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LIFELINES

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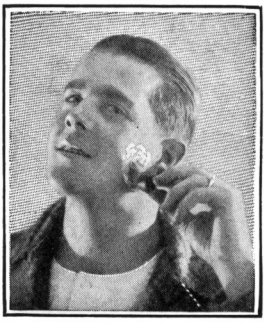

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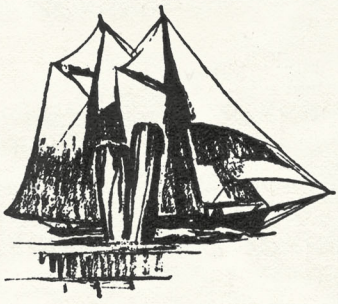

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A Novelette of the Great Lakes in storm, and the heroic loyalty of the Coast Guard

LIFELINES

By

KARL W. DETZER

CHAPTER I

FATHER AND SON

THE TWO men, one old, one very young, faced each other angrily on the cold Pine Haven dock.

"And a grand, fine son you are!" John Lee shouted.

"A grand, fine father, maybe!" young Dave answered.

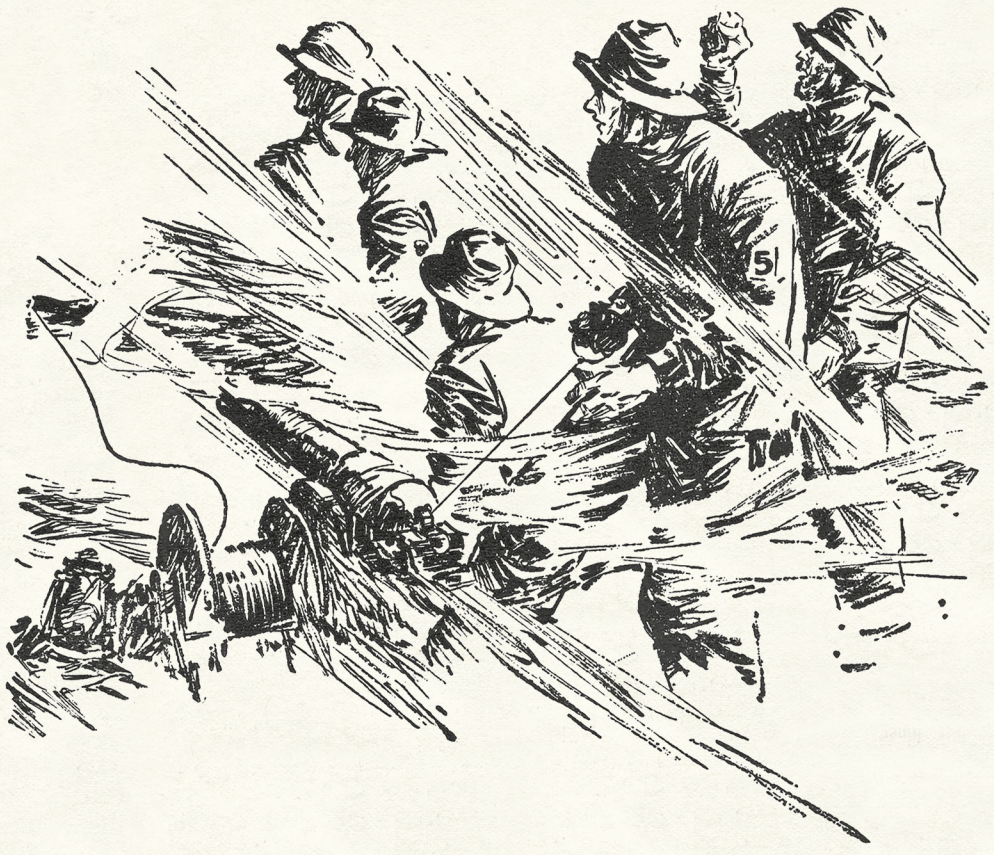
The fall gale was making. The son, who wore under his slicker the gilt crossed oars of Coast Guard insignia, checked his temper when he had cried out once and, shaking spray from his eyes, looked down uneasily at the short, stubborn figure shivering in front of him. The old man carried a heavy stick of cedar in his thin hands. He must support himself by it intermittently; only when the merciless wind slackened he pounded the loose planks of the dock.

"New machines? Modern? Devil save us! You come down here, knowin' I hate the word, and gabble again about *modern* machines?"

"I'm here on duty this time," Dave answered.

"Duty?" old John screamed. "Has it come *you* can talk of duty?"

Dave hitched the wet strap of his recording clock higher on his shoulder. He had not sought this quarrel with his father. A year they had not spoken. A year tonight, exactly, he left the Lee holdings. Left after a similar quarrel. He had not expected to meet the old man on this trip. Find his father out on the rotten pier bossing the gang in such a storm? The north limit of Prophet Point patrol stood only a few feet away, a white post at the end of the dock, with a key



chained to it. He must punch his clock with that key before he turned back to the station.

Punch it if his father permitted! He might not, of course. A schooner was loading, and this was Lee's pier. What was a Government clock to John Lee? He owned Pine Haven. All of it. Pier, mill, store, timber, orchard, boarding house—every acre, every log, every apple on the place belonged to King John. To King John! Dave filled again with temper. The silly title always stuck like sand in his mouth. It was old fashioned. Out of date like everything else. Forty years roisterous men up and down this Michigan coast called John Lee king!

"Think I don't know what's the matter?" Dave cried. "I know what folks are saying, folks all over the State. You've enough money. Enough to buy new equipment clear through and fill a bank besides! Your stuff's worn out! Saws, dock, tramway, conveyor, vessels, everything!"

Old John bridled.

"Worn out? Saws is set and tempered, ain't they? Cut straight, don't they? I got full cargoes, and deckloads, too. More'n forty men working. Bad year and all. Look at 'em!"

There was a note almost triumphant in his shrill, contentious voice. He waved his stick excitedly toward the crowd of Indian and halfbreed dock laborers who were trundling shingles by lanternlight aboard the auxiliary schooner *Peacock*.

SHE WAS a stubby, two stick craft, already heavily laden; disreputable, dirty. Not even the dimness of the illuminating oil lanterns rigged from mast to mast concealed her ugliness. Dave looked

with disdain. Hatches battened, deckload growing, she kicked and yanked savagely at her ancient hempen lines. Her planks ground threateningly against the sides of the dock.

"She's no more fit to sail than a cracker box!" the younger Lee answered. "You know it. She's rotten clear through. Has been for ten years. You'll have a drowned crew one of these hard blows . . ."

New winds booted his words, deafening his father. The pier swayed under the hammering. Out of the wet northeast, while King John Lee glared contemptuously and speechlessly at his son, a white haired, maniac wave charged in with drunken abandon. It fell mercilessly upon the schooner *Peacock*. One fisty blow it beat against her shabby sides. Then it lifted her as if she were empty instead of loaded and flung her vehemently against the pier.

Cedar poles snapped. The wharf trembled, screeched, recoiled. Planks shattered, and the broad stern of the decrepit vessel ripped a great hole through the rotted roadway.

Old John Lee cried out once, a short warning in a voice pitched shriller than the making storm. His crew was running. One halfbreed, more clumsy than his mates, tripped on a barrow at the edge of the pier. He lifted his arms impotently, screamed, and went down overside.

Dave dropped his recording clock and his belt of flares. It took him twenty seconds to kick out of his boots and tear off jacket and breeches. Before the next wave charged by, he ran to the edge of the pier and carelessly leaped.

The Indian already was a dozen strokes away. Dave lunged out toward him. He must strike the fellow once, square in the abdomen, to make him quiet. Gripping the hair, which was long and matted, he turned him over, and on his own back started ashore.

The water was cold in its embrace. He felt the pressure of depth, the relentless trickery of undertow. Breakers thundered against the beach with a reverberating *drum-drum-drum*. As he crawled up the wash, dragging the man after him, his father was the first to reach them.

"And will you come out!" old John squalled. "Out that lake! Have you no sense? No sense at all?"

DAVE shook the water from his eyes. He let other men tend the halfbreed. With the roar of the breakers still pounding in his ears he followed confusedly to the pier. New lines held the *Peacock* fast. Already sailors were flinging new planks across the great hole broken in the roadway. Old John stepped out upon them recklessly. Dave picked up his shoes and clothes, his belt, lantern and clock. Silently, without knowing why, he followed his father to the little crowded dock warehouse. John kicked open the door and turned up the wick in the lantern suspended on a wire hook from the ceiling.

"Put on your clothes!" he commanded. "No thanks for dragging that loafer out! Devil save us, do y' think you ain't more account'n an Indian? I have this to say now. Tomorrow you come back here to work. Tomorrow, understand? And you'll leave your fancy notions behind. You'll come where you belong, and by Mackinac, you'll do what I say!"

"I'm not coming back," Dave answered. He spoke quietly.

"Ain't coming?"

"No, sir. I'm satisfied where I am. You've given me no reason to come."

"No reason? All I offer ain't no reason? Timber, pier, vessels—the *Peacock* out there and the *River Jordan* that's as elegant a steam barge as ever sailed—my mill—"

"Your mill's a disgrace," Dave said. He still spoke reasonably. "I told you a year ago this pier wasn't safe. You said it had stood stanch forty years. Well, you see what it did tonight. It hasn't a loader or a conveyor or a crane or even a dummy track on it. Think you can get decent vessels to put in here without loading cranes? You said you'd never had a crane and never would—"

"And I won't!" old John cried. A note

of fretfulness came into his voice. "What's the world comin' to? Times different? They's worse, that's all! Talk of needin' cranes and such! Devil save us, I've lifted whole logs bigger'n any o' them bundles them Indians was totin' tonight! Buy labor savin' devices for an Indian? What's he for? I pay a dollar a day, don't I? Good money. Ought to be workin' for a bowl of mush, way they was when I come into this country—"

Dave cut him off. Many times he had heard this. It made him impatient always.

"You'd be money ahead," he advised sharply. "I showed you a year ago how to get electricity out of your water power. Ten times more energy than you have in that undershot wheel. Showed you where you could buy the turbines cheap, get machinery for a modern plant. If you won't learn—"

"Learn?" King John laughed. "Learn from you? Why the devil save us, I run Pine Haven afore you was born! It was me as put in the first dock on this whole shore. Me as cut the first stick o' that first stand o' pine. Did it without no advice, too. Oh, there was plenty floatin' round. Free as fish. A lot o' smart young fellows like you come bustin' in, heads all blossomin' with new idees. I got their holdings now. Where they gone to? Nobody cares. Ended, half of 'em, just the way you're goin' to, deep on the bottom o' Lake Michigan some night, you and your cap'n. I know that cap'n. Know him way down under his shirt. Me and Nels Nelson shipped together when we was young. If he's a sample o' what you got in the Coast Guard—" He jerked open a cupboard door and refreshed his spirit with a drink of cider.

"I'm satisfied," Dave repeated stubbornly.

DAVE pulled the shoes over his wet stockings and stood up. From his height, which was just under six feet, he stared down seriously at his father, took in every wrinkle of the fierce dark countenance. It had thinned in the year. A lifetime of labor, enormous physical labor, told on a man when he reached his sixties. King John's eyes squinted more than they used to. Only the color left in them still was hard; his nose, high and bony, retained its knotty massiveness. It was his voice that had changed most. Dave remembered when it was a great voice, full toned and commanding, attuned to the roar of storm and the whine of busy saws. Time had taken the substance out of it and left a thin little whistle instead.

"Loadin' cranes!" the thin voice ejaculated.

Dave stiffened.

"Just as you say," he replied sharply. "Use a pack of Indians if you want. Makes no difference to me. I'm due to reenlist in the morning. I've been in a year tonight."

"Aye, a year. At twenty minutes past six. A year of heartbreak."

His son started. He suddenly felt a warm compassion, followed at once by discomfort. He'd never heard his father at any time use a word like heartbreak. This was King John? Who boasted, often, that never in his life had he asked a favor, never begged a thing of any man? He was tempted to yield. Perhaps he could still convince him . . .

"It's a fine son," King John exclaimed bitterly, "leavin' an old man lonely!"

"I reckon it is," Dave answered indifferently. He relighted his lantern. King John had said the wrong thing then. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he promised at the door. "Got to punch the clock now."

He pulled his head into the high collar of his jacket and ran down the blasty pier. At the white post on its outer end, he fumbled with the brass key, thrust it into his recording clock and turned it half a dozen times. Seven-twenty, his watch said. Only seven-twenty and it had been dark two hours.

He stood uncertainly, while the wind pommeled his face, and stared out, unseeing, at the thick invisibility of water and sky. The first of the great fall gales

was raking the upper lakes. On the whole rolling surface not a light shone. There'd be good ships bested by morning. King John knew it! But the poor old schooner *Peacock* was making ready to put out.

Queer that he should have run into his father tonight. Their last argument, a year ago, had concerned a loading crane. Five days, that month of October, a vessel which should have loaded in forty-eight hours had lain impatiently at Pine Haven pier, while her master cursed with bell, book and candle that he'd never put in a second time at such a mill, and King John refused again to let his son rig hand power cranes.

Dave had walked out that night. Captain Nelson, officer in charge at Prophet Point Coast Guard station, nodded his head wisely, even chuckled, enlisting him. He was no friend of King John. On all the coast he was the only man with spirit enough to defy the master of Pine Haven. Dave never had learned the whole story; except that as boys Nelson and King John, who hailed from the British settlement over Canada way, had sailed the lakes on the same schooner, and quarreled. Chance, or mischance, had thrown them here together. It had been a hard fall for King John when his son left him for Nels Nelson. Dave regretted that, but what to do then any more than now? And tomorrow he must decide again. Reenlist, or return to abuse, daily battle, outworn methods; these and an inheritance of mills and uncut timber.

HE HURRIED shoreward. The half-breed whom he had dragged out of the lake groveled toward him near the dockhouse. Wet clothes were freezing on the man's legs and back. He tried excitedly to express thanks. With Lee impatience, Dave pushed him aside.

"Get up, you clumsy fool!" he growled. "Watch your step and you won't be falling into the water!"

His father stood again in the dockhouse door. The old man carried a lantern now and was shouting bitterly at an enormously fat sailor, bundled heavily in oilskins, who had just climbed up from the schooner deck. Dave recognized him. It was Captain Josiah Twiddle, master of the bedraggled *Peacock*. The two were arguing.

"You'll sail tonight!" King John was screaming, his voice raised ambitiously against the noise of storm. "Tonight I say! What you seamen coming to, anyhow? Skeered to go out in this? Y' talk like an Indian squaw! Whose fault but your own you smashed into the dock?"

"Yours!" the captain cried rebelliously. "I won't sail tonight, sir! It ain't fitten! Ain't fitten to take men out—"

"Won't?"

Dave broke into a run. He was late on patrol. And why wait to hear? Twiddle would sail; no escape from it. He had reached the foot of the runway when he saw the girl waiting in a clump of bushes. He halted.

"Janet?"

She ran up to him, her yellow slicker flapping in the wind, and touched his dry outer jacket.

"It wasn't you?" There was relief in her voice. "They said you saved a man!"

"No trick to that."

He spoke shortly. He felt the way his father did sometimes about the infernal halfbreeds. Here he was, all wet underneath and three miles to walk. He set his lantern down in the sand and took the girl's hands in his.

"Where you been, Janet? I've watched every night for a month."

"I daren't come, Dave. My father won't let me. Yours has been talking to him."

"What about?"

"You and me. And loyalty."

"Loyalty?"

Dave swallowed irritably. He knew how old Captain MacGrath, Janet's father, pronounced the word. As if there were something godly in it. MacGrath would pull off his slicker and throw stones at the moon if King John told him to.

"What about loyalty?" he demanded.

"They say you don't know what it means."

"They say! A smart lot they know if

they're talking about me and my father! If taking abuse and knuckling under on everything remotely connected with progress is loyalty—" he checked himself resentfully. "Where's the *River Jordan* tonight, Janet? In port?"

The girl winced; looked out fearfully at the wet, howling blackness.

"Out there somewhere. My father telephoned from Mackinac this afternoon. Said he'd best keep shelter. King John gave him a raking. Told him not to be an old woman—"

"A squaw!"

"An old woman. I was in the office and heard. So he put out. That's what *he* calls loyalty, Dave."

"Meaning stupidity! Stupidity and cowardice! It's only a coward wouldn't tell my father what he thinks—"

"Folks think you've a duty, Dave."

"That's another good word," he exclaimed with heat. "If you want to see it in action come down to the station and look at my skipper. Nelson's got duty printed all over him plain as type. When it comes to loyalty he's a walking, swimming example. I've got to go, Janet. My clothes are wet."

He was gone before she could reply. Once, looking back, he sensed that she stood a long time peering after him, till his black shadow merged into gusty darkness.

CHAPTER II

SURFMAN NO. 5

THE STORM put on fresh vigor while Dave ran south by west up the howling wash. Breakers galloped landward in long, white, screaming ridges, like ranges of small mountains suddenly equipped with feet. He came thankfully upon the beckoning lights of the Coast Guard quarters. Prophet Point station stood out with no more protection than the free air could give it on a wind whipped jut of land, with the lake to watch on three sides, and at its back a towering dune.

The ground was barren. No sprig of vegetation could find footing except sparce bunches of sand grass with stiff, keen blades, that rattled and swayed now in the wind. Particles of sharp sand, driven like hail, bit deep into Dave's cold face. Spindrift ripped from the tops of careening breakers and charged shoreward, wetting again his cold legs.

Midway to the water the lookout tower perched like a windmill. It was a tiny wooden box, with windows on four sides, set twenty feet in the air on slim stilts. Now, in spite of its white paint, it made only a dark rectangular blot, blacker than sky, lake, or land, so that the man on watch might see through the night more clearly.

Behind its glass Dave knew that his partner, the inarticulate Jake Halseth, No. 4 man, was on duty. He ran a little faster. He was late finishing patrol; twenty minutes at least. Captain Nelson would have plenty to say! Nelson's habit of mind was to be irascible beyond endurance if nothing urgent was happening, and calm as an empty church if there sprang up emergencies. Even so, Dave liked that better than the manner of his father, He was nearly to the door, on the lakeward side of the quarters, when it burst open and Nelson himself stepped out. He was carrying a lantern and wore his heavy weather clothes.

Recognizing Dave, he shouted "Well?" in a voice none too cordial, and led the way back into the squad room.

A long, lean, vigorous, wind beaten man was Captain Nels Nelson, twice King John in size, with great red hands and the salty brand of the deep seas upon him. He had stayed afloat many years after John Lee threw his dunnage ashore and went to cutting timber. Somewhere over fifty now, his yellow hair had grayed in spots, like wisps of smoke. He took off his sou'wester, flung it to the table and turned fiercely upon his surfman.

"Well?" he demanded again; then, "Where you been spendin' this nice evening?"

His voice was windy as a mid-Atlantic night, liquid as the fresh water of the lakes. His lean face, sharp nosed,

with colorless eyebrows and eyes that squinted eternally, good weather or bad, was drawn into a scowl; a fierce face, if he had his own way about it. Perceiving for the first time that Dave's hair was wet, he asked sarcastically—

"Fall in?"

"Jumped," Dave explained. "Fellow washed off the pier."

"Brought him out? Who?"

"Indian, Dockhand. Loading the *Peacock*. She's sailing tonight."

"Tonight? Sailing tonight? Oh, no! Twiddle ain't a fool."

"Heard my father tell him he had to."

"Had to? Well, well!" Captain Nelson raised his brows ironically. "Loaded light, of course!"

"No, sir. And she's rolling right nasty alongside. Tore out a big chunk of the roadway."

CAPTAIN NELSON set his lantern on the floor. His temper made the most of the situation. Under his stare, which was none too complimentary to the name Lee, Dave lowered his eyes. He felt a family responsibility if the *Peacock* put out; as if he, too, were guilty of poor seamanship. Even ashore Nelson was preparing for bad weather. Overhead men were tramping in rubber boots. There was hurry and confusion in their footfalls. The whole house shook under the merciless hammering of the wind. Dave heard some one running down the stair. It was Noah Tuft, No. 1 man and second in command. He wore high rubber boots, a yellow sou'wester strapped under his chin, and his unbuttoned slicker disclosed a double breasted knit woolen jacket.

When he opened his mouth the room filled with sound; the voice that rolled out of his throat was a resonant, even humored bellow.

"Boys about ready," he reported. "I'm sendin' Boutin north and Glory O'Brien south. I've give 'em the extry Costens. Told 'em to go far enough round the point so's they can see clear."

"Aye, hold the others ready," Nelson replied, "Tell Anderson to tune the engine in the power surfboat. Light the boathouse lanterns. Glass is still goin' down." He pointed to the barometer between the windows. "Lee here's wet, Been in the lake. Soon's he's dry I'll put him on lower telephone watch. Relieve Halseth on lookout—you take his place. Tell Bill Claus to get some coffee boilin'."

Noah Tuft trotted into the passage, roaring his orders up the stair. Captain Nelson turned back to Dave.

"Pulled out an Indian?"

"Halfbreed."

"Must have pleased your old man. He's got a lot o' brotherly love for breeds. Critter have a name?"

"I didn't ask."

"Didn't ask?"

Nelson squeezed his fist shut tight so that the knuckles cracked resoundingly, a gesture he saved for annoyance. Two more members of his crew ran past the door out into the night. He watched them go and then complained:

"Didn't ask? That's Coast Guard business, is it? Makes a rescue, saves a drowndin' and come prancin' back here sayin' as you don't ask his name. It don't do to be bashful in this Service. Nope, don't do a-tall. Step right up when you've done a rescue next time. Say, 'Beg pardon, mister, what the devil's your name?' Say it polite like, understand? And bring it home with you What you think all them pretty blanks is for in my desk, if it ain't to report names and things? Well, get into dry clothes."

