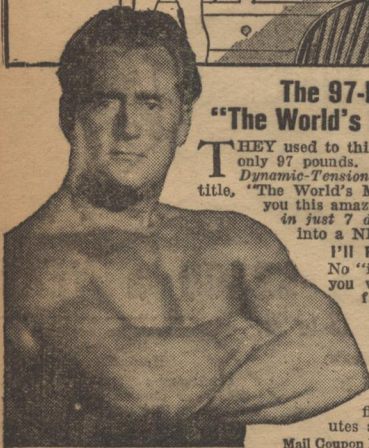
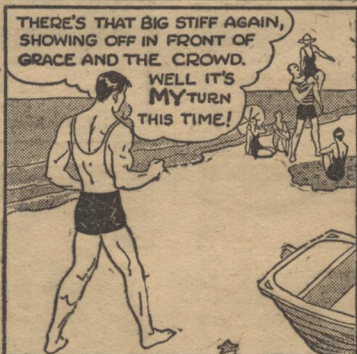
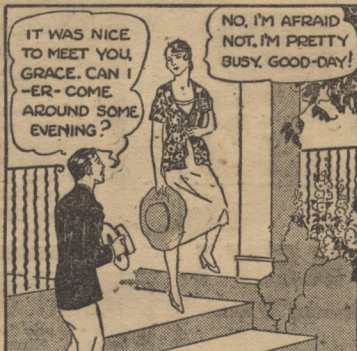
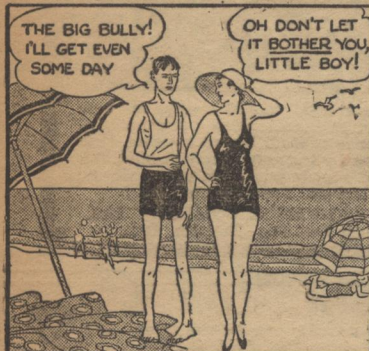
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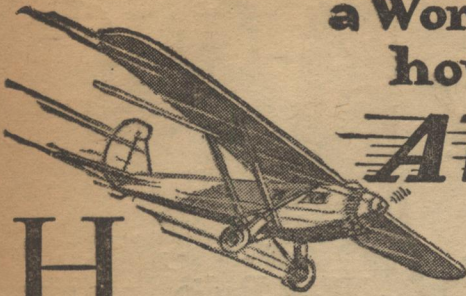
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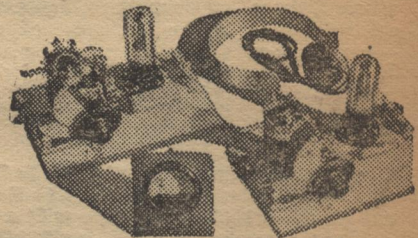
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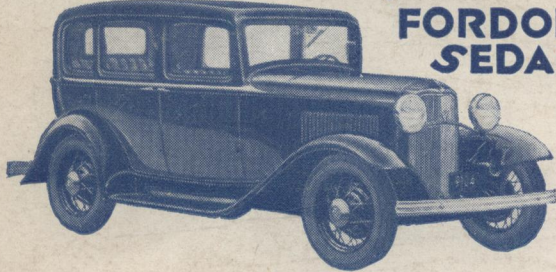
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FORD V-8 OR

\$600 CASH



FORDOR SEDAN

\$1500.00 CASH

100 PRIZES GIVEN AWAY

1st Prize \$600 or New 8-Cyl. Sedan
2nd Prize \$200 3rd Prize \$100 4th Prize \$75
5th Prize \$50 6th to 100th \$5 Each

IT ISN'T often you have an opportunity to win a splendid prize like this without being required to buy or sell something. To win this prize nothing is necessary but the time you spend working on the puzzle. Can you tell big numbers from little numbers? Can you draw a line connecting the biggest numbers? If you can you may win \$600.00 Cash, or a brand new Eight-Cylinder Ford Fordor Sedan, to be delivered to you by your nearest dealer. All you will have to do to win is to connect up more large numbers in accordance with the rules than anyone else. It sounds easy, doesn't it? But that's all you have to do and you will find it lots of fun; just try your hand at it.

WHY WE GIVE THESE PRIZES

We offer these Good-Will prizes free just for advertising purposes. We sell the well-known Hollywood Marvel Products. We want you to see our new catalog which we are going to mail to everyone who registers in this contest. We feel sure we will receive enough business through the distribution of this catalog, and exceptional offers we make, to more than offset the cost of these prizes. Now remember, it is *not* necessary for you to buy or sell any of these goods to win this prize. The offer is open to everyone and absolutely FREE.