Dave met Surfman Pete Anderson on the stair. He was understudy to Anderson, and of all the crew he liked him least. In fact, old Pete was the only one he didn't like. Anderson, who ranked as No. 2 man, with twenty years of service behind him, was acting as power boat operator or engineer just now. Dave, who already ranked No. 5 since three recruits with less than a year each were in the crew, served as engineer when Anderson was on liberty.

The older man was growling as he passed down the stair. He met the captain in the passage at the outer door.

"Tune that engine," Dave heard Nelson say. "Get her goin' proper. No tellin', night like this."

ANDERSON replied unintelligibly and pushed out into the darkness. The house filled again with wind as he opened the door. Upstairs in the bunkroom, lighted only by a small glass lamp that cast a yellow circle in the center and left the corners thick with shadows, Bill Claus, No. 8 man and station cook, was dressing deliberately.

"Rotten night," Claus commented.

Dave agreed. He ought to know! He found dry clothes in his steel locker. Five minutes later, still buttoning his pea jacket, he relieved Captain Nelson of telephone watch in the squad-room. The captain, who had been walking uneasily up and down, halted and stared once more at the barometer.

"I've no fancy for such weather," he affirmed in his wet, windy voice. "Unhealthy it is. Might just as well be out there somewheres mannin' the pumps myself as sittin' in here a-knowin' some other poor devil is at it! What *you* want?"

Engineer Anderson had come through the door. His hands were oily.

"Can't start it, as usual," he complained. "No life in her!"

Dave answered before the captain.

"I can start that engine, sir! Never had trouble yet!"

Nelson looked at him sharply. Anderson glowered.

"Don't trust no engines," the No. 2 man declared. "None of this mechanical stuff. Gas engines ain't to be trusted in no boat; ain't made for boats! Boats is made to row—"

"I can start it, sir," Dave repeated eagerly.

The center telephone emitted half a dozen short rings. It was the land wire, running over the dune to Pine Haven. There were three instruments on the front wall. The other two connected with the lookout tower, and by submarine cable with the Coast Guard stations of the Windy Island, fourteen miles north-northwest in Lake Michigan. Dave lifted the receiver.

"Prophet Point Coast Guard. Surfman Lee speaking."

The line sang and sputtered with the noises of the storm. Suddenly through the confusion he recognized Janet MacGrath's voice. She was speaking rapidly.

"Schooner," she was saying. "Schooner *Peacock*. Sailed. Ten minutes ago. Trouble. Don't know what. Seems to be coming ashore . . ."

"Thanks," Dave answered quietly.

He hung the receiver on its hook. Funny how unexcited he felt. Just as if he had read as news in the paper something he'd known a long time. Poor fat old Twiddle! Of course he sailed! Before Dave could turn from the wall another sound racketed through the riot of wind and water. Noah Tuft, who just had relieved Halseth on watch, was jerking the lanyard of the tower bell.

"That schooner's in trouble," Dave reported.

He did not say the *Peacock*. Nelson knew what schooner he meant. He'd seen the old hack; knew just how many of her ribs were cracked, how rotten her cordage was, how her seams were sprung. Nelson had known as well as he that she'd need help tonight! Tuft burst in, bellowing.

"Call!" he roared. He halted three feet from the captain and repeated the word in his immense voice. "Call! Boutin's burning a Costen. Somewheres up north!"

"Who was that phoned?" Nelson turned slowly toward Dave.

"Pine Haven," Dave said. He omitted Janet's name. "*Peacock's* coming ashore. Cast off only ten minutes ago."

"Ten minutes?"

"That blasted engine!" Anderson complained.

"Never mind the engine; take the gun," Captain Nelson directed. His temper

had cooled. He was master of emergencies and calm because of it. "We won't need either boat. She'll be blown close enough in. Ten minutes, you say? Well, I might have given her twenty! Muster the crew, Tuft. Send the cook south for O'Brien. I say, Halseth!"

DAVE ran into the darkness at Tuft's broad heels. Wind, swinging around the corner of the boathouse, struggled fiercely against his hands as he found the latch and dragged open the wide back doors. A kerosene lamp and two lanterns hung from the beams of the great drafty room. Wind tramped on the hip roof with the thunder of a charging regiment of cavalry. The lamp puffed smoke when the door opened.

By its light Dave made out the two familiar surfboats, alike in build, size and tonnage, alike save one held a Kermath engine; the power boat with its brass propeller, the pulling boat with oars laid properly across the thwarts. Like a pair of clean white twins the craft rested docilely on their cradles, ready to slide down the runways to the lake. Between them, and at the rear of the house, stood the beach cart, heavily loaded with the implements of rescue.

The cart balanced squarely on its two broad wheels, its pole forward, axes, shovels, lanterns and patent "water lights" snapped into positions about its dark blue body. The whipline reel, breeches buoy, the two blocks and the brass cannon were piled on top, with the shotline boxes stacked one above the other over the front end. Tuft already had jerked out the prop under the pole. Captain Nelson stepped in easily, biting off a mouthful of tobacco.

"All here but Boutin," he said. "I shouldn't 've let Steve Race take his liberty today. Knowed it at the time. Get your places, men."

Dave swung the left hand drag rope about his shoulder while Glory O'Brien, who had run in breathlessly from patrol south, snatched the right. Engineer Anderson still was growling as he gripped the pole beside Tuft. Cook Claus and the captain fell in behind the cart.

"Forward!" Nelson commanded. His voice floated out contentedly against the wind. He was at his best on duty. "Wisht we had a horse," he added. "Well, we ain't. And no time to send for one. Follow the shore, men."

The storm gouged their eyes with blown sand and spray as the cart trundled out of the door and the crew strained doggedly along the wet beach toward the north. Over the shoulder of the dune the red flare of Boutin's Costen signal burned with swift intensity. A good mile away it appeared to be. Ambitiously its light poured against low running clouds, casting the high smooth hill of sand into hunchbacked relief. Five minutes the men tugged. Then, around a bend in the shore, the distant, meager lamps of Pine Haven showed mistily through the squalls.

Midway to the town, with a tar barrel blazing on her deck in fiery prayer for help, drifted the ragged *Peacock*. One moment her port sidelight shone red. It cast a long, wavering, crimson streak across the tops of rollers. Then the starboard sidelight, dim green, took its place.

Dave saw her with hot shame. Poor, fat, old Twiddle! His vessel was turning. Spinning crazily. Out of control, at the mercy of exasperated elements.

Light deadened against the sky. Boutin's Costen signal burned itself out. In a moment the surfman himself staggered to his place beside the cart.

"Turnin' end for end!" he screamed at the captain. "Round and round! Set tar barrel afire on deck. Burned my light to answer 'em!"

NELSON listened unexcitedly. A dry smile broadened his lean face there in the darkness. King John had been a sailor himself once; but he sent this vessel out. Well, the northeast wind was flinging her back in. King John couldn't boss northeasters! His schooner lay only a quarter mile off shore now, and was drawing rapidly nearer. The burning tar

barrel on her deck cast the tattered upper workings and her torn rigging into bursts of sharp relief. Canvas bellied or drummed empty; no one stood at her tiller, this would indicate; either that or her rudder had broken.

"A little speed there," Nelson shouted. "She'll come in this side o' the pier."

The schooner twisted shoreward. She lay only five hundred yards off the wash now. Four hundred and fifty. No hope remained. A swift wave leaped and kicked her landward. She rolled crazily, stood upright for a brave second, and rolled again.

"She's hit!" Nelson said. "Little speed, boys!" A hundred paces farther, abreast of the grounded vessel, he cried out sharply—

"Halt!"

The shadowy, bundled figures of men ran toward them along the wash. King John was in their lead, swinging his lantern excitedly. At forty yards Dave recognized him. He was screaming, in his thin high voice. Pausing abruptly, he held the lantern up to Nels Nelson's face.

"Where's your boat?" he demanded. "Where'n jumpin' Mackinac's your boat? No boat? How you goin' to get my men in? I say how?"

Nels Nelson pointedly ignored him. Whistling softly under his breath, he turned his back and estimated the distance to the disabled *Peacock*.

"Two hundred eighty yards," he pronounced; then called shortly, "Action!"

Noah Tuft lifted the Lyle gun quickly from the cart and set it in position on the beach, its two and a half inch muzzle toward the wreck. Anderson already had yanked the long blue boxes of shotline from the cart and run with the first of them to a spot just windward of the gun. He pulled up the lid and canted it toward the wreck. The shotline slid off the pins of a French fake and was ready for use. Boutin was unwinding the reel with awkward haste. Dave, with Cook Claus helping, went at his own task. In a narrow trench, dug in the beach twenty yards behind the gun, he buried the extended sand anchor and quickly filled the hole, tramping the wet covering back solidly with his boots.

"I want a lifeboat!" he heard his father cry as he ran back toward the shore. "She's my vessel, ain't she? My vessel! My men drownin'!"

"Out my way, Mr. Lee," Nels Nelson answered.

"A boat!" King John persisted. "Think you can save lives with that kite?" He shook his fist at the line. "Men row, if they got guts!"

"Aye," Pete Anderson growled, "sure, that's what they do. Use oars!"

"*I* can row a boat!" King John screamed.

Nelson, smiling a little, had dropped to the sand behind the gun. Tuft was pushing home the eighteen pound projectile, with the shotline already bent into the shank.

"Don't need a boat this time, Mr. Lee," the captain said patiently. "Couldn't use it here on this reef. I know my business, better'n you know yours. 'Sides, I ain't thinkin' much about savin' your miserable ship. You been abusin' her too many years. Paul Jones hisself couldn't save her now. But I'll be pleased to haul in the men you sent out. Good sailors, some of 'em." He turned deliberately and, squinting along the gun, shouted, "Right—a little more—well!"

Tuft released the brass barrel.

"Ready!" Nelson cried.

A trail of sparks followed the shot momentarily. The shot line uncoiled. It dropped limply into the water. Nelson ran expectantly down the wash and grasped the shoreward end. A full minute he waited to see the result. Dave, busy unloading the crotch, saw his father standing speechless for the minute; behind him, some little distance down the shore, he perceived Janet MacGrath. She was struggling squarely against the wind, her wet slicker reflecting the blaze of the tar barrel on the *Peacock*.

"That fell short," Nelson sang out calmly. "Swab the gun, Tuft. 'Nother box o' line. 'Nother shot." From his haversack he jerked a small white linen

bag of powder. Dave saw the figure 5 printed on it. Five ounces, a medium charge. He dropped the crotch.

"Ready!" Nelson called.

Again the gun exploded. Again the shot fell short. Short or to leeward. Dave saw a man briefly on the schooner deck, a stout fellow, colored with firelight. Breakers, thrashing across the vessel, showed pink froth before they subsided into blackness. The storm shook the earth with a new burst of temper.

Once more the cannon roared. This line *must* make it! It was the last. Rarely did it take three—three on the cart were regulation. Two more hung ready in the station three miles away. Three miles? As well three hundred, with the *Peacock* canting viciously on the reef. She'd not last long enough for tired men to run three miles and back.

Nelson, on hands and knees at the edge of the surf, cried out triumphantly:

"They caught her, boys! Steady—I'll have to cut her right length! No time for 'em to drag her clear out!"

IT WAS Tuft who made the newly severed shotline fast to the whipline block. Men on the schooner were hauling away. Dave, stretching the tackle from crotch to sand anchor, saw Janet MacGrath kindling a fire of driftwood fifty paces down the beach. She knew a woman's duty on the coast.

She could help without interfering. Without interfering as his father was doing. Through the tumult of the gale Dave still heard King John's irate, complaining voice.

"A boat'd do it, if you had any guts, Nels Nelson!"

"Got some guts an' a few brains too," the captain answered. "Ready?" he asked his men.

The hawser was made fast to the whipline. All hands pulled heartily. It seemed an eternity before its outer end was safe at the wreck, an eternity of cold yelling wind, of high flung breakers, of infinite toil. Janet's fire was blazing now. Greedily the gale whipped its high flame shoreward: gratefully the crew warmed their hands.

"They're havin' trouble out there," Nelson commented. A swinging lantern shone aboard the vessel. "There we are. Guess they got her fast. Tighten up on that tackle, men. That's it—throw up the crotch—now heave!"

Still it was not right. He watched another minute. Then he turned quickly, blinking through the storm.

"Dave Lee! Where's No. 5? Into the buoy, Lee! Something wrong aboard there. Go out—we'll pull you out—get in here quick! Take charge on deck. Show 'em how!"

"Him?" It was King John protesting. He flung away his lantern and, hobbling across the beach, yanked at Dave's sleeve. "Not you! Devil save us, not you! Think I'd let you go? Not aboard my schooner with your fool idees!"

Dave pushed aside his hand gently and swung into the wide canvas breeches of the buoy. There was time to say nothing. The cork ring tightened under his arms. His feet slid off the sand. Twice his toes dragged and he was lifted into the air. The crew was working quickly, yanking him out across the water. As he rolled lakeward on the pulley his father's voice followed:

"Don't you send my boy out there, Nelson! You'll drown him, you want to drown him!"

Storm devoured whatever else he said. Strong hands ashore were dragging the other end of the whipline through the block fastened aboard the wreck. Twice high rollers, tall as the walls of a house, caught Dave's drenched legs and broke into his face. The tar barrel, now burning low, cast the schooner into grotesque blots of shadow and of flashing light. Before he was halfway across he discerned the trouble. The lifeline was made fast to the foremast right enough; only tied too high.

HE REACHED the vessel. Hands clawed greedily at his clothes. Once over the side he could not stand; not with the deck tilting like this! Each wave

washed over it. Only upon its after portion, where the house gave protection and where the tar barrel burned, it was not yet awash. But the shingles had broken their lashings. More than half the deckload had been swept away.

These things Dave saw quickly. The roar of the gale was more tremendous here than ashore. He crawled across the tumbling deck.

"Where's Twiddle?" he demanded. No one answered. Seamen were yanking frantically at the buoy, struggling each to be the first ashore. "Your captain!" Dave shouted. "Where's Captain Twiddle!"

A voice broke from the dark.

"Washed over."

"Washed over? Twiddle?" Dave felt blood rushing to his face and throat. "Drowned? You say drowned? Couldn't get him?"

"Couldn't try."

Dave groaned. Twiddle of all men! Poor fat Twiddle.

"Why, he didn't have a chance! Didn't want to sail!" The deck pitched and Dave rolled over, catching at the rail. "Who're you speaking?" he demanded.

"Pence—mate. I got a broken leg."

Dave crawled up the inclined deck. One of his father's halfbreed seamen stepped on his hand in an eagerness to reach the line. Dave knocked him down.

"Take your turn!" he warned.

He made out the figure of the mate crawling painfully toward him. Already two of the four other members of the crew were fighting for place. Dave braced his feet on the inclined deck and lifted the mate. He pushed through the others, who were trying without skill to reach the high buoy. He dropped the mate into it and jerked the whipline. The rescue belt started shoreward. The other four cried out.

"It'll be back," Dave told them. "You see the captain wash over?"

"Him pushed right in lake," a man answered.

Dave groaned. The schooner was settling lower into the water. A great wave charged overside and light from the barrel soaked out. Complete darkness enveloped the laboring vessel. Her deck tilted farther. She would not last long. No ship could outlive these rocks. Not even a good ship. The *Peacock* had been a good ship! But what chance had she tonight, unrepaired? He thought tumultuously of Twiddle, of King John.

The bulk of the returning breeches buoy slapped against the side of the vessel. Dave tumbled a second man into it and again yanked savagely at the line. He saw lanterns jiggling on the beach; by the light of Janet's fire, swift anxious figures running up and down the wash. The buoy made its second trip shoreward.

There was no talk among the three men who remained, two seamen and the cook. Weakly they held to each other and to the foremast. Dave glanced up again at the hawser made fast to the mast. Twelve feet it stretched above the deck. Twice too high. With each roll of the schooner the tension grew. Dave hesitated. No time to change it now; better to get these men ashore before it broke . . .

THE *PEACOCK* canted farther. A wave lifted her into the teeming air and set her down upon the rocky bottom. The masts swayed violently. The hawser stretched and grunted, threatening to snap; it sagged when the vessel rolled landward. Below, against the tamarack spar, the block of the running whipline rattled and the buoy came overside. This time the cook went ashore. Fear had battened his tongue in his mouth. Of the two remaining, Dave demanded again roughly to know of the captain.

"Rudder broke. Tried to fix it. Washed off."

"Couldn't catch him?"

"No!"

Dave gave up questioning. The buoy remained a long time ashore this trip. Four minutes passed; five; six. At last the running whipline told him that it was returning. He worked quickly, starting it shoreward again. One man remained.

Dave and one other. The buoy lurched back and the last member of the crew got in stiffly.

"Easy," Dave warned.

Awkwardly the fellow swung out. The blaze of Janet's fire cast him into a hunched silhouette as he rode into the wind. Dave shrugged. Another half-breed. He peered upward through the dark at the pounding mast. The line had held. Six feet too high, but she still held. Another five minutes, seven at the most, and it wouldn't matter. Let her break if she must in seven minutes!

New winds fell upon the schooner. Waves, beaten to fresh fury, clawed at the vessel's rotting planks. The storm, cheated of the crew, pounded with exasperation Dave's legs, his back, his cold face. The deck tilted farther. A roller charged up the side. It spilled on the deck with the noise of thunder and when the dying *Peacock* shifted on her broken keel it raced in whirlpools fore and aft. It caught Dave relentlessly in its greedy embrace, yanked, endeavored to tug him overside.

Clinging to the rail, he glanced up anxiously. A second time the *Peacock* rolled. Far to lakeward she tilted her short masts—too far— The hawser snapped with a report like an exploding field piece. The frayed end of hemp slid overside into deep dark water.

Dave cried out once futilely.

He was cut off from shore.

The schooner rolled again. Her bottom grated rebelliously on the stony reef. She canted port and starboard, lifted, smashed down, lifted, smashed again with a jar that drove Dave's heart against his ribs. She floated free a moment while the next mountainous wave pried under her. In the instant, after its passage, she rested with false security upon the throbbing surface.

The next attack conquered. She kicked once like a frightened horse. Like a horse she shook her wet decks and turned over gracelessly upon her starboard side. Dave, gripping the rail, felt deep water ride over his head. Then calmly, as if weary of inattention and abuse, the *Peacock* sank.

Dave was thrown clear of her tangled rigging and broken gear. His boots filled with water. He strained; tried enormously to rise. His weighted heels dragged him down.

Black howling water closed over his head with a wet finality. He went down fighting, fighting his tight jacket and his boots that dragged like iron anchors. An immense object thrashed upward toward him. It struck his chest and, picking him up like a dry shingle, hurled him out of water into swift, keen air. He clutched at it greedily. Up—up— then down just as suddenly, and the lake again poured over him.

Giddily, in the next rise, he realized that he clung to a thrashing mast on the *Peacock* herself. He could see its end far above against the night sky. With a crazy, sickening motion it rolled and crashed in the angry sea. Any moment it might snap free from the crumbling hull.

He looked about desperately. Broken gear and tangled rigging hung like cobwebs above him. The water churned with wreckage. One piece in particular charged at the foot of the banging mast. An oblong chunk. A hatch cover. Its six inch timbers smashed doggedly against the spar, worked free and floated under him. Dave clung to security with one hand, with the other tugged at his boots. No use. The water inside held them like glue. He gave it up at last and, releasing his stiff grip on the spar, jumped heavily for the hatch cover. Missed it. Reaching backward, he clawed again at its slippery planks. He found a ring bolt and held desperately.

HE OPENED his eyes as wind and waves heaved him shoreward. Janet's fire cast ragged streaks of reflection across the black water. Four men were struggling with a flimsy skiff on the wash. Trying to rescue him? With a skiff in this sea? They must be mad. He slid down the trough and darkness

smothered him. Once more he bounced high.

He could see more plainly now. The men on shore were Nels Nelson, Boutin, Noah Tuft—and one other. Old King John! Again he pitched bottomward down the steep side of a roller. Again he lifted.

He saw clearly. It was his father dragging savagely at the skiff. The others held him back. With fists and feet old King John fought the three—Nelson, Boutin and Tuft—fought insanely to put out in a skiff with a single pair of oars. They bore him backward at last. The skiff swept out empty and the next minute smashed on the wash. Dave's eyes burned shut. Had he seen right? His father howling to put out alone to save him? It couldn't be.

The hatch cover careened downward, and deep in the trough Dave's feet scraped gravel. A brutal wave pried him upward, and again the planks crashed down. His feet dragged on bottom. Depth was lessening here; he thrust himself free from the cover. Like fate it followed him. Its edge struck his shoulder, retreated, and with wild, handspring antics bowled over and over in the wash.

Dave felt the hard push of a breaker as he flew upward into the cold air. He dropped limply to the gravel, and undertow dragged him out. The next wave pushed him shoreward. He could hear shouts now on the beach, violent commands, curses, King John's high, complaining voice against the roar of wind. Hands, gripping his slicker, hauled him roughly out of the spitting lake.

He heard his father first— "He's alive?"—and Nelson answering calmly through the tumult:

"Lug him back to quarters, Tuft. Alive? Sure he's alive."

"Oughtn't to be!"

"Oughtn't?"

"It's drownin' he deserves. Jumpin' twice one night in the lake!" It was King John, the same King John. He tugged at Dave's frozen jacket. "Have ye no sense, no sense at all?"

CHAPTER III

SHORE MARINERS

DAVE awakened in the bunkroom. Captain Nelson was shaking him violently with his great red hands. Daylight shone feebly through the windows.

"It's six bells an' you've slept nine hours," Nelson said. "An' besides, they's a gal in the kitchen claims she's got to see you personal and partic'lar."

Dave sat up stiffly. He knew only one girl who would come here to see him. The events of the night swept across his memory in wet confusion. He heard Noah Tuft snoring in the No. 1 man's room at the head of the stair. O'Brien and Boutin was sleeping on their iron cots next his own. Glass rattled noisily in the rear window at their heads. But the gale had fallen away.

"Down to thirty-four mile an hour," Captain Nelson said. "Give us time for breakfast anyways."

David dressed hurriedly in rough weather clothes. He'd need them before the day was over. Thirty-four miles an hour wasn't much of a wind now—only a "strong breeze" in official Coast Guard language—but this was the first blow of the season. It was bound to last three days.

Downstairs an odor of fresh coffee floated out of the kitchen. As he stumbled into the room, the slim figure of Janet MacGrath turned quickly from the stove. She still wore her slicker and sou'wester.

"Dave!" she cried. Her voice was hoarse. "We're all proud, proud of you, Dave!"

"All?" Dave asked. "Thanks." He looked at her uncertainly. She didn't mean *all*, didn't mean King John at least. "Thanks," he repeated, and could think of nothing more to say.

"All of us! Your father—"

"Said I deserved drowning!" Dave cried bitterly.

His memory jumped confusedly to the scene on the howling wash, to the picture of his father turned savage, fighting three

men in an effort to launch a useless skiff. Impetuous. King John was always that. Dare wind, water . . .

"What was he trying to do with that boat?" he demanded. "Doesn't he have any judgment at all? Any judgment about boats? Nelson was doing all he could!"

"He was frightened, Dave. We all were. He wanted to get out to you himself. Dave, you're going back to the mill today?"

He returned her gaze steadily before he replied. Suspicion crowded whatever filial affection was rising in him.

"My father send you down to ask that?" he demanded bluntly.

Her eyes dropped under his stare. He guessed she had not slept all night. Her slim face lacked color. Her blue eyes were dull and ringed, either from tears or wind.

"I came because I wanted to come."

"He sent you!"

"He did ask me to talk to you. I'll tell you the truth, Dave. He wants you back in the mill."

"Then he'd best run his own errands," King John's son replied. "It's a poor sort that sends a girl on his peacemaking!"

He felt the muscles tightening in his face and neck. Lee pride? All right, Lee pride it was.

"Dave!" she protested. "Don't look so angry, don't, Dave! I was trying to help."

A spirit of rebellion overwhelmed him, a rage at Janet. It was cowardly of his father to send Janet with a message. More cowardly because he chose Janet of all the girls in the world.

"Tell him to run his own errands!"

"Dave! You refuse even to come up to the mill and talk?"

Her voice hardened. She waited for an answer. He hesitated. Should he go?

"You refuse?" she repeated.

"I certainly do!"

She looked at him almost helplessly. Neither spoke. He watched stubbornly while she fastened her slicker and wrapped a muffler about her neck. Then the latch slipped back quietly into place and her blowing oilskins disappeared beyond the window.

TURNING, Dave discovered that the door of the squad-room was standing wide open. He heard Captain Nelson clear his throat.

"Women," the captain remarked significantly as his No. 5 man entered, "is like ships. Love 'em, and they tries to drown you. I know, I've sailed a bit with both. Well—" he paused uneasily, pursing his lips. "They found Twiddle," he announced.

Dave started. Twiddle! He'd never be able to forget fat Twiddle. Never forget his useless protest there in the wind on King John's creaking dock—

"Ain't fitten, ain't fitten to take men out!"

"Corpse washed ashore," Nelson said roughly. "What comes of his signing year after year with a yawin' fool."

"You mean my father?" Dave cried.

"Sure your father. Who else'd send a good skipper out in that sea on a rotten old ship like the *Peacock*?"

"A fool?" he asked sharply. "Well, maybe. Fool enough to own a township or two in his own right!"

"A yawin', crazy landlubber! Take it for ballast or cargo!" The captain's rancor vanished abruptly. "Go try your hand washin' dishes, Lee," he ordered. "You ain't been doin' much today. Slept nine hours. Claus, he's standin' lookout just now. Relieve him at noon."

Dave washed the dishes soberly, without thought. He never could think on kitchen duty. He ran across the beach just as the bell on the lookout tower sounded eight strokes for noon, and climbed the ladder to the deck. The wind had shifted violently to the north-northwest in the hour's time. Like a flat palm it slapped against the lookout. Claus waited relief.

"I'm goin' to grab me some hammock," he said fervently. "Don't matter if you guys never eat."

Dave took the recording clock from

him and hung it back upon its hook. He turned to the windows as soon as the cook was gone and looked out. Glass extended shoulder high around the four sides of the room. At the right, as one faced the lake, a brass telescope was bracketed to the wall. He adjusted it quickly to his own eye. No stack or spar in sight; only high black rollers, lifting in the off-shore channels, snarling with a white show of teeth. The wind carried a hint of ice as it charged down from the northwest. The second stage of the three-day blow was making. Dave watched a long time rigidly. Two hours this trick of duty would last. Plenty of chance to think. Think of his father, of Janet, of reenlistment.

Thought came easily, standing two hours. There was no chair in the lookout. The room amounted to little more than a box, nearly square, too short and too narrow for a grown man to lie at full length on the floor. In one corner a board held the rough log, a thumbed black book in which the surfman on duty must record the events of his watch, temperature and barometer readings, the force and direction of wind, the state of weather and of surf. To aid him, in case of disaster, a dumb compass was painted on the ceiling. It pointed fixedly to the north, while suspended below it, an arrow revolved on a pin in its center, to locate exactly the point where any vessel lay.

A slate hung above the front windows for the guardsman's further convenience. On this he must chalk the number of vessels sighted, whether steam or sail, and the number of barges in tow. Dave observed that it was empty now. Claus, and the watch before him, had sighted nothing since daylight. Masters would be fools to tempt the lake today. Good mariners, men like Captain Nelson, knew well enough this storm had not blown itself out. They were lying snug in port, skippers of freighters, steamers, car ferries, all of them. All except old Captain MacGrath with the *River Jordan!* He was abroad. King John had so ordered!

Dave was still thinking irritably of his father as he went out to deck and struck the half hour on the bell. Twelve-thirty. Returning, he reached for the clock. A key, like the one at north patrol post, was chained to a beam at the rear, with a second recording instrument beside it. Each half hour, day and night, the man in the tower must punch this clock.

THE TELEPHONE rang just as he fitted the key in its hole. He jerked down the receiver. The line hummed with static in the growing storm. He could hear nothing. It was the Windy Island instrument, connected by submarine cable with the Coast Guard station fourteen miles across the channel. The bell jangled again in another minute. Again he could hear nothing. He looked from the windows.

Far away, off the head of the island, he thought he made out the faint gray shape of a boat on the unruly surface of the lake. Behind it a cloud marched threateningly. The spot vanished as the cloud grew, and an opaque curtain suddenly dropped across the shore. Snow. In fine driven flakes, like salt, it rattled against the glass.

Dave reached upward uncertainly and set the needle of the dumb compass to the point at which he thought he had seen a boat. He was mistaken, perhaps . . . The telephone rang feebly. This time he caught one word.

The name Kirt.

Kirt. A man named Kirt was harbor master on Windy Island, John Kirt, who used to be county sheriff. Dave rang the telephone connecting with the squad-room.

"Couldn't hear nothin' else?" Captain Nelson exclaimed. "Nothin' about what they wanted? Wasn't help. Oh, no, John Kirt never needs Coast Guard. He's too good a sailor. Wanted somethin' else beside Coast Guard!"

"I thought once I saw a boat."

"Thought?"

"Couldn't be sure, sir."

"Can't take a crew out huntin'

thoughts," the captain answered. "Got to see."

Dave hung up. It was no use talking to Nelson in this mood. He was not hostile; he was seldom that; only self assertive. He saw the captain and Noah Tuft, both in boots and slickers, run out of quarters at once, and bracing their feet on the whitening beach, scan the lake. The snow had thinned to the eastward. Dave searched that segment for the shape he believed he had seen. She should be east of the point now, if she were a boat holding course and speed. There was nothing.

Snow piled against the glass on the north and west sides. At exactly one-thirty-five, the telephone rang again. Dave sprang to answer it.

He could hear. The static was gone.

"Bringin' John Kirt over in mailboat," a faint voice said. "Blowed off pier . . ." Dave missed the next words. He shook the transmitter roughly. The voice picked up. "Wants a doctor and priest . . ."

"Doctor and what?" Dave shouted.

"P-r-e-e-s-t," the voice answered. "Hurt bad. Internal . . ." the connection faltered.

"Internal?" Dave shouted.

"Injuries!"

The voice broke off. That was all. A half second Dave waited. Then he leaped toward the door to the deck. He checked himself before he reached it. No need to ring the alarm bell; this wasn't a call for rescue! He went, more calmly, to the other telephone, reported to Captain Nelson first, then through Sandy River summoned a doctor, named Himmel, and Father Moore. He was still talking to the priest when Nelson entered. The captain was unexcited and inclined to laugh.

"What good one priest can do John Kirt's more'n I can guess," he said. "Take a full crew and extry No. 9 prayin' in stroke to save that sturgeon. They'll need help landin', though. Keep your eye peeled, Lee." He stepped to the window. "There she be comin' now," he announced quietly.

DAVE whirled about. He had seen nothing, in spite of his vigil. Now, westward, in a slit through the snow, he sighted the Sandy Island mailboat, only a scant half mile offshore. A little near the rocks. But coming along all right. Or was she? He spoke uncertainly.

"Drifting?"

"Dunno. Guess not."

The captain squinted. Patches of snow obscured the small boat momentarily. Then wild yelling winds pushed aside the clouds and she thrashed into sight. Twice, while Dave stared, he thought she turned end for end.

"Looks all right," Nelson grunted.

"Steering?"

"Seems so."

They watched silently. Three minutes blew past — four — five. The captain pulled the brass telescope toward him finally, adjusted it to his eye and peered through it. He was scowling as he pushed it aside.

"Can't tell a thing. What the devil they're skiddin' so close to them rocks for—"

He stopped abruptly, again adjusted the telescope. He was calmer this time when he spoke. Even so, Dave was unprepared.

"Give us a hand launching boat, Lee," he commanded. "Then stand wateh."

"You're going out?"

"Goin' to see what ails 'em."

The captain flung open the door to the wind whipped deck, himself jangled the alarm. He repeated his commands as he ran down the ladder. Dave, following, heard them with chagrin. Stand watch, while his mates went out? It was the cook who usually stayed ashore. He pulled at Nelson's sleeve.

"Don't I go?" he cried.

"Been wet twice today, ain't ye?"

The captain charged into the boathouse. As its wide front doors swung open, admitting light, snow, spray, and boisterous winds, Dave saw Engineer Anderson leap over the gunwale into the power boat. He heard the rattle of gasoline can against the priming cups,

Anderson's grunt as he turned over the crank of the rear starter. The motor chugged under compression. There was a single lame explosion. Again the crank twisted, a quarter turn. No answering pop of ignited gas replied.

"Get a move on," Nelson warned.

The members of the crew ran to their places beside the boat.

"Take life preservers," Nelson bade.

Only Dave, who was to remain ashore, and Anderson, sweating at the engine, did not grasp the kapok life belts from the seats. Dave gripped the gunwale at the bow thwart on the starboard side. His fingers itched to help the engineer. He trusted this Beebe-McClellan, and Anderson did not. She was a stanch craft, twenty-six feet over all, seven and a half in beam, with a draft amidship of two feet nine.

Her lines lifted sheer at bow and stern to defy any surf, her stout oaken keel, frames and gunwale could resist any cudgeling, her light cedar planking made her easy to drag in the wash. Copper air compartments buoyed her up fore and aft and along the sides; a waterproof floor, with valves and freeing trunks, drained off quickly all over-reaching waves.

Bolted to the keel, under a housing of straw-colored cedar boards, the chesty 20 H. P. Kermath motor, with her four gray iron cylinders cast *en bloc*, stood as ready and dependable as the boat, capable of a stiff ten miles an hour, no matter how heavy the sea. Only Anderson, of all the engineers up and down the coast, had found his Kermath wanting. Dave understood the reason. Anderson was like Dave's father, contrary as the seas that bred him, an enemy of machines, as backward looking as King John himself. He believed in sail and cordage, in brawn and weary backs, halfbreed or white, and in oars. Oars first, above all things mechanical.

"Get a move on," Nelson repeated.

Anderson reared up.

"She won't start!"

"Won't?" cried Nelson.

Dave sprang over the gunwale, not waiting for orders. Under the bow he twisted a thumb valve.

"Gas shut off at the tank," he said.

He leaped back to his place at the side.

"She'll start now!"

The boat waited, bow outward on its cradle. New winds, screaming like tortured souls, clawed into the wide front doors.

"Man the surfboat!" Nelson cried.

Anderson yanked again at the rear starter crank. The motor roared a gusty challenge. Spindrift pelted Dave's face as the cradle began to move down its track. It rolled slowly; not so well as usual. The bow pressed out into the wind. A wave reached toward it, collapsed and retreated down the launching way. Cook Claus and Glory O'Brien followed it. A second was charging in, a howling breaker, shaking its tough white mane.

Anderson, rising above the engine, suddenly grasped a twelve-foot oar and thrust it overside. Dave had an instant sight of the mailboat, close ashore. Did she need help or not? Not, he'd say. He wrestled at the gunwale. O'Brien, to his knees in the backwash, was dwarfed by the nearing wave. It lifted above him, showing a huge green and black side, topped by froth.

"Go!" Nelson screamed.

O'BRIEN leaped for his place in the boat. As he vaulted upward, both hands on the rail, the wave washed over him. Dave dodged aside. Halseth charged past him. The green wave poised. The No. 3 man ducked under it. The surfboat was sliding off its launching cradle. It would be waterborne in another second. Again Dave felt chagrin. He was staying ashore.

The green and black breaker parted. With an immense and vehement fury it smashed down amidship. Boat and crew were hurled landward and up the beach. Men bowled overboard. Another wave thundered in while the craft rolled awkwardly. It caught boat and crew again,

belted them shoreward, crushed the trim white port side against a half submerged log and ripped an ugly hole.

Dave stiffened with rage. He hated the lake, suddenly and vehemently. Despised it. It had taken unfair advantage. The mighty Beebe-McClellan sprawled helplessly on the beach. Broken; half full of water. Anderson's oar floated in the undertow, a torn lifebelt entangled on it. Of the great, slow, hard knuckled engineer he could see nothing.

He found himself dragging the heavy body of Noah Tuft up the sand. The No. 1 man's arm was broken, from all appearances. Lamely he started for quarters. O'Brien swam in the shifting currents twenty feet offshore. Halseth, Boutin, and Race, holding one another's hands, made a living chain and plunged into the wash after him. Halseth, who was ahead, thrust out a boathook. Its bent spike caught solidly on O'Brien's lifebelt and they dragged him shoreward. Only Captain Nelson fought the wrecked boat. He gave up suddenly, and Dave saw him count his men.

"Anderson, Anderson!" he called. "No. 2! Anderson!"

The lake replied with a wet, windy laugh.

"The mailboat!" Dave shouted.

In the minute of catastrophe to the Prophet Point boat—it had occupied scarcely sixty seconds—the island mail carrier had spun close in. A hundred yards north it was rolling shoreward. In trouble. No doubt now, if there had been before. She needed rescue.

"Action, men!" Nelson bellowed.

He charged north toward the point. He turned once and stared with mistrust at the lake. He called again:

"Anderson! I say, Anderson!"

CHAPTER IV

JANET

THE MAILBOAT lay fifty fathoms off the shore. Dave recognized old Cap Trowbridge on her short stern deck. A good waterman, equal to most emergencies. He was pushing frantically with a single oar. A Coast Guardsman from the Windy Island station, apparently along to help with the injured Kirt, was working on the forward deck, jabbing at bottom with a pike pole. The boat pitched south toward the rocky strip. Another runaway roller lifted her.

"She'll come on the sand!" Nelson shouted. He swung toward Dave. "Heavin' stick, Lee," he demanded. "Bring heavin' stick!"

Dave found the stick in the boathouse, a two foot supple bamboo staff, heavily leaded at one end, to the other attached a coil of light, stanch line. The mailboat lay less than a dozen fathoms off the wash when he got back to shore. Nelson snatched the heaving stick at once, dropped the coiled line at his feet, made sure that its end was secure to the bamboo, aimed deliberately and hurled.

The surfman from Windy Island caught the rope. Halseth already had made fast to its other end a stout length of whipline. In twenty seconds the boatman had pulled it aboard. In ten more it was thrown in a pair of half hitches around the bow post. Its slack disappeared at once. Hands ashore were dragging with desperate exertion. The boat jerked its head like an unwilling horse, then plunging, bore toward land. It struck bow first. High ridges of green water flung over it. Cap Trowbridge, gripping the tiller between his feet, clung to the stern deck. The keel scraped gravel.

The boat rolled once. A wave lifted it and it jerked landward. Half its wet length was aground. The captain stepped backward calmly in the shallow water, spit on his cold palms and vaulted. He landed awkwardly on the bow deck and ducked at once into the cabin. When he emerged he was carrying the long, bundled figure of John Kirt.

Jumping overside, he lifted it after him.

"Breathin' smart enough," he said. He started with his load toward quarters. "You boys get that boat out," he commanded, "and don't stand gapin'."

Dave, straining with the others against

wind and snow, drew the mailboat up the sand.

"Rudder pin broke," Trowbridge explained hoarsely. "Couldn't steer." He looked sheepishly at the faces of the men who had saved his craft. "Thank you kindly," he said awkwardly. "Who's got some eatin' tobaccy?"

Halseth supplied it. He was in temporary command, in the absence of Nelson and Tuft, since the drowning of Anderson. Silently he led the crew back toward the boathouse. The wrecked power surfboat lay uselessly in the wash just south of the launching runway.

"Stand guard here, Boutin," Halseth ordered. "Watch for Andy." His voice stuck on the name; he shook his fist unconsciously as he scanned the near water. "No chance to use grapplin' hooks now. Try it later, wind goes down. Drownded! First drowndin' we ever had here I guess!" He turned quickly. "Take lookout, Race," he bade. "Claus, go lay down. You're too shaky to be any good. Might as well have a lady cook. O'Brien, patrol north. Lower telephone watch in squad room, Lee. Storm ain't over; not by a long sight."

DAVE panted through a swirl of snow to the quarters' door. In the captain's private parlor on the right of the corridor he saw the injured Kirt on a couch, the priest and Dr. Himmel, a great fat man in a heavy overcoat, bending over him. Tuft slouched in a worn leather chair between the front windows, scowling at the bandages the doctor had put on his arm. Captain Nelson, who stood at his desk, was staring reproachfully at the barometer.

Dave stoked the fire in the round sheet iron stove in the squad room and sat down to pry off his wet boots. The cold of the day and night had bitten deep into his bones. He shivered. What a ghastly storm! Twiddle; now Anderson! He spread out the boots before the stove and sat down again, head in his hands. He'd had too good a look at Anderson's broad frightened face as he pitched overside, the oar in his hands. The lake had mocked him with that oar. Thrown it back, unbroken . . . He leaped to his feet, startled.

THE BACK door opened with unexpected force. A familiar voice was screaming.

"Nelson! I say, Nels Nelson! Devil save us, where's he at?"

It was King John. Dave shrank down in his chair. What did his father want now, this of all minutes? He reached for his boots. He might escape upstairs, get into dry clothes. Irresolutely, in his stocking feet, one wet boot in his hand, he waited until his father panted into the room, still shouting. Dave did not hear what he said. His astonished eyes could see only Janet MacGrath. King John was towing her after him as if by a line. She held back, protesting. Before any one could speak, Nelson stepped out of his quarters, hands in his pockets.

" 'Nough noise to drown the ship, Mr. Lee," he pronounced. "They ain't no call to go squallin'. We got a sick man here."

"Squallin'? You say squallin'? Time I'm done you'll squall! Wait till I get the snow out my eyes!"

He stopped for breath, jerked a red handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his eyes, and for the first time saw his son. His thin voice sharpened.

"You, David? It's you I've come to speak with, not this dogfish! You'd go sendin' me messages? Tell me to run my own errants? Very good, I've come myself."

"You can go back," Nels Nelson said. "I repeat, we got a man sick. And one out there drownded! Besides, nobody's deef."

"Deef?" King John repeated the word excitedly. "You're deef and dumb and un-Christian, to boot, takin' my boy! Only boy I got!"

"Dave!" Janet broke in. "I'm sorry—he made me come—"

"Sure I made her! Make somebody do as I tell 'em!" The old man's pale eyes

examined Dave scathingly. "Devil save us, go get some shoes on!" he cried. "A night like this and no shoes on! It's a decent son you are, goin' trailin' off with this—" He jabbed a wet glove at the captain.

Captain Nelson removed a package of scrap tobacco from his pocket. He pinched into it with thumb and forefinger, wadded the flakes into his mouth and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Leave my No. 5 alone," he warned unexcitedly.

"*Your* No. 5? *Your*? He ain't nothing to you, nothing a-tall, Nels Nelson! He's my boy, and I got the right to tell him when he's comin' home. My boy, and no number on him, far's I'm concernt! Run that through your gangsaw!"