CONTEST RULES

Complete rules and instructions will be sent on receipt of the registration blank. Final date for registration November 30, 1932, but if winner of first prize has mailed registration blank within three days after this announcement is read \$200.00 extra will be added to first prize. Final date for submitting official puzzle January 30, 1933. Contest restricted to continental U. S. Only registered contestants may take part. Employees of this company and their relatives are excluded. Ties, if any, will be eliminated by means of additional puzzles of the same nature, but larger, as explained on official puzzle blank, which will be mailed registered contestants immediately on receipt of registration blank. At the same time we will mail you a dozen EXTRA COPIES of the Marvel Path Puzzle to practice on. Prizes will be awarded according to official standing of contestants after ties are eliminated. Duplicate prizes will be awarded in case of final ties, as provided in rules on official puzzle blank.

9	2	6	7	3	9	4	7	4	3	9	4
4	8	3	5	6	3	8	5	5	7	3	7
5	3	8	2	6	6	5	7	2	6	5	5
7	5	4	8	3	5	6	3	9	2	5	7
3	6	5	2	9	3	5	6	4	8	3	5
9	2	7	5	2	9	3	6	5	2	9	3
2	8	3	6	6	2	8	4	4	6	4	7
7	4	8	2	6	6	4	7	2	5	6	3
5	6	3	9	3	5	6	4	8	3	6	7
3	7	7	2	8	3	5	6	3	9	3	5
9	3	5	5	2	9	3	6	6	2	9	3
4	7	2	7	7	3	8	5	6	6	2	9

HERE'S THE WAY TO SOLVE THE PUZZLE

Above is a Marvel Path Puzzle—the simple puzzle which decides the winner. All you do is take a pencil and draw a line or path through 40 of the numbers in the square as shown in the sample path at the right. In drawing your line or path, you want to include the MOST big numbers, and the FEWEST small numbers, as per the following rules. That's all.

9	2	6	7	3	9	4	7	4	3	9	4
4	8	3	5	6	3	8	5	5	7	3	7
5	3	8	2	6	6	5	7	2	6	5	5
7	5	4	8	3	5	6	3	9	2	5	7
3	6	5	2	9	3	5	6	4	8	3	5
9	2	7	5	2	9	3	6	5	2	9	3
2	8	3	6	6	2	8	4	4	6	4	7
7	4	8	2	6	6	4	7	2	5	6	3
5	6	3	9	3	5	6	4	8	3	6	7
3	7	7	2	8	3	5	6	3	9	3	5
9	3	5	5	2	9	3	6	6	2	9	3
4	7	2	7	7	3	8	5	6	6	2	9

- (1) Your line must be ONE CONTINUOUS LINE but may turn as often as you wish. You may start at ANY NUMBER IN THE SQUARE and stop at any number. When finished your line must contain 40 numbers.
- (2) Your line must go straight up or straight down, straight right or straight left—diagonal (slanting) lines are not allowed. See Sample Marvel Path above at right.

- (3) From the number you begin with you may go in a straight line until your line contains 4 numbers. Then you MUST turn because 4 numbers are all that are permitted in a straight line. If you wish you may turn when your line contains 3 numbers. But LESS than 3 numbers in a straight line are NOT PERMITTED. Observe this rule throughout—NEVER LESS than 3 numbers in a straight line—NEVER MORE than 4.

- (4) Your line must never touch or cross itself. When your line contains 40 numbers STOP. Add up the numbers in your finished line and put down the total. The path that adds up to a bigger total than anybody else's WINS.

We have drawn a sample path in the small puzzle above to show you how to do it. You may start at any number in the puzzle. The numbers in our path add up to 189. See if you can beat this path by starting at some other number. Try it. If you do and your path adds up to a bigger total than anyone else's, you win, and the prize you win will be \$600.00 Cash, or a brand new Eight Cylinder Ford Sedan. That's some prize for taking a pencil and drawing a line, but don't stop to solve the puzzle now—mail your registration blank first! Be in time to get the extra \$200.00 that goes to first prize winner, for promptness. Copyright 1932, Hollywood Marvel Products Co.

\$200 EXTRA For Promptness

No need to rush about drawing your Marvel Path. You can do that later. The thing to do RIGHT NOW is to DECLARE YOURSELF a contestant by mailing the registration blank below. \$200.00 extra cash will be given first prize winner if he or she registers PROMPTLY. This makes \$800.00 in all, or the Ford and \$200.00 cash extra. SOME PRIZE just for drawing lines between numbers. So mail this registration blank IMMEDIATELY. Be ahead of time so that you can get ALL there is to be won. To step into this car, to know it's yours—to know you don't owe a penny ON it, and haven't paid a penny FOR it—that's worth while. But when, besides this, there will be in the bank two hundred dollars extra, you can be sure your BIG CHANCE has come. RIGHT NOW is the time to say you're going to WIN!

REGISTRATION BLANK

HOLLYWOOD MARVEL PRODUCTS CO.,
1023 N. Sycamore, Dept. 409
Hollywood, Calif.

Without obligation to me, register my name in your Good-Will Marvel Path Contest. Send me full information, the Official Rules together with the official puzzle blank, and 12 extra copies for practice. I expect to submit a puzzle in this contest. It is understood that I may win first or any other prize listed above, without paying you one cent for goods or service.

Name.....

Address.....