Dave had stood, silent, looking confusedly from one to the other. Janet was crying, unashamed. He crossed to her and touched her arm. Anger and embarrassment thickened his tongue.

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

"He made me tell, Dave, tell just how you acted. He asked me when you were coming; I told him what you had said—"

"Which was a pretty piece!" King John interjected. "A pretty piece for a lad to go speakin' at his father. I'm tellin' you now, an' I've come 'way up here to do it where there's plenty of witnesses. They's a place for you in my holdin' and for nobody else and you'll be comin' right back with me. Think I have to say anything twice? Not on this coast I don't! Nels Nelson knows that well enough, could swear to it on every page of the Book. You'll send no more messages; you'll come!"

"Not unless he wants," Nels Nelson interrupted.

"I don't want," Dave said. He spoke again to Janet, ignoring the others. "I'm sorry I got you into this. It's not your fault—"

"Fault!" King John cried. "Who're you to go talkin' about fault? Try to drown yourself twice in one night! How many more times, devil only knows. Look at you, all wet! I'm holdin' it agin you, Nels Nelson, and I'm a man o' rich spites, which you're aware. By Jonah's whale, I'm sick o' the sight o' your rig! And they's another thing. Why don't you answer your telephone? What kind o' Coast Guard is it? Ring all day and all night and nobody answers!"

"Nobody answer?" Nelson spoke excitedly for the first time.

"Nobody! We ain't got no fancy motor boats up at my dockhouse and no barometers and none the rest your jimcracks—" he looked spitefully at Dave—"but we answer our telephone!" He sat down heavily in a chair.

"Best calm yourself, Lee," warned a voice from the doorway. The group turned; it was Dr. Himmel. "I've told you to stay off passions."

King John turned hotly.

"Somebody else thinkin' to run my clearin'?" he demanded.

"Professional advice," the doctor answered. "You asked me not a month ago." He ignored the older man's outburst. "Line dead, captain?" he asked.

Nelson spun the crank vigorously. An uneasy scowl covered his face.

"Dead as Adam," he pronounced. "Blowed down."

His eyes rested on Dave, then on the fretful figure of King John. There was point to his next order.

"Go find the break, Lee," he commanded. "Along with him, Halseth! Where's Halseth? Quick!"

King John leaped up excitedly. "I ain't through talkin' to him, Nels Nelson, you know I ain't!"

"No difference to me," Nelson answered. "Guess it don't matter to him much. Think we ain't got any business down here at this station, nothin' to do but listen to you all night? I'd as lief hear a buzzard or worse! Get along, No. 5!"

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DAVE obeyed, thankful to Nelson for sending him. He was conscious that Janet looked after him imploringly as he ran from the room. He did not wait for Halseth. Dragging on dry boots,

with a kit of linemen's tools over his shoulder, he let himself out the back door. Why had his father come? Certainly with two men drowned, another half dead in the captain's quarters, there was better to do tonight than quarrel. The storm was not over. King John still had the *River Jordan* to think of! Dave stopped, head first, in his tracks. He had almost forgotten the *River Jordan*. No wonder Janet looked so sick; it was not about *him* she was worried. It was her father, out there risking his vessel, his crew, himself. For the sake of what they called loyalty!

He went ahead more slowly. It was only seven o'clock, but already dark as midnight. The Coast Guard telephone line ran over the high shoulder of the dune and down behind it, across a wasteland studded with juniper and scrub cedars. Snow coated the north sides of the short poles; but the line held firm, wind whistling through its wires, all the first blasty mile. He peered lakeward when he reached the top of the dune. Sand and snow and sharp frozen spindrift whipped across the land. It drove like nails into his raw face, put tears in his eyes; try as he might he couldn't blink them out. He staggered on over the shoulder.

Ahead of him he made out a broken pole. The wires had snapped. He dropped down beside the torn line, and with stiff fingers loosened his coil of emergency wire and his tool kit. Ten minutes he worked. He was giving the repaired line its final twist just as Halseth strode up.

"I'll finish," the No. 3 offered. "I'm dry. There's likely more down in the cedar swamp." He swung the repair kit to his shoulder. "Don't sit down," he called back. "You'll freeze."

NIGHT thickened over the wide dune. Dave turned westward into the wind toward quarters. The gale romped in bursts of angry vehemence, veering left and right. The snow was piling into ridges by now; it blew in frenzied clouds, heaped up, scooped itself into hollows, reformed in brief shapes.

At length Dave missed the whine of wind in the wires. He staggered back through the darkness to his right. Squinting against the storm, he tried to make out the lean, guiding shadow of the next telephone pole. Ice was forming on his lashes. He brushed his glove across his face and burrowed on. He could see nothing. Where were the poles?

Five minutes. Ten. He'd lost the trail, all right. He might follow his footprints back to the broken wire and begin again. He tried. Blowing snow had wiped out the marks.

Wind clawed his face as he turned back, boxed his ears with icy, unseen hands. Left and right. It was shifting, apparently. North or west or east. It roared down hollows and shrilled across the twisted ridges. He ploughed on stubbornly. He certainly ought to be able to walk in a straight line. Somewhere he would reach the lake. Half an hour, an hour, roared by. A straight line? In half an hour any man should find the shore, walking straight. Was he going in a circle?

He thought uneasily of Nelson and Janet, both awaiting his return, Nelson for report on the wire, Janet begging, silently, for word of Captain MacGrath. He thought of his own father, berating them all, of Anderson's helpless, icy body floating somewhere in the lake. Terror crept with the cold into his bones. He attacked it fiercely. Was he a schoolboy? He remembered suddenly a story Tuft had told, of the recruit lost up here on this same dune one night twenty years ago, and the search next morning, and what they found. He beat his arms against his sides, recalling that. Better keep on going!

How long had he been out? Two hours? Three? The cold dug more deeply into him. He staggered uphill. Down. Up . . . He had no sense of time.

A broken branch tripped him in the snow. He fell face down. He was comfortable

for the minute. But this wouldn't do! He must keep moving. Savagely, abandoning his linemen's kit, he fought clear of the drift and stumbled on. His frosted eyes searched for dawn. It must be nearly day. Must be. He'd been out here for hours. Again he fell into the gentle comfort of soft drifts.

He lay quiet this time. Then, in the murk ahead, blurred a speck of light. It enlarged into a patch of yellow, misty luminance. A lantern moving. He tried to shout. Words froze in his throat. The lantern swayed nearer. Hands shook him vigorously. Janet? A girl, out here in this storm? She was guiding him down the slope.

CHAPTER V

STEAMER IN DISTRESS

LIGHTED windows burst through the dark in oblong blurs. A door swung in. Warmth struck Dave's cold skin like tearing teeth. He sat down suddenly on the squadroom floor.

A big man, Himmel the doctor, was ripping off his frozen jacket.

"Cold water, rub him with cold water," he was saying. "Coffee, miss. Right away. Bend your fingers, young man . . ."

Dave obeyed wearily. It came home to him with shame, through a din of sounds, that his father still was here. Still objecting. Still arguing with Nelson, who now argued back. King John had taken the captain's big cane chair for himself and sat with it tipped against the wall. His hands shook, where they rested on his knees. Dimly Dave heard his voice.

"Wasn't the *River Jordan* off Charlevoix! What'd she be doin', layin' off Charlevoix five o'clock?"

And Nelson answering:

"There was some vessel there! I've a notion nobody else'd be fool enough to keep a good ship out in a three-day blow!"

On and on they went. The room rocked with noise. The telephone rang insistently. Halseth answered it. All Dave heard was the name *River Jordan*. He remembered suddenly, and struggled to sit up. The *River Jordan* was out, with Janet's old man commanding.

"Take a swig of this coffee," Dr. Himmel bade.

Dave drank it all. Excruciating pain attacked his frosted legs and hands and face. Slowly, very slowly, a delicious sense of warmth began to lessen it.

"I'm all right now," he said huskily. He repeated it, for fear they hadn't heard.

King John got up stiffly from the chair and shuffled across the wet floor to look down at him. There was less rancor than curiosity in his hard blue eyes. The muscles of his face twitched once, but he said nothing. The front door opened with a howl of wind and Glory O'Brien stamped in, with snow heaped on his shoulders and ice in dripping festoons on the rim of his sou'wester.

"They's something out there," he affirmed. "Sure's your eye! Heard it!"

"Eh?" Nelson jerked open the locker nearest the door and shook into his own slicker. "Heard it? Well, that settles that. There's some kind o' ship out there and it don't make a howling lot o' difference to me if it's the blasted *River Jordan* or Noah's ark or this here *Leviathan!* Tuft, you mind the phone. Do that with one arm!"

His able men swarmed after him into the frigid dawn. Only King John and Janet and Tuft remained. The old man waited scarcely a minute; then he mumbled to himself and bolted after the others. Wind caught the unbuttoned tabs of his cap as he opened the door. It flew from his head into the screaming air and he lunged wildly after it. Dave got to his feet immediately. In the next room he heard Himmel.

"Still workin' on Kirt," Tuft said, and nervously crossed the hall to the captain's quarters.

Dave walked stiffly across to Janet.

"What's this talk of the *Jordan*?" he demanded. "What about it, Janet?"

The girl turned away, as if the question could not be answered. A spasm of emotion contracted her face. Dave tried to

meet her eyes. They weren't natural, so bright. She was going to cry? He struggled for his own bearings. Instantly, as if she had read his thoughts, her mouth tightened and she recovered poise.

"Charlevoix called," she said evenly. "Oh, some time ago, early in the evening while you were lost. Reported a steamer making rough weather. Nelson's sure it's the *Jordan*."

"Sure? No reason to think that! Your father's behind the Beavers!"

His words lacked conviction. Off Charlevoix? Thirty odd miles away at five o'clock. It was morning now. Wind tramped against the snow packed glass. He realized suddenly that its direction had changed.

"Nor'east!" he exclaimed.

"Right now it is. It's been shifting for hours, all directions. That's why you lost your way." She took his hand impulsively in hers. "Your father hunted you too, Dave, better than an hour. We all knew, when Halseth reported in. We guessed in a wink you were lost. For once he didn't carry on. Dreadfully upset, but tried not to show it. Yes, he did, Dave! Said you'd never let a little snow blind you. Told Nelson the Lees could take care of themselves."

Dave winced.

"They couldn't, though!"

"Dave, look there! Why are they running?"

He peered through the window. The chance to tell her was gone. Snow, flying in white patches under a dirty morning sky, blanketed the figures at the point. They were swarming eastward, Nelson in the lead. Janet reached swiftly for her coat.

"Not you, Dave! Not again tonight!"

He gave her no promise. But as soon as she was gone he threw off the blanket in which he was wrapped, and silently, so neither Himmel nor Tuft would hear, crossed to the lockers and searched for a set of heavy weather clothes. It took him five minutes to dress. His back ached when he bent; his skin burned fiercely. Otherwise he was all right!

HE WALKED out slowly. The murky light of morning shone dimly from a thick winter sky as he halted on the porch. Snow kicked down the wind in white flurries. Along the wash to the right of the point immense waves trooped landward in bellowing ridges. Direct seas had fallen away to the westward; driftwood, broken planks, uprooted small pines and cedars rolled together in the backwash. The power surfboat, drawn ashore, lay on her crushed side out of reach of the cold, exploring fingers of the breakers.

Of Nelson and the crew there was no sign. He ran, gasping, against the wind. Its pommeling choked the breath in his throat, made him dizzy, a little. He stumbled over the strewn rocks at the jutting tip of Prophet Point. Cap Trowbridge's mailboat lay here safely on cedar rollers. The old man was working on her by the first thin morning light. Oblivious to wind, to snow, he crouched under the stern, repairing the broken rudder pin.

Dave hallooed to him and halted for breath. He made out Nelson a hundred paces farther. The captain was bending down, ankle deep in water, gloves cupped to his ears, while he listened intently to sounds coming in from the lake. Halseth stood beside him. Boutin, Claus, Race and O'Brien knelt nearby in the snow, also listening. Dave saw his father leaning on Janet MacGrath. The old man looked cold.

He ran by the two, unseen. Nelson glanced up as his No. 5 halted beside him, answered his question before it was asked.

"Steamer," he said. "Long blast. Distress."

"The *Jordan?*" Dave shouted.

"Maybe, maybe not. How the devil I know?"

The wind veered, whipping from the northwest. On its back it carried an unbroken wail of sound, a steamer whistle crying its urgent distress, a single, long drawn, clamorous blast, entreating and importunate.

"That's not the *Jordan!*" Dave protested.

He felt Janet at his side. King John came screaming behind her.

"Not my father!" The girl's voice strained against the wind. "I know his whistle; that's not his!"

"I seen her," Halseth insisted. "Snow busted apart, an' I seen the *Jordan* clear!"

The entreating wail once more rolled down the storm, a forlorn and beseeching note, faint in the distance.

"Not the *Jordan!*" Dave repeated.

Nelson scowled. He waded forward three paces. Dave, trying to penetrate the snow, distinguished only white spitting flakes and a dark sky. He could not hear the whistle now. Breakers howling at his feet devoured all smaller sounds. Nelson advanced another step. A wave burst into his face. He whirled out of reach, gulping water and shouting.

"Fire! Smell her? She's burning! Get out the way, girl! What difference it make, *Jordan* or not? Lively, men!" He plunged toward the boathouse. "Surf boat!" he bellowed. "Have to use pullin' surfboat! Oars!"

Dave heard his father:

"Aye, oars! Ye got your senses, Nels Nelson!"

The crew swung about, bewildered. The whistle whined again. It seemed a long way out this time. Then the wind kicked around and snow curtains shredded apart. Brown streaks of smoke drove across angry water. Out of the storm, not a half mile offshore, burst a fierce angry glow.

Below it Dave made out the dim silhouette of a vessel. Too hazy to identify. She lay far to the east.

"Wasn't burnin' before!" Halseth cried, "No smoke first time I seen her! I swear it, Cap! Seen her, seen the *Jordan!*"

The snow dropped its opaque shield.

"Take lookout, No. 5!" Nelson shouted.

DAVE faltered. Stay ashore twice in one day? Rebellion shot through him. It *might* be MacGrath, *might* be the *Jordan!* Again the smell of burning timbers whipped down the wind. Once more the orange glow broke through white clouds. The distress wail sounded more plainly.

He tripped in sand. The boathouse doors swung open as he staggered up. No engine ready. Oars this time. Oars and an undermanned crew!

"Dave!"

Janet ran toward him. King John lurched unsteadily behind her.

"Go with them, Dave! Halseth may be right; maybe it is my father."

Her face was white, even against the snow. Dave, gasping with exertion, looked beyond it to the boathouse.

Already the trim white bow of the pulling boat was slipping down the launching ways. Less surf on that side now. The shifting wind was piling up water across the point. Easier to get the boat out. Stay ashore? He tried to run faster. Fifty paces ahead the bow struck the surf. His mates were tumbling in. Janet cried:

"Hurry, Dave, please! It's my father!"

Too late. Oars dropped sharply. Out on the obscure lake sounded an ominous rumble. Explosion. The black sky reflected purple lights, and a wide, angry, crimson flame shot upward through the snow.

Ashore, Dave watched his mates put out to rescue.

Shame and fury caught him by the throat. Shame at his own weak legs, fury at Janet MacGrath. She had begged him to stay, next minute urged him to go. He had obeyed Nelson, Nelson who twice in one day left him on solid, secure beach.

Already the lifeboat was making hard progress. Its six slim twelve foot oars of straight clean ash beat robustly, but to no apparent avail against the surf. Dave's cold eyes, squinting in his frosted face, made out the captain straining at the long sweep in the stern of the Beebe-McClellan, counting the stroke, shouting curt, chesty orders at his laboring men. Halseth and Boutin on the after thwart set the cadence. Race and O'Brien toiled amidship. Cook Claus and the

surfman from Windy Island who had come in the mailboat swung at the places in the bow.

Dave bit his teeth together savagely. Stand watch in the tower? Not this time. An unreasonable fit of Lee temper swept through him. Claus, who couldn't row, could have stood watch! Turning, he saw Noah Tuft come out to the porch of the captain's quarters and peer intently at the hidden lake. There was reason for Tuft to remain ashore. Broken bones exempted any man. Frost didn't. A little frost?

He laughed bitterly. He'd lost his way in snow. That was why Nelson abandoned him here on solid land. He wasn't fit to go out. Like a cow he had wandered in circles on the dune. Like a squaw. So his father would have said—like a squaw! He'd got lost like a squaw.

A HALF mile out the vessel in distress wailed forlornly. Dave, straining, tried to pick up the sound. He was positive she was not the *River Jordan*. The *Jordan's* note was sharper, high pitched like King John's own voice. Dave kicked his boots free of mushy ice and ran up to the top of a dune, better to see and hear. King John and Janet watched not far off. Cap Trowbridge stood with them. There were icicles on the mail carrier's long mustache. As Dave approached he was shaking his big gray head. Arguing. Arguing with King John.

"No day for oars!"

"Best day in the world! It's oars'll get 'em out!" King John's cry rose shrilly against the mail carrier's heavy words. He looked like a madman. Bareheaded, one mitten gone, he pranced left and right in the snow and sand, screaming contempt. Contempt for the Coast Guard. For Captain MacGrath, or any other skipper who'd let a good barge catch fire. Contempt for Janet, shivering beside him. For Nelson.

"It's *him* let the *Peacock* break up!" he bellowed. "Sent ou' a good for nothing line! I'll tell he Gover'ment! Twiddle'd be dry in port, had Nels Nelson rowed. I be glad his power boat busted; shows what the good Lord thinks o' engines . . ." His complaint trailed off in a dry choking mutter.

Dave's cheeks burned in shame for all Lees. He heard Trowbridge grunt in protest. It was true the pulling boat had been easier to launch today. Winds that yesterday clawed and smashed the motor boat on shore, galloped today in frenzied regiments from a new quarter. The western line of the point only bubbled in a howling backwash now; eastward the rollers cannonaded in terrific salvos. The lifeboat already was halfway to the tip. Like a lunatic dervish it leaped in the embrace of cross swells. Another minute it would clear the point and, unprotected, face the spiteful treachery of storm. There would come the test!

Six oars, six pairs of arms, no matter how stout, against a stiff northeaster?

Any surfman knew the answer. It was hard enough in practise, with a full crew and ordinary wind.

"Burnin' hard," Cap Trowbridge said.

Dave sniffed. Smoke tasted bitter on his tongue. A veering wind tossed the smell of burning pine in again toward land. Briefly against the sky white rushing clouds reflected the color of fire, tints of lavender, orange, carmine. They disappeared immediately. A new gust of wind ripped the curtain apart. There was still no sign of the burning vessel. Quickly he looked to the west.

His mates in the pulling boat had pushed ahead ten feet.

THEY rounded the point slowly. Like a lost net float the lifeboat leaped from crest to crest of the running ridges; slid down a smooth side, was lost whole seconds. Snow piled thicker. The little white boat faded to gray; the black striving figures of men became only specks, head and shoulders above the gunwale. A moment they too made a dull colorless blot, then the storm extinguished all sight.

Dave heard his father:

"They ain't tryin'. Call that rowin'? Devil save us, when I was young we *rowed!* Hell an' the butcher couldn't stop us. Look at 'em! Squaws! And you! Look at you!" He swung furiously on Dave. "A fine longshore son I got, ain't I? Savin' breeds one minute, stayin' safe when a ship breaks up—"

"That's a lie!" Dave cried.

"David!"

Janet stepped in front of him quickly. He pushed her aside. She persisted.

"Not now, Dave! Don't quarrel now!"

"I tried to go!"

"He knows you did. And it isn't the *Jordan!* I'm sure! Think I haven't lain awake nights enough listening to know my father's whistle? Think—"

"I seen her, ma'm," Cap Trowbridge said positively. "She's the *Jordan.*"

Dave looked hard at Janet. She paled under the emphasis of Trowbridge's words. Dave felt the beating blood in his temples. His face was hot. Under his borrowed gloves sweat moistened his hands, hot in spite of the weather, in spite of the icy wind. He knew, too, that MacGrath's ship was out there, knew it by instinct. He turned, faltering, to Janet. Before he could speak, Trowbridge cried out:

"I knowed it. Knowed it. They're comin' back.'"

Dave stared. His mates' oars, pounding the frothy tops of rollers, were beating out of time. In spite of their effort the lifeboat was backing landward. Captain Nelson yanked violently on his sweep. His crew labored impotently. They fell away a hundred yards against the tactics of the gale. With difficulty they caught stroke and held it. King John ran lakeward.

"Squaws!" he shouted. He waved both fists. "Wimmin! Weak necked squaws!" He swung back upon his son. "If you'd gone 'long you'd of helped—"

"They's holdin' up," Trowbridge pronounced.

Through the dimness of snow swirls Dave saw his comrades once more putting out. Winds, slanting down from the northeast, battered their heads. Snarling lines of gray foam atop mighty breakers crashed at them out of the sinister blackness of deep spaces. But they made headway.

The boat, her upturned nose and high stern bouncing light in the air, fought back wind, water, snow. Inch by desperate inch she crawled outward. Inch by inch. Foot by foot. Yard by yard. Fathom by desperate fathom. Out—out—

Snow dropped its opaque shield. The gale howled with fresh, heartless exuberance. Its million voices shrieked in a ghastly crescendo over water and land. Dave clenched his fists, wiped snow from his eyes. He saw a mammoth, boiling breaker driving landward, a headlong wall, white on top with the trickery of foam, solid black below. His heart leaped. It was bound to happen. The invincible wave galloped on. Atop it, helpless, their oars entangled, like a shingle on a millrace, tossed the surfboat.

In, in, the wave reared. The boat lifted on it. Nelson wielded the sweep, the others fought their oars. In—in—the lip of the roller curled, twenty feet off. With the boat in its freezing embrace, it hurled down.

Dave, terrified, saw the crew thrown free. He remembered Anderson in the instant—the cold, frightened face as he plunged overside. Anderson, hard old Anderson, drowned. And now—arms, legs, slickers and lifebelts and oars—the rest of his mates heaped in the seething wash.

"Squaws!" King John screamed.

DAVE charged down the sand. Nelson, first up, swung fiercely upon the boat. The wave that had beaten it, that hurled it landward in an ecstacy of wild disdain, filled it at once to its stout oaken gunwales. In twenty seconds the freeing trunks drained it. It was unbroken, ready to put out again.

Would they try it?

"Launch boat!" Nelson commanded. His voice, strong, assured, undisturbed by

defeat, shook the men into action. "Places—launch boat!"

"Ice forming," Trowbridge shouted into Dave's ear. "She's ice all over!"

"Between breakers," Nelson sang out unexcitedly. "Ready—go!"

The boat followed the undertow down the gravel.

"Take oars!"

Dave ran to help. The same launching ritual, as if this were a routine drill in summer. A wave lifted the bow. Claus slouched at his place on the thwart; now O'Brien lurched in; now Race. Wet, frosted, winded, they gripped their oard awkwardly. Nelson's voice, heavy against the clamorous sounds of storm, urged their stiff hands into action.

"Go! Go! Go!" he set up the cadence for the stroke.

A second time the rescue craft pulled through breakers, backed, pulled out again.

"Never make it!" Trowbridge whispered. "Can't. No oars this side o' salvation can beat that lake today. Takes power—power—"

"Devil save us!" John Lee screamed. "When I was young . . ."

His voice died before a mightier sound. A second explosion, an immense reverberant roar, smashed through the gale. The flare of the burning steamer leaped into sight for a moment. Crimson against the clouds, its high arms waved defiance. Violent echoes ran back among the dunes.

Dave turned quickly.

He had remembered something, in the midst of that blast of sound. Trowbridge's boat was repaired. He'd seen him working at it. Broken rudder pins didn't take much fixing. He pulled the old man's sleeve,

"Your boat?" he bellowed. "Your boat, Cap? I'll take her out! We can make it with an engine!"

"Us?"

"Why not?"

He tore back to the boathouse. Through its wide doors snow was piling in ridges on the varnished floor. Only the beach cart and wreck gun remained, Dave ran to the tall extra gear locker at the rear of the house, with its polished brass powder box above it.

With a spare heaving stick in his icy gloves he charged back to Trowbridge's boat. Dr. Himmel, Noah Tuft and Father Moore were running down the sand, stirred out by the second explosion.

"Engine start?" Dave shouted.

"She's a Kermath," Trowbridge answered. His hands were shaking. "Same make's your own!"

"All hands help launch!" Dave ordered.

Never except in drill on quiet summer days had he commanded a launching, then always with Captain Nelson standing by to oversee.

"Grab that gunwale," he commanded. "Take it between waves, push out with the undertow."

He kicked a round cedar pole beneath the bow, to serve as a roller. He saw his father as he did so. King John, silent for the first time that day, had grasped the port rail and was doing his best to help. Dr. Himmel dropped in behind him. On the starboard side and forward of the short cabin, Trowbridge flung his weight upon the planks. Tuft, leaning under the overhang at the stern, pulled the rudder straight with one hand.

"Dave!" It was Janet MacGrath. "You're not going out—just two of you—"

Her voice broke off. Dave grasped the stern.

"Go!" he shouted huskily.

CHAPTER VI

LOYALTY

THE ISLAND boat plunged forward. A round shouldered wave rumbled in and spattered against the bow. The boat followed it slowly as it broke and withdrew. Another wave crashed in. The heavy craft took its buffet easily. A third, larger than the others, poised at the edge of the gravel and burst with a throaty roar.

"Go!" Dave repeated.

/He flung all his weight on the stern. He was tired, he realized. Mighty tired! Caught in the undertow, the keel scraped outward. Cap Trowbridge leaped to the deck. The engine sputtered. The brass propeller flashed into action. Dave, swinging aboard, saw Janet's red, bare hands straining with the men along the gunwale. He saw her wide eyes, blind with terror, her open lips. He scrambled up, seizing the rail atop the low cabin, and unleashed the oaken tiller. It banged frantically against his feet. He stepped across it and gripped it, fishermen fashion, between his cold ankles.

The boat wallowed in the mad embrace of the outraged lake. He felt the bow lift again, the stern thrash down on gravel. Tuft had released his hold. The doctor and priest staggered back toward land.

Only his father and Janet MacGrath still fought in the surf beside the kicking stern. Then Janet let go. Only his father held on.

King John, in water to his waist, strove with savage exertion. His mouth, wide as a cavern, showed two broken teeth in his thin, dark face. His eyes squinted shut. Blood spattered across the knuckles of his hands. His hat was gone; gray hair blew about his head. His face turned purple. Never had Dave seen him so fierce, never so unbeatable. All the challenge, all the fury, all the hate, the distrust, the vindictiveness of his long, hard years, King John concentrated in one fearful moment. All the spites he ever had harbored came to life again to be flung in fierce disdain at the demon lake.

The boat kicked free from his hands. Thankfully Dave heard the steady grind of the engine in the cabin. He clung desperately against the thrashing antics of high, boarding seas. Ten feet—twenty—thirty. Free of the breakers, the mailboat rode stubbornly on the backs of green rollers.

Dave permitted himself to look shoreward. Careless of storm, his father still stood knee deep in the wash. Undertow dragged at his feet. One hand uplifted, his hair still flying, eyes pinched shut, grim mouth wide open, he was shouting. Encouragement or abuse, no one could tell. He put his hand across his closed eyes in the second Dave watched, caught once at his throat and tumbled forward.

A great wave, charging around the point, smote the starboard side of the mailboat, hurling her far to the south and backward toward the rocks. Dave jerked his head about. Men were lifting King John. Dave gripped the tiller more firmly between his feet and crouched low behind the cabin. No time to think of his father. Thirty fathoms of white water lay between him and shore. He steered north by west.

The smell of smoke was stronger now. It slanted down the wind in terrifying gusts. Acrid and ugly, it caught Dave's breath. Twice heat pelted through gaps in the driven snow. Heat—and the temperature near zero!

AN ARM of flame writhed upward through the murk ahead, showed momentarily and disappeared. Dave, squinting at it, saw for a brief instant the black side of a freighter's hull. The *River Jordan?* He couldn't tell. The whistle no longer sounded. That was the boiler, that last explosion. Water had flooded the stokehold and the boiler let go. The crew must need help desperately.

Fifty yards farther, where sharp rocks pushed out from Prophet Point, the lake boiled furiously. Foam loosened itself from the tops of breakers. It whipped away like snarls of white hair blown from the heads of careless old men. The power boat began to make less progress. Great seas leaped aboard her, solid masses of green and black water. They tore aft along the cabin roof and pounded Dave's cold face. Ice formed on the upper workings. One glove froze to the grip rail. Dave jerked up his hand to free it. The bow dipped far down into deep, unlighted troughs. High ridges blotted out the snowy horizon. Or at the flighty whim of wind and water, the craft balanced tipsily atop a tall, hurrying

roller, bow and stern thrust out naked in the yelling air.

Dave clung doggedly to the rail, working the tiller port and starboard between his feet. Its oaken handle kicked like an unbroken horse. His mind jerked with it, backward and forward. He remembered Janet MacGrath's white face. She was suffering all the torments a sailor's daughter knows, powerless to help on shore. It was *her* father in danger on King John's steamer, on a sinking barge that King John had ordered out. Only the Lees would be at fault if old Captain MacGrath went down on the rotten *Jordan*.

The Lees! He as much as his father. The old man was hurt. No doubt about it. He had fought like a youngster, pushing the mailboat out. Immense strength had come from his far hard youth and settled for a moment in his arms. Rage had spurred him. Dave pressed the tiller to port just in time. The boat turned her bow up into the wind. A white bubbling caldron that marked submerged rocks on the point lay well to the right. Dave, watching his chance, turned the boat full against the charging seas.

Ahead, for the first time, he made out Nelson's men.

They were laboring stoutly. Their oars swung in stroke. Now advancing, now falling back, they strove with unflagging effort to reach the wreck. One—two—one—two. As if this were only another fair weather drill Nels Nelson held the cadence. The mailboat pushed closer, in turn gave way, once more advanced.

Smoke in thickening brown streaks tore through the snow and slashed over Dave's head. Ice piled higher upon the top of the cabin. It clung in layers along the sides. Under his feet it turned the gray deck white. Once Trowbridge looked out anxiously through the pane of glass between Dave's hands. He disappeared immediately. He was standing faithfully by the engine, slowing its revolutions when necessary. They were making speed in bursts. It was a race now, a grueling race between his boat and Nelson's.

Oars against engine, chrome nickel steel and gray iron against tired muscles and aching elbows, twelve hundred revolutions a minute against the swing of bending backs—an uneven match. Unequal odds, and the lives of imperiled men at stake.

Did Nelson see the power boat? He must, by now. Dave steered to the north. No need of passing so close to his mates. He kept far enough away to avoid a collision. Nelson was only five boat-lengths ahead now. Dave's craft fell back. It crawled up. Five again. Four. The mailboat charged down a steep trough and gained three fathoms. Almost abreast.

Dave saw Nelson's mouth open and close as he yelled commands. He saw the red faces of the crew and the white breath that puffed like steam from their mouths. The pulling boat lay low in the water. She, too, was carrying ice. Ice in sparkling ridges along the coaming, rounded silvery mounds of it piled up bow and stern. Ice on the oars. On the rowlocks. On the men's backs. Ice—the trickiest hazard of the saltless seas.

ANOTHER huge wave rolled up ahead. Bow to bow the two boats toiled, Dave felt his feet jerk down as the roller caught his own boat forward. He felt the lift as the wide beam slid over the top. He glanced to the right apprehensively. Even as he looked Nelson's sweep yanked out of the water. Oars crabbed. The surfboat lurched, rolled once drunkenly to her starboard side, then losing headway, was hurled leeward savagely. Even above the scream of the storm a sharp fragment of Nelson's voice snapped across the water.

Dave peered ahead. For a moment he saw clearly fifty feet of the burning steamer's side. She blazed like a glorified torch. Crimson streaks of reflection shot across the cold, black water. He looked back. Snow closed down between him and the surfboat. She had dropped far behind.

Oars, eh? Oars that his father put his trust in? Oars!

The four cycle engine kept at its work with unvarying and undiminished effort. Offshore the snow was clearing. All men who ever sailed the lakes knew that snow always fell heaviest on Prophet Point, Perhaps out there where the fire blazed the air would be clearer. A man might see, might see well enough to help the poor devils on the vessel, might determine whether or not this was the *River Jordan*, whether or not King John in one storm had two lost ships to shame him.

The wreck was drifting landward, always landward, each time the clouds of snow ripped apart. Dave swung the tiller slightly to port. An eighth of a mile to go. A few hundred yards.

The wind veered with a sudden vehemence out of the north. It snatched away the snow. A whistle cried in a sharp complaining bellow. He knew that steamy note! It was the *River Jordan*. No doubt this time! The *Jordan!* A cold, despairing terror laid hold of him; his mind jerked back pitingly to Janet MacGrath, with fury to his father. He had hoped till this minute it wasn't old King John's vessel. Told himself over and over Captain MacGrath was too good a sailor, too wary to risk his ship, no matter what its owner said. He remembered with violent clarity the last time he saw MacGrath ten days ago on the wharf. He remembered the fine little wind lines about his eyes, his easy voice.

The tiller kicked in frenzied remonstrance against the stout grip of Dave's ankles. Holding it firm, he stared despairingly through the broken swirls of snow.

What was it, this amazing thing out there in front? Was he seeing double?

The blazing ship lay only three hundred yards to his right, close to the sunken reef that two nights ago tripped and destroyed the schooner *Peacock*. It was a black wooden barge with high Texas forward, a low, thin waisted sweep of deck and a jutting of houses over the stern. To the left, still in deep water, at the edge of another blanket of snow, a second steamer fought the gale.

TWO VESSELS! One burning, one in danger of the rocks, both in immense jeopardy. Smoke and snow slashed down, burying the mailboat in a confused obscurity. One ship was the *Jordan*. He'd heard her signal. Which? His tortured eyes, splashed with tears and snow, gouged by the wind, could not determine. Both ships were alike in build, the long, low, unlovely build of Great Lakes carrier fleets. They were of a size, both painted black. One burning, the other fighting the insane antics of the lake, one as badly off as the other. Dave's heart sank. Two crews to be rescued? He needed Nelson, needed the pulling boat to help.

More smoke slanted down the air in thick yellow and black gusts, now hot, now frosty as the ice on the boat, making a dark background against which snowflakes juggled like tiny, insane stars. Through the turmoil of the storm the outline of the two fighting vessels was seen dimly, and in part. One moment a bow stood clear, Again a long flaming section of deck. And then the rolling funnel of the second steamer, farther out,

Dave steered toward the upflung blaze, close along the shallow reef. There was desperate need of haste. He found himself shouting at his boat, crying out in hoarse encouragement to the steel heart of the engine, belaboring the ice that weighted cabin and rails and cedar sides.

Another flash of clearer air. The second steamer had crowded in close to the one that was burning. He made out figures of men in cloudy silhouettes on her deck. They were working about a lifeboat. Suddenly it shot overside, splashed into the boiling seas. It trailed off to windward. A stout line followed it. The snow closed in.

A moment he could not guess the meaning of that maneuver. Were they taking the boats? Abandoning ship? Then understanding flashed clear through his drenched mind. That second ship was

standing by. She had heard the distress signal, at fearful risk had come to help. She was passing a line now by means of that empty lifeboat. Wind and waves would hurl the boat across to the burning vessel. If possible men would secure the line. Then, at a signal, the less endangered steamer could haul away, could tow the other to calmer water under some near-by headland.

Or, if there were not time for that, the taut hawser would serve as a wet, precarious guide to safety. With loops of light hemp flung around, the blistered crew of the flaming barge could make one last desperate effort, kicking hand over hand along its icy length, through the tops of waves, to the security of the rescue ship. She was standing by for that—standing by! A word flashed hotly across Dave's memory.

"Loyalty!"

Loyalty! Here it was, wet and winded, against overwhelming odds, working doggedly upon that dirty, treacherous seas. Loyalty of one vessel to another, of seamen to seamen.

The line was stretching out. When Dave could see again the boat, bottom up, heaved on the rollers halfway across the intervening space. He could see neither of the steamers. Smoke and fog and snow wrapped them in howling invisibility. His own power boat was pulling nearer, was forced back, pressed forward, back, forward—a little nearer. Once he looked astern. There was no sign of Nelson's crew. Had they capsized, or been pushed back to shore?

THE GALE stamped in new fury. Heat poured in overwhelming waves across the cabin of the mailboat. Blazing timbers ripped from the burning craft and sailed swiftly overhead, trailing sparks like companies of lost comets.

Fifty yards. Cap Trowbridge opened the trap.

"Not too close!" he screamed out. "If we hit her—"

Dave gave him no reply. He gripped the tiller more firmly between his ankles. The snow sucked upward. He saw four men on the bow of the vessel over the chainlocker. And the short frayed end of a hawser, broken in the hawse hole, ice covered, pounding the sheathed side. So she'd lost her anchor!

Forty yards. Another break in the snow. The line was aboard, fished out of the water and made fast. The rescue ship was pulling away carefully, a last desperate chance. The great rope slacked, pulled tight, slacked once more, again went taut. It snapped like a cobweb and the broken ends tumbled into the water.

At the same instant a heavy grumble sounded across the waves and the high black side rolled.

The doomed, flaming steamer had struck the reef. Atop the drowned *Peacock* she writhed in the agony of destruction. Trowbridge thrust his head out once more.

"Not too close!" he shrilled.

Dave answered shortly.

"Come out, take tiller! I'll go for'ard!"

Thirty yards.

Trowbridge crawled out slowly to the icy deck and slapped the trap shut after him. He tripped as he stepped over the tiller and caught its bar between his heels. Dave, releasing it, reached under his slicker and felt the heaving stick and line. Safe. He scrambled down the port rail on the icy six inch deck around the cabin. The boat burrowed deep once and the weight of an immense wave leaped down on him. It clawed and booted his head and arms, threatened to yank him overboard. Doggedly he hung; the wall of water passed; he went on, more slowly, with new ice freezing on his back.

The bow, weighted with a great rounded hump of ice, washed under at every sea. Dave braced himself on its treacherous deck, on hands and knees, and dodged under the sprayhood. He looked up suddenly, confused. Darkness had slapped across his eyes. The black side of the freighter heaved almost atop him. Smoke, churning down, shut out the sky and its cold gray light. Heat pelted him. No snow here, only a fine spray of rain.

He braced himself again, scanned the rail. Was it the *Jordan?*

It looked like her. The same build as the *Jordan*. Same blunt lines. Same age. One of that great laboring fleet of wooden vessels, ugly, leaking, old, condemned to eternal dirty toil. Dave tried to recognize some plank or spar, a streak of paint. Smoke gouged his eyes, filled them with tears.

When he peered upward again a head had thrust overside, a smudgy, smoked face. Dave jerked out the heaving stick and made its line fast to the boat. He hurled the stick upward. Desperation put strength into his muscles. It sailed far into the air, the line uncoiling after it. Flame roared in a mounting chorus to his right. He was close to the bow. The heaving stick fell backward into the lake.

He dragged it out quickly. The line froze as it came up, melted under the pommeling heat of the fire, froze when the wind veered the blaze. He flung the bamboo staff a second time. More heads showed at the rail. Ice, in immense overlapping sheets, covered the bow of the steamer and piled in fantastic pinnacles about the pilothouse.

Looked like the *Jordan*, all right, but he wasn't sure. Under the ice forward, now dripping away in the heat of the fire, her name was painted. He stared hard. Couldn't tell. His eyes ached. Heat stung like shrapnel against his frosted face. Nothing seemed real. Not even the tugging at the heaving line. Were they dragging it aboard?

THE BOW of his boat bunted into the high black side with a jar that set his spine aching. At once it fell back. Another wave caught it, hurled it upward, threatening to crush it against the rolling, icy wall, spared it, and flung it disdainfully far away from the ship.

Three heads appeared overside. Then a man climbed on the rail. Dave saw him close his eyes as he jumped. The line slacked. It was looped under his arms. Another length of rope, made fast to him, paid out rapidly over the steamer's side. The men on deck were adding to Dave's short lifeline. They were taking no chances. He need not heave the stick again. A second man could leap—a third, a fourth—as long as the line held. The sailor landed feet first on a high round roller and disappeared under the tumbling surface.

Dave yanked frantically. The fellow came up, twenty feet away. Numb, frosted, his eyes staring, his hands hanging limp, Dave dragged him overside. Between two splashing breakers he jerked open the forward trap and thrust the fellow in. A second man leaped from the deck.

Still more rope trailed overside. Dave fished the second seaman from the lake and in turn pushed him into the cabin. His boat had fallen away from the grinding side of the vessel. Away and down toward the stern. Flame leaped from a dozen hatches and clawed at him like blazing fingers. His face ached, hot and cold, blistered and frozen by alternate blasts.

A third man jumped, then two together, holding tight to each other. One of them was injured. Dave dragged the icy line; pulled them in. He must lie flat on the slippery deck to lift the hurt sailor out of the water. He was over at last. Another—another. Dave lost count. Then a second injured man, with two supporting him. A long time it took, getting them in safely. Then one more, a big man man with blistered face and bleeding hands. He alone of all the crew had a voice, a husky, terrible croak that tried to form words. Dave listened, his own ears battered deaf by the gale.

"I'm last."

"Last? Where's the captain?"

The survivor pointed a bloody frozen finger at his own chest.

"Me."

"You?" Dave bellowed.

He sank back. It was not MacGrath, not the *Jordan*. That was the *Jordan* standing by. Safe, if MacGrath maneuvered right. Not on fire, not sinking. He steadied his feet and glanced up. No

more line paid overside from the half burned vessel. She was listing. Ice, charging seas, shifting cargo and fire in her hold had canted her at a wild angle on the reef. He heard Trowbridge yelling across the tumult of the storm. Dave signaled to pull off.

Caught in the trough, the mailboat tumbled with a vicious, thrashing motion. Dave clung to the sprayhood. At length the boat was safely away. He shook freezing water from his eyes.

Through the snow he discerned the wavering outline of the other steamer. The *Jordan?* She was pointed lakeward again. Ice glistened in heavy layers on her deck. Even as Dave watched she sounded a blast on her whistle. Three seconds it lasted.

The *Jordan!* No doubt about it now. Her high shrill voice swept down the wind with a squealing note like King John's own. One three second blast, indicating she was on her way. Captain MacGrath had seen the rescue. He had stood by, trying to help, till the mailboat took off the last man. Now he was heading for open lake, for deep water and safety. He sounded the whistle again, a business-like, sharply cut note. Wind snatched it landward. Would Janet hear and understand?

CAP TROWBRIDGE. on the stern deck, steered warily. Great seas, piling up behind him, kicked the boat along, or overtaking her, assailed her with fisty blows. Dave lifted the trap and helped the steamer captain through it.

He stood up, holding fast to the sprayhood. To the left he made out the boiling line of the reef, pushing northward from the point. Through thinning snow he saw the high, drifted ridges of the great dune, the angles of the station roof, the wide doors of the boathouse, two oblong black patches against the gray, and nearer, now concealed, now sharply clear, the running figures of men on shore. Behind them they dragged the beach cart.

Nels Nelson, driven back to land, unaware that rescue already was accomplished, still strove desperately to reach the burning ship.

Dave crawled aft along the icy coaming to the stern deck. The tiller was frozen solidly between Trowbridge's boots. Dave pried them away. The old man protested. Dave pushed him through the cabin.

"Tend engine," he commanded. "I'll take her in."

Winds, swaying north and northwest, blew the snow in high clouds. For whole minutes the beach lay clear. Nelson, seeing the incoming craft, had left the beach cart. The wreck gun, already set up, pointed at the writhing fire and the black and yellow smoke above the dying barge. Farther out, concealed in the swirls, the *Jordan* snored her message—short bursts of sound, repeated once each minute. She was seeking shelter, wisely, under the head of Windy Island.

Dave rounded the last hidden rocks of the point and once more felt the kick of the backwash. Along the shore, breakers battered their white heads against forming ice. The last of the rocks disappeared on the port side and Dave swung his craft toward land. He saw Nelson running back stoutly along the beach. The crew labored after him. They waded in, dragging a stout line.

Waves lifted the mailboat's stern, throwing the bow under. If he had ballast here, if those half frozen fellows below deck would stay aft— No time to warn them. Fifty yards. Forty. Seas broke with a mad roar all about. He saw white water, felt a thud as the keel struck. A lift. A second crash. Then the squeal of torn planks and Nelson's voice.

"Heave away!" the captain sang out calmly.

Hands and hemp caught the broken boat. Dave felt another slight lift. The hull was aground. Waves broke over. The cabin traps snapped open and men from the steamer sprawled out. They plunged into shallow water and straggled ashore. A few pulled limply on the taut lines. The boat moved up the sand.

CHAPTER VII

KING JOHN ABDICATES

JANET MACGRATH ran down the wash and caught Dave's hands.

"Not the *Jordan!*" he tried to tell her. "*Jordan's* safe. You heard her, heard her steaming off?"

The girl nodded, blinking tears from her eyes. She could not speak.

"She was standing by, Janet. Trying to help. Your father's safe now. Mine—"

"He's sittin' up in quarters," Noah Tuft interrupted, "swearin' fit to bust."

King John sat in Captain Nelson's big chair when Noah Tuft, with his good arm, propelled the No. 5 man to the door.

"Played out?" Dave heard his father say.

His voice was older than it had been an hour before. His body had a wasted look. There was no blood in it.

"Leave a little thing like that play you out?"

"I'm not," Dave answered stubbornly. He stared at the blanket over his father's knees. King John, wrapped up in a blanket! "Nothing wrong with *me!*"

"Nothing wrong?" The old challenging whistle shrilled in the elder Lee's throat. "By the saints, if I'd done all the fool things you've did these three days—"

"Done his duty," Nels Nelson put in. "Took a boat out 'thout orders, but I'm allowin' to overlook that."

"Orders? Why, you—you blasted shingle weaver!" King John flung the blanket from his knees. "Listen, Dave Lee! You heard what that doctor slob said? I got to quit. Got to go lay down. Me! Well, I ain't a fool, no matter what you are. I know when a stand o' timber's cut. Don't do no monkeyin' with slash. If I'm done, all right."

His voice squealed upward. Dave tried to speak.

"Say your say when I'm through," his father commanded. "I'm gettin' out. Goin' to some high toned camp like Chicago. Goin' to ride in colored taxicabs a while. Pine Haven's yours, whole works, top deck to beach."

"And I'm boss?" Dave demanded.

"Got to be. *I* ain't goin' to give you advice. No difference to *me* how you clutter the place up. Build machines so thick you can't spit if you want. Sink the dock. It's nothin' to me. Kiss the breeds to bed every night! You're boss. Come home now. I'll fix the papers."

He glared at Nels Nelson.

"Better go, boy," Captain Nelson said.

Dave arose slowly. Water dripped in puddles from his frozen slicker to the floor.

"Got to get some dry duds on first," he consented.

"I ain't waitin'," King John growled. He jabbed a thumb at Janet. "Comin', gal? He knows the road. I ain't waitin'."

She shook her head.

"I am," she said decisively.

PIONEER RAILROADING

By

Arthur Woodward

IN THESE days when the monstrous "hogs" of super size and power root their roaring way down the singing rails from East to West and North to South, engineers and firemen, passengers and crew live the life of Riley.

But in the good old days, say Michigan in 1836, riding on a railroad was an event for the passengers and the men who drove the train.

In that year the first train of the Erie and Kalamazoo Railroad was put in operation between Port Lawrence on Lake Erie and the small town of Adrian, thirty-three miles inland. And when I say that the train was driven I mean it in the literal sense of the word, because the first cars were drawn over the wooden rails by a team of horses hitched tandem to the coaches.

The rails were three by four inch oak slabs, spiked upon heavy stringers. Some of these stringers were seventy-five feet in length. In the spring of 1837 a narrow iron strap rail about five eighths of an inch thick and two and one half inches wide was spiked to the oak rails.

In August 1837 the first steam locomotive was put on the run. This was the "Adrian." Three other engines, the "Toledo," "Tecumseh," and "Lenawee" were later used on the road. They were the regular small, wood burning chimneys and upright fireboxes on wheels, masquerading under the name of locomotives, which were then in vogue. The passenger coaches were called "pleasure cars." They were two decked affairs, top heavy and habitually inclined to jumping the track.

The first train consisted of the engine and one pleasure car. This primitive coach held twenty people. It antedated the two decker by a year or so. In the latter type car, the upper deck was reserved for the ladies, the seats being elegantly furnished with sheepskin upholstery; the men occupied the lower section and sat on plain wooden benches. These more up to date "Pullmans" carried thirty-two passengers, sixteen upstairs and sixteen down below.

Only the most venturesome spirits would dare a railroad journey on this strap iron road. It took a man or woman with a stout heart to brave the dangers of the thirty-three mile trip and the dangers were not superstitious fancy, either.

The thin strap iron rail was spiked to the oak rail by tapering nails only two inches long. In a very short time these spikes worked loose and the end of the rail curled up rather suddenly, in many cases ripping up the planking in the bottom of the coaches. These loose rail ends were called "snake heads" and were quite a problem to the early engineers and firemen. On these wood burners, the fireman got off the train at intervals and loaded his fuel box from the neighboring forest. Ditch water alongside the track served as the liquid refreshment for the hard working little engines. But the engines weren't the only things that worked hard. On exceptionally steep grades, the male passengers were often requested to alight and help push the train up the incline. Such were the joys of pioneer railroading.

HUGH PENDEXTER

tells a story of early Missouri and a white man's mysterious vengeance with red magic

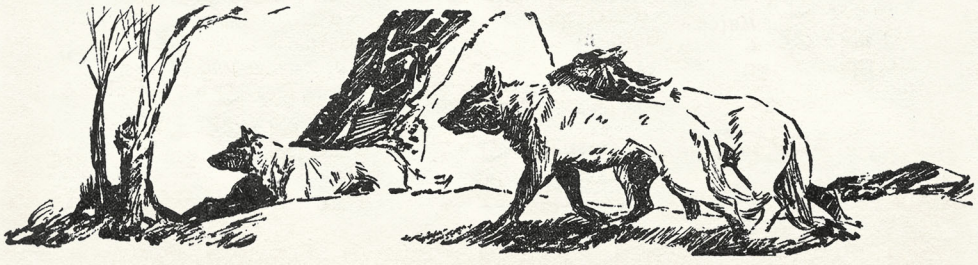
WOLF MEDICINE

FORT BENTON was too busy to bestow much attention on any individual. Prior to 1864, with only six steamboats arriving during the season, an eccentric character would have been noticed and discussed. But in 1867, with the number of steamboat arrivals jumping to seventy, when thirty or forty boats could be counted at one time between the post and the mouth of the Yellowstone, a man needed to stand out like a sore thumb to attract comment.

Montana's gold camps, road agents and restless Indians sated the river's appetite for excitement. Steamboat freight rates were up to twelve cents a pound; passenger fare was three hundred dollars. The levee end of Benton's interests vied in liveliness with the clamor attending the latest discovery in Last Chance Gulch.

One of the few men at Benton who had the leisure to study the surging humanity along the riverfront was a wolfer. He was idly waiting for his season of activity to set in—the bleak winter months, when mining would cease and the Missouri would be sealed with ice. He wandered much among the excited, impatient, raucous voiced men as they scrambled for transportation to the mines. He was daily among them, but not of them.

Those of the newcomers who took time to look at him carried away a picture of long ragged hair, falling from a wolfskin hat, sunburned to a rusty color over the broad shoulders. Also, perhaps, a vague recollection of bushy beard almost entirely covering the wolfer's features. Each



batch of arrivals jostled against him without pausing to realize that he was the successor of the old beaver trapper, and a new type. He was indifferent to the buffetings of the gold crazed mobs; and aimlessly he lounged from saloon to levee, from store to store. Those held by trade or hire at Benton gave him greetings, which he acknowledged with a nod, or a few laconic words.

He was one of the few men on the Upper Missouri who was killing time. The bustling confusion of the gold hunters left him calmly contemplative. The sharp eyes peering from under bushy brows found little of interest except as they might linger on the dandyism of the river pilots. Like the wolfer the pilots were idlers during the few days required to unload quartz mills and passengers. One of the pilots, working for Joe La Barge, bumped against him as a milling crowd hastened to the nearest bar. The wolfer's gaze quickened as he noticed the fellow brush his sleeve.

"Just like I was poison," the wolfer told himself as he entered the saloon and stood beside the pilot in the long, thirsty line.

The pilot, as befitting a class drawing the unprecedented salary of twelve hundred dollars a month, was immaculate in appearance. From new stovepipe hat to dazzling shoes he wore the richest and the best. He would have shifted his position had there been room. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically and, being in no haste, took his time to examine the rough figure beside him. The two were opposite poles. The antithesis was complete. Ever a Prince Bountiful, the pilot condescendingly invited the disheveled creature to have a drink. The wolfer nodded, almost surlily. The pilot was puzzled by the bartender's courteous demeanor in serving the fellow. He began to understand, however, when the wolfer returned the courtesy and tossed a nugget on the bar.

"My friend," said the pilot, "I'd never taken you for a miner. You must have struck it rich."

"Not interested in mining," was the listless reply. "I'm a wolfer."

"But you managed to find a rare chunk of gold. Does wolfing pay better?"

"Pays fair to middling. I like it. You fetched up quite a crowd of men. Mostly from St. Louis?"

"Come aboard there, largely. From Indianny, Iowy, Illinois, and Missouri. Your work must be lonesome."

"I like to be alone," said the wolfer, as he hunched over his drink and swept his gaze up and down the line.

All eyes were focused on him because of the nugget.

"What's your handle, if you don't mind?" ventured the pilot.

"Wolf. Just that."

This would have discouraged the pilot from attempting further conversation had not the wolfer displayed big white teeth, and added:

"I like to kill wolves. Just like I had a grudge against 'em."

Then he abruptly turned away and left the saloon. A dozen men broke from the line and hurried after him, each eager to learn the source of the nugget.

THE PILOT remarked to the bartender:

"He didn't get any change back for that nugget. Simple minded, eh?"

"He'd git change if he'd take it. We ain't holding out nothing from fellers like him. Wolf ain't nobody's fool."

"But he tosses gold away and works hard hunting wolves."

"Begins his season with the first freeze. Cleaned up better'n three thousand dollars last winter, beside what gold he picked up."

The men who followed the wolfer outside were now returning, clamoring for more liquor and cursing the wolfer. From their vociferous denunciation it was plain that their burning curiosity had been curtly and profanely discouraged.

Yet the ragged figure had taken on something of dignity even in the estimation of those who had been rebuffed; for gold can gild rough men as well as base metal. The wolfer was a Crœsus in potentials. The outward garb was no longer an index. One of the unsuccessful loudly complained:

"He oughter be made to tell. He oughter be pushing his luck instead of fiddling round Benton. Does he always pay with gold, barkeep?"

"Yes. For two seasons that I've been here. Always acts like gold was just so much dirt to him."

"Gawdfrey mighty!"

"'Tain't fair that a man should have secret diggings if he don't care a hoot about 'em!" proclaimed another.

"What's his name, barkeep?"

"Wolf. Only name the river knows. Short 'n'easy to remember."

That the wolfer enjoyed human companionship was further suggested that night when he invited himself into a poker game consisting of two pilots and two professional gamblers. He was welcomed warmly. Near morning he quit nearly a thousand dollars winner, but showed no elation. The pilot who had drunk with him was one of the players. As he walked to his boat to catch a few hours' sleep the wolfer accompanied him to the levee. The pilot, a loser to the extent of four hundred dollars, impatiently complained:

"Greenbacks and hard money don't seem to appeal to you any more'n the nuggets you carry loose in your pockets. If you know rich diggings, why don't you hog it out and go back to the States and live like a white man?"

"Ain't interested in the States. Just like to kill wolves. Just waiting for the first freeze. Have sort of an itch to see if any one I used to know happens up the river. Prob'ly wouldn't speak to them if I saw any such. Comes from living alone so much, prob'ly. Good night."

"Goodby. Off for the States tomorrow morning."

FOR TWO days the wolfer was missing from the riverfront, and those who had hoped to learn his secret departed in heavily armed bands for the diggings. The *Zephyr* was beginning to disgorge freight and passengers when the wolfer lounged along the bank. A storekeeper, an acquaintance, joined him and laughingly said:

"Rare man hunt for you the last two days. Tried to make them understand it was no use to pester you."

"Er-huh?"

"Yes, Wolf. Them pilgrims sure was keen to find you and larn where you got the gold. Tried to make 'em understand your old friends here would be first to know if you was going to give it away."

"Er-huh?"

"But what we old-timers wonder about is, how do you manage the Injuns? Married a squaw?"

The man's eyes lighted in anger; but

his deep voice was composed as he replied:

"No squaw. Injuns, at peace or war, always take the warpath against wolfers because of their dogs' dying from eating the poisoned bait. I buy their dogs before they're killed. Lame Bull and his Piegan band of Blackfeet are my friends. Each fall I visit the Bull at the Three Buttes. Carry along best presents money can buy. No trouble with Injuns if they see you're playing square. I talk their lingo. That helps a heap and—"

He broke off abruptly and removed his skin hat and violently rubbed his shaggy head. Then, without completing his sentence, he hurried to join the *Zephyr's* passengers, now making for the line of stores and saloons.

The storekeeper followed, asking him—

"Thinking to see some one in that batch of Pilgrims you know?"

"Couldn't know anybody. Been away from the States nigh on to twenty years."

"Never heard you say what State you hail from, Wolf."

"Been drifting round quite a spell."

"Had a notion you come from the South."

The jam at the saloon entrance held them up for a few moments, or long enough for the wolfer to say—

"I've talked Injun so long I reckon you'd find it hard to guess where I come from."

"Meaning it ain't none of my business?"

"Something like that. Come in and have a drink."

The storekeeper refused, and hurried away.

THE WOLFER entered the barroom and walked nearly to the end of the long bar before wedging himself in between two of the *Zephyr's* passengers. The latter scowled heavily after feeling his elbows and shoulders, but their resentment vanished when a nugget of gold rolled on the bar, and a bartender hurried forward, eager to give service.

"Drinks for the house. Call it twenty dollars."

The bartender, estimating the nugget to be worth more than fifty dollars at the least, loudly announced—

"My old friend, Wolf, buys a full round at four bits per."

Immediately those nearest the wolfer fired a volley of eager questions. One pilgrim, third away on the wolfer's left, leaned far over the bar to glimpse the hairy face, and put query after query. Unable to answer the general cross examination, even had he been so inclined, the wolfer fastened his gaze on the outstretched head and explained that the nugget came from hostile Indian country. Yes, he could easily find the place again, but did not care to do so. No, he was not afraid of the Indians. Friendly with them. Crazy? Maybe. But he wasn't interested in gold. Living? By killing wolves. Yes, he liked that better than picking up gold. No. He would not tell others how to find the diggings as it would be sending them to death.

"Death!" cried his questioner. "Joe Gilkil never held back from facing that critter yet. Taken chances all my life. Expect to die taking 'em. Neighbor, your best health. May you always be happy."

"Drink hearty, friend," replied the wolfer.

One drink was all he would take; nor would he remain to be questioned further. He was followed closely as he left the long room. Men struggled to get close to him. They pleaded and begged to learn something of his secret. He remained silent and slowly worked his way toward the river. Finding him entirely unresponsive, the group began to disintegrate. Curses and denunciations were showered upon him, but he did not appear to be heeding. Gilkil fell back with his boat companions until they re-entered the saloon. Then he returned to the wolfer, chuckled heartily, and began:

"Friend, that parcel of critters is sore and mad. Was that drink slinger talking straight when he said you made several thousand dollars a year by skinning poisoned wolves?"

"That's right," confirmed the wolfer.

"No secret about that. I'll tell any one where they can find wolves."

"Drink slinger didn't give your name—your real name."

"Prob'ly never heard it. Some one started calling me Wolf. Sort of stuck."

"Lots of folks up here have new names for old," and Gilkil nodded knowingly. "Just how do you go about wolfing?"

The wolfer briefly explained how he set his line of bait in a wide circle in an open valley after the first freeze.

"Bait's poisoned. Kills wolves. They freeze solid. More'n a hundred die from feeding on one carcass sometimes. With the first thaw I have to work sharp and pelt them before the skins can spoil."

"You have to dodge Injuns pretty smart."

"Not me. I'm wise enough to fix that before hand. No danger from them."

"Huh! That strikes me as being easier than breaking your back with pick and shovel."

The wolfer nodded, and said—

"Struck me that way. I'm satisfied."

"You haven't a partner?"

"No. Right sort hard to find. Too crazy after gold."

"You could make more if you had a partner? More'n double what you make working alone?" continued Gilkil.

"Yes. Two lines in place of one. When a big thaw comes and holds warm for some time, one man is helpless. He'll lose most of his season's work," said the wolfer.

"And summers? What do you do?" eagerly asked Gilkil.

"Fill my pockets with nuggets. Come down here and do something."

Gilkil breathed heavily. Then he confided:

"After you quit the bar some of the men laughed. I up and told them that a man who can clean up several thousand in one winter just by skinning wolves can stand lots of laughing."

The wolfer's lips drew back in a grin, or a snarl, disclosing the big white teeth to the gums. In a low tone he admitted—

"I've stood for lots of laughing in my day."

"How far do you go to get your skins?"

"Not far. Wolves come to me. They'll come. I'm good at waiting." Again the white teeth flashed.

GILKIL hesitated while endeavoring to estimate the wolfer's plane of intelligence. That a man would spend a winter in skinning wolves was a strong indication of mental deficiency. Conversely, a man who spent a season, or a portion of a season, in the wolfer's company, if he possessed any amount of shrewdness, ought to be able to learn the source of the beautiful nuggets. Suddenly squaring his jaws, Gilkil said earnestly:

"See here, Wolf. We're strangers to one another. But I feel as if I'd always known you. I'd like mighty well to learn your wolf game. I'd do my best at it. I'd take any split you might decide on. I'm down on my luck. Only got a couple hundred dollars I could put in. How do you feel? Is there any chance? I can live hard and work hard."

The wolfer stared at him for a few moments and then shifted his gaze to the rolling river and was silent for a minute. Gilkil's fingers contracted into fists and he barely breathed as he waited. Without looking at him, the wolfer was saying—

"If you wa'n't so mortal crazy about finding gold we might make a go of it."

"Want to find gold? Yes. But I don't care if it comes from a wolf's back, or out of the ground," eagerly said Gilkil.

"That sounds—" the wolfer nodded approvingly. "I'd split fair with any greenhorn I took in."

"But I know how to use a knife!" cried Gilkil.

Without appearing to have heard him, the wolfer went on:

"I couldn't tell till after the first thaw how much a man would be worth. I always allow to give a man what he deserves."

"Nothing could be fairer'n that!"

"Just what he deserves. Then he can't

kick. It takes money to run the game. Might lose everything by a big thaw spoiling the skins before I could take them off."

"I've taken chances all my life!"

"There's the gifts I've got to hand out to Lame Bull," the wolfer continued in a monotonous voice, as if reading a bill of lading. "I'm working on the plateau between the Marias and the Milk. I buy Lame Bull's protection. Another man would mean another saddle and another packhoss, and double rations of beans, flour, coffee, sugar and salt. Then there would be another set of blankets, another buffalo robe, rifle, Colt six-shooter and a double supply of strychnine. Of course I've got my outfit."

"Look, Wolf, you take me on. Make any split you want to," urged Gilkil. "I'll chip the two hundred towards my part. You'd do the buying for me. I've been to the Coast. I can skin any sort of a critter. I'm no greeny."

The wolfer stared at him speculatively, his eyes focused on the cameo pin that fastened the collar of the flannel shirt.

"Been wondering what sort of jewelry that was." He poked his finger at the pin but did not touch it.

"Cameo. I'd like to give it to you, as I don't want it. But it belonged to a woman who brought me bad luck. I reckon it's unlucky."

"For a long time I've made my own luck," said the wolfer. He combed his fingers through his bushy beard and confessed, "You know, I've lived with Injuns so much I've gotten their notion of what's 'medicine'. Plumb foolishness, mebbe. But right now I've the notion that pin would be big medicine for me."

Gilkil's fingers flew to his collar in nervous haste to remove the cameo.

"Take it, and most welcome, if you feel that way about it."

He dropped it in the wolfer's palm. The Wolf stared at it intently for a few moments. Slowly depositing it in a pocket he told Gilkil:

"I'll take you on. You're advancing the pin and your loose money."

"I trade!" said Gilkil; and he whipped out a buckskin bag and proffered it.

The wolfer shook his head and reminded Gilkil:

"You've got to live while we make ready to start. Time enough for the money after we make our first camp on the Marias. I'll find you when I want you."

He wheeled and walked rapidly away. After his first surprise at the sudden leavetaking, Gilkil smiled broadly.

IT WAS the nugget the wolfer had tossed on the bar that decided Gilkil to endure the rigors of winter on a treeless prairie. Desire had been inflamed further by the bartender's story of other nuggets carelessly exchanged for drinks and goods. He stared intently at the bluffs across the river, without seeing them. His vision was traveling far from the Upper Missouri.

Gilkil concluded his reverie by telling himself that it would be strange if Joe Gilkil failed to learn the innermost thoughts of a man, no more sophisticated than was the wolfer, after living with him for a portion of the winter. Once he succeeded, the world would be his playground.

He was aroused by one of his boat companions lustily crying out for him to make haste, as arrangements had been made for an immediate departure for the mines. He announced that he was remaining at Benton; and when they accused him of being foolishly afraid of road agents, he made no defense. He wished them all away before the partnership with the wolfer became known.

During the remainder of their stay in Benton the partners met daily and discussed the work and hardships ahead. Always before separating Gilkil would bring up the subject of gold. Beyond admitting that he knew a place where a man could "comb it out with his five fingers" the wolfer would give no details. But this was sufficient to cause Gilkil to suck in his breath with a little hissing sound. One day Gilkil exploded:

"Why don't you corral that gold? Gold means everything, Wolf."

Grimly whimsical, the wolfer said:

"Everything, eh? That means everything 'tween heaven and hell."

"Give me the gold and I'll pass up one and take my chances with t'other!" declared Gilkil passionately.

The wolfer studied him curiously, his lips slightly parted.

"Partner, I don't know but what you'll git your chance," he slowly said. "Pard Gilkil, when a man is thirsty as that, he's due for a drink, mebbe."

He would not go beyond that, but the half promise filled Gilkil with impatience to leave Benton.

At last came the day, late September, when the wolfer brought out the horses. Gilkil asked—

"Plenty of whisky?"

"Small jug. For medicine. No place for big drinking where we're going."

THE first stage of their journey was to the Teton, and for the six miles the wolfer rode ahead, his bearded chin covering the cameo pin he wore at the neck of his shirt. Once they had entered the valley and had turned their backs to the Missouri, their way was pleasant and alluring. The banks of the Teton were graciously timbered, and the valley was walled in by cliffs of the prairie plateau, rising a hundred feet or more. The wolfer became talkative, even loquacious, and strangely enough for one of his grim calling, he dwelt on the beauties of the valley in the summer months, when it was brilliant with flowers and perfumed with the scent of the rose.

"You talk the way poetry sounds," commented Gilkil, whose thoughts were not inclined to nature worship and who preferred framing pictures of nugget studded diggings. "You'll be writing verses next."

As if abashed, the wolfer became silent and talked but little for the rest of the day's travel. They camped ten miles up the valley.

Before sunrise they had climbed a zigzag path to the plateau and were riding over the dry, rolling grass lands. The wolfer had but little to say, and his companion was busy with his dreaming. They entered the valley of the Marias by a path that twisted downward for more than two hundred feet and left the high, cold wind behind them. Their camp that night was in a beautiful grove, close by the limpid stream. Their seclusion and coziness invited the rambling talk of contentment.

Gilkil abruptly suggested a drink of whisky. The wolfer bared his big teeth in a grin and reminded:

"Only for sickness. We'll be separated from the whisky trade for a long time, Gil."

Then he told his disgruntled companion stories of the Blackfeet bands and their country, the treeless, waterless plains between the Marias and the Milk. He pictured the red owners as almost continuously engaged in fighting their enemies at some segment of the huge circle.

When he became silent, Gilkil, stretched on his blankets and smoking his pipe, remarked:

"Lonely's hell up here, ain't it? I see you're wearing that cameo."

"Been wearing it for some time. It's pretty. I'm red enough to think it'll bring me luck."

"Mighty little luck it brought me."

"You was saying your wife wore it."

"Not exactly that. Don't want to talk about her. This must be a mighty bleak country when the snow comes."

"For our profit I hope it will be cold and bleak, with the thaws lasting only a day or so."

Gilkil removed his pipe and came up on one elbow and said:

"I don't see, Wolf, how you figger it the way you do. Willing to live in cold and storm when you could make your pile in honest summer weather and live snug all winter among white folks."

"I like it. I wouldn't go in for it if I didn't. I don't like mixing with white folks. Only people who ever cold decked me were white folks. Injuns will let you

alone when you don't want to talk. If they're your friends, they stick. Don't blow hot one day and cold the next."

"I love a crowd and whisky."

"And women?"

"When they ain't the clinging kind, and don't try to hamper me and nail me down in one place," Gilkil promptly admitted.

"Gilly, you've had women. Now you want gold. I'm thinking you'll have the last."

Gilkil came to a sitting position and hungrily urged—

"Why not promise up and down to let me have some of the gold you don't want for yourself?"

FOR HALF a minute the wolfer snapped dead cottonwood twigs and tossed them on the coals. Then he drew up his head and quietly said:

"All right. But not in a way that'll bring whites into the diggings. Lame Bull's been too good a friend for me to do that. But you're starved for gold. The cameo didn't fetch you any luck, you say. Gold won't fetch you any happiness, I'm thinking. But have it your way. Before we quit this trip, if we both live, I'll show you gold."

"Wolf, do that, and I'll always be your best friend."

"You're my friend now," reminded the wolfer. "No, I'm not buying friends. By the way, this is past the time when you were to pay in your loose money. Might as well be reg'lar and businesslike."

Gilkil sank back on the blankets and laughed shortly, and explained:

"My living, and the whisky, and a setback at poker, you know— Well, I've got just fifty dollars left." He dug a hand into his pocket.

"Leave it be there," said the wolfer. "Of course, I don't need the money; but I like to have a partner live up to just what he agrees. It makes no difference outside of that. Money's no use up here. Just the idea of knowing I can always count on a man. Just to have him do what he says he will. The feeling he'll always be fighting beside me, or keeping them off my back by standing with his back to mine.

"Wolf, you can bank on me 'way across the board. Joe Gilkil never yet went back on a friend. No, sirree!"

"Good. If a man will cold deck one friend, he will another."

"Dog-gone, Wolf! I'm thinking you've lived alone so much, or with Injuns, you git queer notions without any reason to back them up."

The other pondered over this for a bit, then agreed:

"That may be right. Living alone so much raises hob with a man's mind. Prob'ly that's it. Well, let's git some sleep. I want to be at my snug winter camp up this valley as soon as we can make it. Little log cabin in a cottonwood grove. Even built a snug lean-to for the hosses. They'll git feed there all winter, pawing the snow, what doesn't thaw and run off. Live snug, when you'd freeze up on the prairie. With Lame Bull my friend we don't have to worry about Injuns jumping us. His peace pipe will cover any friend of mine, of course. S'pose we sleep against an early start."

He was sleeping soundly within a few minutes. Gilkil remained awake for a long time. He was picturing the hidden spots where one could "comb it out with his five fingers."

The words danced through his brain. It maddened him to know that the great secret was in the keeping of the senseless log beside him. It infuriated him to know that he must serve the eccentric most drearily before achieving his great desire. When he awoke, the breakfast of beans and bacon was ready.

During the day's ride at the foot of cliffs, which at times towered three hundred feet, the wolfer talked of the work ahead. He explained how their prey passed the summer on timbered slopes, rearing their whelps in holes under the rocks, and living on the young of deer and elk, on grouse and rabbits, until cold weather set in. He pictured them descending to the plains to hunt in packs of

fifty or more. Then was the time when a wolfer set his lines of bait and made his profits.

As Wolf talked, Gilkil listened gravely and nodded his head; while, almost all the time, his thoughts were racing to ledges, to holes along the side of a creek, where gold could be "combed" out in heaps.

II

LAME BULL'S band of a hundred lodges, housing a thousand men, women, and children, presented a barbaric yet invigorating picture to the horsemen approaching the village at a lope. Back of the village, and sprawling over fifteen miles of the elevated plateau, stood the Three Buttes. These mountains were half clothed with pitch pine and spruce and rich grass. The vivid green of the timber contrasted sharply with the white capped peaks.

The wolfer had tutored Gilkil as to manners. The lessons consisted largely of:

"Keep your mouth shet. Keep close to me. Don't pay any attention to the squaws. Eat what's set before you. There's lots of dogs, but don't shoot any. Use your cudgel."

Already he had told of the immense herds of elk, black tailed deer, of antelopes and bighorn sheep, that fattened on the grass lands to the very peaks. He had named the cherries and different kinds of berries in describing this as an Indian heaven. Nor did he forget that the heights served as watch towers for discovering buffaloes or enemies.

"I'll take you to the top of this nearest butte. You'll see old Cypress ninety miles to the north. No end of rolling prairie in the northeast and east. A mighty fine view of the Bear's Paw range southeast, and the ranges beyond the Missouri, and the Rockies in the west. But you won't see the rivers, as they're hid in the deep valleys. You'll like it."

"I'll climb up there for just one thing," mumbled Gilkil.

"Gold, or women?" The wolfer grinned broadly.

"Gold! I'd go to hell for that, and for nothing else."

"Not for a friend?"

"Oh, of course. That goes without saying. Say, Wolf, sure these fellers are all right?"

He referred to the band of horsemen suddenly sweeping from the lodges and riding toward them. The wolfer flung up his open hand, palm outward, and resumed conversation. Gilkil heard nothing. He was watching the racing band, now almost upon them. He winced, thinking the two horses and smaller mounts of the Indians were to crash together. But the band split and passed furiously on each side of the white men, and instantly wheeled and encircled them. The leader rode close to the Wolfer's stirrup and shook hands warmly. None of these men, perfect physical specimens, seemed to see Gilkil until the wolfer told the leader:

"Your brother brings a man to help him hunt wolves."

"There is a robe and meat for him. It is good he did not come alone."

Then he caused Gilkil's scalp to prickle by sounding an unearthly yell. His followers did likewise. The Americans' horses broke into a mad gallop, and the furious cavalcade did not halt until close to the lodge of the chief. In a low voice Gilkil muttered—

"Such damned smells!"

"Don't let anyone see you wrinkling up your fussy nose," warned the wolfer as he swung to the ground. "This is the chief."

Lame Bull, followed by several squaws, emerged from the lodge. He seized the wolfer's hand and threw his left arm around the broad shoulders and rubbed his wrinkled, painted cheek against the bearded one, first on one side and then on the other. He took no notice of Gilkil until the wolfer explained:

"A man to help your son hunt wolves. Your son brings gifts."

"Let the white man keep close to my

son, so my young men will not take him for a Crow.

He led the way inside the big lodge, his small eyes glittering in expectation. Outside the curious gathered.

Although eager to learn what the white man had brought him, Lame Bull produced his pipe and smoked with his two guests. This important ceremony out of the way, the squaws spread a new Hudson's Bay blanket and placed in the middle of it a big kettle of elk meat and dried berries cooked together. The chief talked of the season's hunting and fighting, and expressed alarm because of the vast horde of white men overrunning the gold country a hundred miles or more from Benton.

While he talked his gaze wandered to where the wolfer's packs were piled just inside the entrance. He was as eager as a child to have the packs opened, but by no word did he betray his curiosity. Gilkil ate suspiciously. Once he grossly violated red etiquette by breaking in while the chief was speaking, to hoarsely whisper—

"This ain't dog we're eating, is it?"

"No! Shut your trap."

THE WOLFER ate heartily and leisurely. Gilkil stole glances at the scalps decorating the chief's apparel of skins. He would have eaten but little had not the wolfer urged him with a quick frown. At last the white men would eat no more, and Lame Bull said they would walk about the village. The wolfer said he would open his packs before leaving the lodge.

Anticipation fairly burned in the small eyes as the chief watched his white son drag the packs to the center of the lodge. The entrance was filled with the heads of the curious. Playing for a climax the wolfer began with twenty pounds of hard candy for the children of the village. Then followed some gay cloth for the women in the lodges of Lame Bull and two subordinate chiefs. There were two dozen hunting knives to be distributed by the chief. Slowly the wolfer placed the last package on the blanket. Lame Bull held his breath and attempted to stare indifferently away as the white man's fingers fumbled with the fastenings. He could not suppress a grunt of delight as the brace of .44's, Army model, were placed in his lap and quickly supplemented by a large box of ammunition.

The onlookers patted soft tattoos against their lips with their fingers to express their amazement and delight. Lame Bull expressed his love for his son, but gave no words of thanks for the gifts. Thrusting the revolvers into his belt, he spoke to a squaw, who quickly brought a box of rawhide to the blanket. The chief explained:

"This is medicine. A strong wolf medicine. You must see it before the white man does to keep the medicine strong."

"Gilkil, just a bit of red manners. Step outside until I have opened the box. Come back when I call."

Gilkil, wary of the crowd before the lodge, did as directed. The wolfer slowly unfastened the rawhide thongs and opened the box, sank back, and patted his fingers against his open mouth. Pleased as a child, the chief smiled.

"It is medicine," he repeated, "for my son."

The wolfer examined the gift more thoroughly, then replaced it in the box and securely knotted the thongs. He told the chief:

"It will be a long time before my white friend sees this. The medicine must know it belongs to me."

THE NEXT few days were days of feasting, of racing ponies, with the chief promising to become proficient with the revolvers if the ammunition held out. All the while Gilkil was yearning to be gone. When it was time for the wolfers to depart a final feast of the whole village was given by the leading men, and twenty young bucks rode with the white men for half of the thirty odd miles.

Early next morning the partners were back at their cabin and the wolfer was resuming his instructions to Gilkil. These

consisted largely of taking Gilkil over a twenty mile semicircle. Over and over again it was impressed on the beginner that he must learn this route, the start and finish being equidistant from the river, so he could cover it when a blinding storm obscured all landmarks. For himself the wolfer planned a much longer line of bait.

Gilkil hated it, and was scarcely able to conceal his state of mind. He wished the actual work would come. One night the wolfer returned indoors from studying the weather and announced:

"Strong freeze by morning. We'll soon be at work."

Gilkil's accumulated resentment boiled over. For days he had fought to retain control of his tightly strung nerves. It was the wolfer's tone of satisfaction that rushed him into an open complaint. He savagely told his partner:

"I don't understand it at all, Wolf. No *sabe* to it. Here's you, knowing where you can scratch out prime nuggets with your bare hands, and you'd rather stick here in this Godforsaken place, through a rotten winter, poisoning wolves!"

The wolfer laughed aloud; something he seldom did. Gilkil flicked his eyelids rapidly and for a moment forgot his irritation as he said:

"I'd say, if I didn't know better, that some time, somewhere, I've known some one that makes me think of you. You never was out on the Coast?"

"No. If I'd ever seen you I'd remember. You were in Californy sometime, and in rich diggings, from what you tell. If you're so crazy about gold, why didn't you stay there?"

Gilkil frowned, as he said:

"A woman. She spoiled my chances out there."

"Did she act up any better after you fetched her East?"

"She stayed out there. Died."

THE RISING wind sucked down the valley and howled woefully. The wolfer stepped to the doorway, where the big buffalo robe serving as a door bellied in as if some monster were crowding against it. He lifted the robe, and a cold gust blew ashes and sparks from the fireplace.

"You're freezing us out," complained Gilkil.

"The wind fooled me," mumbled the wolfer. "Thought some critter was pressing against the robe. Let's see. You was saying about the woman—"

"I said she died out there; but let's talk about something else."

The wolfer dropped on his blankets.

"I never knew much about women," he confessed slowly, "so we'll talk about them. Then about something else, say, my hidden gold mine."

"The last will make good hearing," eagerly endorsed Gilkil. "I'd stay awake all night to talk about gold—fat nuggets."

"You was in rich diggings. Why didn't you stick after the woman died? She couldn't bother you any after she was dead."

"Well, she did. She set people against me by dying."

"You've been gitting at the whisky," accused the wolfer harshly.

"Good land, no! It does sound funny, but it's easy to explain. You see, Wolf, the woman was a whiner. Homesick for the East. Blamed me for taking her West."

"Homesick. Took on about it. Er-huh?"

"Well, her whining, of course, made some folks think I'd abused her. Then when I happened to be with the boys and she was alone, she pegged out. How'd I know she was mortal sick?"

"Died alone, of course. But you ain't no doctor. And folks blamed you?"

"I said so. She's buried in Lone Mountain Cemetery. Done everything I could. But some folks got to talking rough. My friends told me I'd better cross the Sierra. I did. Kept on going till I struck Indianny."

"Of all I ever heard tell! Blamed you 'cause you was unlucky enough to have your wife get sick and die."

"Not exactly that," Gilkil corrected.

"She wa'n't my wife, but I was taking care of her."

"Well, that beats all creation! No claim on you, yet you took care of her. Still she complained and you was blamed."

"I'm sick of the whole business. That's why I was quick to sell that cameo. It fetched me bad luck," said Gilkil.

"But if it wa'n't for that cameo I'd never took you on, prob'ly," said the wolfer. "And if I hadn't taken you on, you'd never git a crack at my hidden diggings. Now, Gil, I'd say that cameo fetched you luck. Fetched you a woman and will lead you to gold."

"Let it bring me gold and I'll forgive her for driving me from Californy with her whining and homesickness."

The wolfer threw back his head and laughed aloud. Usually his approach to risibles was limited to a cavernous opening of the mouth. The cabin was so small and the laughter was so loud Gilkil cried:

"Quit it, Wolf! Stop it! You're splitting my head open. Just as soon hear a wolf pack howling as to hear you letting out such hoots."

"Not knowing much about women it struck me as funny that you, who knows so much about them, could run into hard luck because of one. Now as to my hidden diggings . . ."

FOR HALF an hour he sketched pictures, and Gilkil's mouth watered as he listened. When Wolf had finished Gilkil drew a deep breath and said:

"Now I can sleep and have pleasant dreams. You've promised. Plenty of gold there, or I wouldn't touch it. Don't go to rob any man. But you say there's more'n you'll ever use. If I can work into bonanza just once—"

"Plenty of gold, partner. Some danger, of course."

"Danger? Injuns are friendly and denned up in their village. I know my line of bait so well I can follow it blindfolded. And we can't freeze, or starve."

"I had wolves in mind."

"But they can't trouble one. A good hoss and guns. Bah!"

"No, no, not from a pack. I was thinking of the danger from a mad wolf getting at you."

Gilkil's brows drew down.

"That's silly," he decided. "Mad wolf hasn't more sense than a mad dog. He'd stand no show of catching me. If he tried it, a hunk of lead would mighty soon cure his madness."

"You don't get what I mean. You don't know wolves, mad ones, like I do," patiently said the wolfer. "It's their slyness that makes them dangerous. When a wolf goes mad he quits the pack. He'll steal into a tent, or hut, soft as a ghost, and bite your foot, or your face. The bite wouldn't amount to shucks if it wasn't for the poison. You wake up in the night and tell yourself, 'Rat, or something, been nipping my toe.' In the morning you find, sure enough, something has nipped a toe. But it don't amount to nothing, and you go about your work. And then—"

He stopped and commenced fussing with his pipe.

"And then? Then what?" prompted Gilkil impatiently.

"Why, then you go mad. Mad like a wolf. I never see but one man who went mad. Never want to see another. He'd twist and howl and bite his own flesh—"

"Shut up, Wolf! See here. We're going to have a different sort of a door. Just a buffalo robe fastened with pegs! I won't stand for that."

The wolfer nodded his shaggy head, then reminded:

"But we haven't any tools. I've always blocked out the wind with a robe. Mighty careless, I s'pose. Mebbe we can fix a contraption of logs. What part of Californy was you in?"

"Oh, on the Feather'n' the Yuba. In dry diggings. Floated round quite a bit. In Frisco last."

"Can't dig gold in Frisco."

"Fine place to blow your dust after you've made a strike." Gilkil's eyes gleamed reminiscently.

"That's where your wife died."

"Woman, not wife," Gilkil corrected.

"No, she wa'n't there. She was at the camp. Picked her time when I was having a toot in the El Dorado. How'd I know she was going to peg out and start the talking? Listen, Wolf, git this straight. I don't like to talk about Californy. Always feel I was driven away along of a woman's whining, and lost my big chance."

"Well, well, if you're that sensitive. But you've got a better chance with me to handle gold than you ever had out there, Gil. But she prob'ly wouldn't complained if you'd been lucky. Some women are like that."

"Dead wrong. In bonanza, or in borrasca, she fussed and whined. Tried to send her back East. Tried everything. No good."

"She didn't want to go home?" prompted the wolfer.

Gilkil shook his head, and explained:

"Way things was it wa'n't very pleasant for her. Now, Wolf, I just don't want to talk about that."

"All right. All right." The wolfer's tone was peevish. "But when two men are cooped up in a place like this, they talk about almost anything to keep from going crazy. I'm just as curious about women as you be about gold. A whiner. Never understood women. Always taking on. I couldn't stand for that."

"I didn't," said Gilkil grimly.

Again the peal of laughter, too loud for the small walls. Again Gilkil came up on an elbow. Before he could speak, his partner was apologetically explaining:

"Always strikes me funny when a man thinks he's finding heaven and wakes up in hell. Well, let's turn in. Dream of the gold you're going to paw over, and forget the woman who fetched you bad luck."

THE MORNING broke cold and clear. The freeze was severe, and the wolfer grunted Lame Bull's hunting song as he prepared for the day's work. Gilkil, out of sorts because the wind had disturbed his sleep, "howling like wolves," worked up a transient enthusiasm by telling himself the sooner the drudgery was over the quicker he would be combing gold with his ten fingers. After they had eaten the wolfer directed:

"You be saddling up. I'm going to bury that stinking robe Lame Bull gave me."

"Sort of wondered why you left that rawhide contraption on top the cabin."

The wolfer laughed silently.

"If I'd kept it in here and the heat got to stirring it up, well, you'd slept outdoors, partner."

Gilkil winced and promptly confessed:

"Not after hearing about mad wolves. And my nose's rather fussy at that."

The wolfer carried the long rawhide box, unopened since leaving Lame Bull's lodge, back under the cliffs and buried it. The horses were saddled when he returned, and Gilkil was eager to be off. The wind was strong and cold when the two gained the plateau. Cuddling his head in his collar, Gilkil cried—

"It'll be rougher before it's softer."

The wolfer nodded and galloped over the frozen scum of snow. Inside of half a mile the wolfer killed a buffalo bull with his Henry rifle. Gilkil was amazed at the man's dexterity in preparing the carcass for the poison. When the wolfer had finished and swung into the saddle his partner grimaced in disgust and said—

"You look like a murderer."

"A butcher," the wolfer corrected. "Your man killer does a neater job. You saw how I doctored that carcass. You'll do the next one." They rode on a few miles and Gilkil took his turn. The wolfer laughed silently. Gilkil frowned at his gruesome arms and said—

"Wolves will smell me instead of the bait."

"Right. But they'll never give chase when their dinner's waiting on the floor of the prairie."

They were following Gilkil's line, and at dusk were back at the cliffs. Descending the crooked path, and washing in the icy water, they hastened to the cabin and kindled a blaze in the crude rock fireplace. The wolfer told his companion—

"What you've been through today is

just August weather to what's coming."

Gilkil, trying to clean his nails, wrinkled his nose in disgust. His partner was amused, and he asked—

"Finicky about a little blood?"

"You can't expect me to like it," grumbled Gilkil.

"But it's clean blood. You can't make bread without getting dough on your hands. You'll get used to it."

The wind was making a weird sound in the valley. The robe filling the doorway bellied in and sucked out. Gilkil's brows contracted as he watched the robe work back and forth. Finally he cried:

"Damn that robe! Keeps acting as if some one, or something, was trying to git in."

"When you eat, throw the first bit of meat over your shoulder to feed the ghosts; then they won't bother you," said the wolfer.

"Ghosts? What do you mean? Or just some of your funning?"

The wolfer shrugged his broad shoulders and replied:

"I don't know if I'm joking, or funning. Injuns do that— Feed the ghosts. Sometimes I can't tell where I leave off being white and begin to think red."

"But I don't take no stock in ghosts," said Gilkil sharply. "I was thinking about mad wolves. That doorway's got to be plugged up."

"No boards, nor box stuff to use," mused the wolfer. "Mebbe we can fix it someway."

"We'll freeze to death when it gits colder."

"Cold air don't hurt a body," assured the wolfer. "You'll git used to it. One thing you never had to fret about in Californy—cold weather."

"Nor mad wolves," Gilkil added.

THE WOLFER kneeled before the fire, feeding fuel to make a bed of coals for cooking, and as he built up the blaze he said:

"Never could understand how a mad thing, beast or human, can use his cunning after he's lost his reason. Now what makes a mad wolf want to sneak into a cabin, or tent, and bite a man? He ain't hungry. Yet he'll slip in, sly's a weasel. He don't rush in and chaw whatever he comes to, but comes like a shadder, or a ghost. The harm he does wouldn't amount to shucks if it wa'n't for the poison he leaves behind. But even a teeny scratch is more deadly then to have your back half ripped off by a grizzly. And the suffering that can enter through the teeniest scratch! Good land! I could tell you more stories—"

"For God's sake, don't!" broke in Gilkil. "Talk about gold."

"Gold to me is just another kind of a rock."

"It'll buy all a man can want," shrilly insisted Gilkil.

"Didn't for me. I can hoe out a barrel of it." He paused at Gilkil's half smothered cry. "Yes, a barrel. You think you'd be happy with a barrel of gold. But don't call it gold. Call it all the food and terbaccer and finnified clothes and travel and whisky you could ever want."

"And women!" added Gilkil, his eyes blazing. "High and mighty, highty-tighty women, who'd never look at you poor, but who will clean your boots if you throw gold in their laps!"

"All right. Women. But what if you owned all the women in the world? And why do you want highty-tighty women to clean your boots?"

"Ain't it some fun to see a proud, grand'n' mighty one bow her head? Ain't it fun to see the high'n' mighty become meek'n' meeching?"

The wolfer turned it over in his mind while preparing the coffee. Then he reminded Gilkil:

"But I don't know much about women. Them you speak of, would be bowing their heads to the gold, not to you."

"I don't give a damn what they bow to, so long as they knuckle under."

The sudden peal of wild laughter gave Gilkil a start. The wolfer quickly subsided, and said:

"You're a funny cuss. You'll earn your gold just by keeping me company."

Mollified, yet a bit resentful, Gilkil complained:

"You make me jump with that wild hoot of yours. Must sound like the howling of a mad wolf."

"Now, Gilly, a mad wolf don't go round, howling his crazy head off. That's why he's dangerous. Soft footed as a ghost. And sly! Show me the slyest thing you can think of, and it'll be clumsy alongside a mad wolf."

"Don't talk about wolves. Mad ones."

"All right," patiently said the wolfer. "We was talking about women. How much happiness have women fetched you? I'm plumb ignorant, you understand, Gilly. Sometime I may want to go back to the States and cut a shine. I'd like to learn things. Do women who bow before gold make you the happiest?"

"I don't know." The tone was sullen. "The kind that don't help you any is the kind that fall in love. They are a great nuisance."

"Well, good land!" muttered the wolfer, staring, wide eyed, at his partner. "I can't tell what you mean. You don't believe in love?"

"Not the soft, mushy kind. Your red friends don't either. That old buck we visited has a lodge full of squaws. He barks, and they hyper. He has the right notion."

"It's their custom. Lame Bull's happy. His squaws are happy. But it's the red way. There was old Solomon. Had a thousand wives. Learned it when a younker. If I remember my book reading he wa'n't over happy. Look at it this way. What would you do if you got soft headed 'n' soft-hearted about a woman who'd knuckled to your gold, and you lost your pile, and she made fun of you?"

"I'd kill her!" hoarsely declared Gilkil; then meeting his partner's staring eyes he hastily added, "Of course, I don't mean that, Wolf. It would be my hard luck. Let's talk about something else."

"All right. Tell me about the Californy diggings. Did you strike it rich?"

GILFIL made a face at disagreeable memories, and mournfully confessed:

"I could have made a million if I hadn't left a case knife at the foot of a ledge; or if I'd had a scrap of paper and a pencil with me one Sunday morning. It was above Dog Town, and only half a mile from our cabin."

"How many in your party?"

"Alone—that is, the woman was with me— Well, I'd passed that spot a hundred times. This Sunday I was making for Dog Town for a bit of fun. Happened to notice what looked like signs in the gulch wall. Stopped and scratched with my case knife that I used on crevices. Inside of two minutes I had ten dollars' worth of coarse gold. But I didn't have any paper or pencil, and couldn't put up a notice, showing size and direction of my claim. Being Sunday, and every one flocking to town, I left the case knife by the ledge and went on. I run my ten dollars in coarse gold up to two hundred at monte. Then lost it and what loose money I had, besides. When I went back to the cabin late that afternoon two fellers was in that gulch and had it posted. Wolf, that gulch paid a million, folks told me afterwards. I never got a smell. Talk about rotten luck!"

The wolfer started to laugh, but stopped to say:

"And talk about costly monte games! Why, Gil, you gambled away a million one Sunday afternoon! Or, put it this way. You once owned a million dollar case knife! Good land! Why didn't you turn back to your cabin and write out your notice?"

"Just what I'd done. I'd done that very thing. But there was my woman. She'd got on my nerves. We'd had a row. I don't mind when a woman rips and tears. But when they just sit still 'n' cry—oh, I can't stand that."

The wild laughter could no longer be suppressed. It roared and howled above the wind. When he could speak, the wolfer's voice was low and unsteady.

"You've given me a new thought, Gil.

Besides the million dollar game and the million dollar knife you had a million dollar row with a million dollar woman, who had million dollar nerves and busted into a million dollar crying spell." Then the wild laughter again. He concluded by saying, "How she must 'a' combed you when she found you'd kicked away a fortune!"

"Well, she didn't," growled Gilkil, "and I don't like that hyena laugh of yours. She didn't. She'd learned better than to try any of them games. She wouldn't done any combing, anyway. She didn't seem to care about gold. Queer that way."

The wolfer nodded and placed two big frying pans on the coals, and said:

"You'll be the second white man to see my gold. I'm the first. We can eat in a few minutes."

"Why not have a drink of our whisky. Just to cel'brate the first line of bait?"

"No, Gil. You'd have a head in the morning; for you'd want more'n one drink. Time enough for a spree after the season's ended, or—but that wouldn't be a spree."

"Or what?"

"I was going to say after one of us happens to git bit by a mad wolf."

"Will whisky cure a man?"

"No, no. Don't believe he could feel it, but I never see it tried. But if it did work a man might miss lots of suffering."

III

THERE came the first thaw. The two men worked early and late, skinning a hundred wolves along Gilkil's line of bait. Gilkil soon proved himself to be an adept, and the thaw held on long enough to permit the cleaning up of the second and longer line. They enjoyed a great advantage over other wolfers; there was no red peril to guard against. The thaw ended just as the skinning was completed, and the scattered wolf carcasses served as new bait, supplemented by an aged bull.

By this time Gilkil was as hairy and disheveled as his partner. He was less loquacious and given to moody meditations after the day's work was finished. He could run his line alone. He bore himself as one sullenly waiting to be released. The wolfer had not announced how the profits would be split. One evening Gilkil inquired as to what would be his share.

"Your share will be a fair one, Gilly. You'll git all you deserve," the wolfer assured.

"I don't care what it is, Wolf. Asked just for the sake of talking. Oh, hell, these stinking hides! All I can think of, Wolf, is that gold. Don't seem as if I could rest natural till I've had my hooks in it."

A few nights later the wolfer sat and stared at the fire a long time. Ordinarily he essayed to prompt a flow of reminiscences from his partner. At last Gilkil took notice of his abstractions and came out of his sullenness to querulously demand:

"Why don't you say something? My nerves are all out of joint."

"I was thinking," mumbled the wolfer without removing his pipe and without shifting his brooding gaze, "you ain't been much of a hand to talk, yourself, I was thinking."

"Don't think; talk," rapped out Gilkli.

"Yes. That's it. The loneliness is gnawing too deep into your nerves. Got me that way at first; that and other things. I don't want you going mad and biting like a wolf."

"What you driving at now?"

"I'm opining to stop your thinking about lonesomeness so much," slowly replied the wolfer; and he took the pipe from his mouth and turned to meet his partner's gaze. "Look here. I'd planned to wait till the season was about ended, but I won't wait that long. After the next clean-up I'll take you to my cache of gold. Diggings are too far away. Can't go there till warm weather. But I can show you rich samples; quarts of nuggets."

"Quarts of nuggets!" It was a new

Gilkil towering above the wolfer. "Near here?"

"Not so awful far. That's as much as I'll tell now."

"Why haven't you shown me before, Wolf?"

"You'd be thinking only of gold and the number of women you could buy. You wouldn't be worth a hoot on a bait line. You'd just keep chawing over in your mind—gold, gold. You'd never think of the gold on the back of a wolf."

"Now you've changed your mind about waiting?"

"Yes. You need perking up. After the next thaw; after we've fetched in the next lot of pelts."

This left Gilkil feverish with excitement. He did not have to fight his impatience long, however. The thaw came over night, brought by the warm chinook. Gilkil worked his line alone; worked like one driven by demons. He scarcely paused to rest, or eat, until the skins were stacked to freeze on top of and behind the cabin. The night which marked the end of the second harvesting he stood in the middle of the small room, his head bowed to escape the slanting roof, and demanded—

"Now!"

"Yes, Gil, in the morning. We ought to be baiting up, but a wild man ain't any good. We'll lose only a bit of the day. Start early and git back soon."

"Gawd! I'll sit up all night. I can't sleep."

"Foolishness. Gold will be as common to you as a woman. You never set up all night on account of a woman, I'll bet."

Gilkil laughed bitterly, and confessed—

"Once, but I was young and much of a fool."

NEVERTHELESS, Gilkil did sleep that night, and was sleeping soundly when the wolfer turned out and raked ashes from the coals and set about preparing the breakfast. He did not want to waste time eating. Swallowing a dipper of coffee and grabbing some bacon, he started to get the horses.

"We're walking; come back," the wolfer called after him.

Gilkil was amazed that the cache should be that close to the cabin. He felt he had been deceived, and despite his lust to be handling the treasure he was embittered by what he considered to be a deception. He barely hinted as much, but the wolfer understood, and genially said:

"If you'd known how close it was, you wouldn't be worth a cuss. Well, we'll start—and highty-tighty women will bow down to it—a piece of yaller ore!"

He talked none as he led the way through the scattered cottonwoods for a mile up the valley. His mood was almost somber as he turned to the base of the cliffs. Gilkil now was like one joyously intoxicated. He sang snatches of old songs. The singing aroused the wolfer enough for him to ask over his shoulder—

"Where'd you learn that stuff?"

"Singing school, down in Indianny. Twenty years ago."

"Er-huh? Sort of pretty, but lonesome like."

Gilkil trembled violently as his partner halted at the cliff and quietly announced—

"We've come to it."

Gilkil panted heavily, like an exhausted runner. The wolfer loosened the earth with his knife, then stepped back and invited:

"Dig. Comb it out with your fingers."

Gilkil dropped on his knees, and like a famished wolf after a rabbit began pawing out the dirt. He yelled hoarsely on coming to the first of the nuggets. Then he was pawing dirt and more nuggets against his knees. When he paused, the sweat was streaming down his face. He glanced wildly at the wolfer and gasped:

"My Gawd, man! You've got a fortune in this hole alone!"

"I've kept my promise. Take what you've dug out and cover the rest with dirt. Time to be at work."

He filled his hat and stuffed his pockets full. Then he stared wolfishly as his partner carelessly kicked the loose earth over the hole. He reluctantly followed

the wolfer down the valley, but walked slowly because of his precious hat and bulging pockets. The wolfer glanced back impatiently, then laughed and said—

"You walk like an old man who's mortal feeble."

"Don't want to jostle any out," muttered Gilkil, his staring eyes watching the brimming hat held in both hands before him.

Carelessly the wolfer remarked—

"I'm hoping you'll be better company from now on."

"Must be a big fortune back in that hole right now, Wolf."

Without turning the wolfer replied:

"Oh, from seventy to ninety thousand. Just guessing in a rough way."

"Land of glory! And you pelting poisoned wolves! Dangerous, you say, going to your diggings?"

"A trifle. Outside of Lame Bull's range. Yes, I'll say mighty dangerous. One way or t'other; you come back or you don't."

"When you was there you oughter packed back twice as much!"

"What I've needed is work. No one can find the place. It'll wait for me. But I've needed work. Your company's done a heap of good. Learned lots of new things. About women, in particular. Now we'll look over the short line and call it day."

"But just what chance would a man run in making your diggings?"

"Ten to one. Fifty to one. I don't know. Of course he'd have to know where they was first. Injuns would git him, or they wouldn't. If he loaded pack animals and had to come slow, they'd git him."

THEY ran the short line and were back at dark. Gilkil went inside to replenish the fire while his partner remained to take care of the skins they had brought back. Before entering the cabin the wolfer stood at the robe and gently lifted a flap. He smiled grimly and softly retreated and commenced whistling. His entrance was advertised ahead. Once inside he ceased whistling and sniffed the air. Then he was gently rebuking Gilkil—

"You've been trifling with the whisky."

"Had to, Wolf. Nerves jumping that bad."

"No harm, if it don't start you on a drunk."

"Drunk?" repeated Gilkil; and he laughed boisterously. "Why, in the morning you'll never know I had a drink."

The wolfer opened his mouth in one of his silent laughs. Gilkil was deliriously exultant as he attempted to help with the supper. He sang. He asked many questions about the secret diggings and did not wait for an answer. As they were eating, the wolfer said—

"If one drink will make a man cut up and act so all fired happy, I'm glad you took it."

"Just had to have it. But the morning will find me sober enough. I'll bet there's an even hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold in that hole this very minute."

"Prob'ly. Just guessing in a rough way."

After the meal was finished and their pipes were lighted Gilkil's nervousness increased instead of diminishing. His partner noticed his condition and abruptly decided—

"You might as well be drunk as a crazy jumping jack!"

With that he picked up the jug and poured half a pint into a tin basin and extended it to his partner and invited—

"Drink."

For a few moments Gilkil did not accept the thing he so ardently had desired. Then he grabbed the dish and swallowed the fiery portion without taking it from his lips. Soon he quieted down and pulled off his boots. The wolfer refilled his pipe and smoked. Gilkil stretched out on his blankets. Finishing the pipe, the wolfer filled it for the third time. Gilkil suddenly asked—

"Ain't you smoked enough?"

"Not yet. Pretty soon. Got some thinking I must finish."

WOLF was still smoking when Gilkil fell asleep. Gilkil still slept when, near dawn, the wolfer rose and noiselessly raked back the ashes and placed dry fuel on the coals, a stick at a time. Then the wolfer stood beside the sleeper and slipped a hand under the blankets at the head of the pallet. As he glided to the swaying robe and geltly pulled it one side his mouth was open in a silent laugh.

Hurrying up the valley a short distance, he unearthed the rawhide box Lame Bull had given him. Near the camp he opened this and took out the skin of a big white wolf. The skin included the entire scalp of the beast with the two jaws of grinning teeth. Beads of green glass served as eyes. After peering through the curtain, the wolfer threw the hide over his tall figure and dropped on all fours. The open jaws jutted from his forehead.

Crawling by the hanging robe, Wolf halted at the foot of the couch, where Gilkil's bare foot and ankle was exposed. Gently clamping the jaws about the foot he reached forward a hand and struck down smartly on the nose of the grim figurehead.

Thus aroused from sleep Gilkil muttered an oath, then was screaming like a madman as he beheld the head of an enormous white wolf receding by the robe, the eyes two green emeralds of malevolence. He reached under the blankets for his gun, and could not find it. Outside came the quick *bang-bang* of a Colt; and the next moment the wolfer was in the room, blowing the smoke from the long barrel.

"The wolf! The mad wolf! Did you see it?" yelled Gilkil.

"Shot him. Don't fret. You're—"

The wolfer did not finish. He was staring at Gilkil's left leg. He dropped beside the couch and examined the limb. Gilkil sat up and bent forward. Stark terror filled his eyes as he beheld it, one tiny abrasion, one drop of blood. The wolfer squatted on his heels and stared at the man.

"Why don't you speak? Why don't you do something?" raved Gilkil.

The wolfer rose to his feet and slowly announced—

"Gilkil, there is no cure for the bite of a mad wolf."

"Think I'm going to suffer like that? Like what you've told about? Why should I suffer like that?"

"Joe Gilkil, I don't know unless it's along of the poor dead woman you left in Californy."

"I won't die! What's the matter with you? Damn you! What do you mean about that woman?" And again he thrust his hand under the bedding.

"You're gun's gone. I saw you hide it. You decided to kill me and take what I have in my cache."

"What's anything got to do with this? I've been bitten by a mad wolf!"

"And there's no cure. But you've had what you wanted. Women! Gold! Think of the woman who got on your nerves. Did no man from Indianny never run across you and give you my message? That I'd kill you like a mad wolf, sometime?"

"Never Rance Peters?" whispered Gilkil. Then he remembered his wounded leg and was yelling, "Ghost, or devil! I won't die from madness."

"If you'd been good to her after stealing her. If I'd found she'd been happy—but you killed her. It would been kinder if you'd shot her. You took her to die, heart broken, among strangers."

Then the terrible laugh again, and had Gilkil not been submerged in horror he he would have realized how close to the edge of life he had stood each time he heard that raucous outburst.

"I told you'd split fair. Give what you deserved. I promised gold. It shall be buried with you. Had you been brokenhearted over the girl's death . . . Had you loved her . . ."

GILKIL floundered about on the bed, but seemed to be pinned down. The wolfer inexorably went on:

"For two seasons I've waited for you to come up the river. Last spring a man from home told me you were back. Alone.

He said you would come by boat to Benton, as you was 'fraid to cross the plains. For two seasons I've watched the boats. Then you came, false friend, woman stealer, and worst of all, woman abuser. Damn you! You even wore the poor girl's pin. And had you said you'd never part with it, that it belonged to some one you loved, some one who had gone away and left you—But *you were willing to sell it.* Gilkil, you killed yourself that day on the Fort Benton levee when you sold me the pin. Now die a mad wolf!"

He turned away and stared down at the fire, unheeding the mad screams that filled the cabins. When exhaustion silenced Gilkil for a bit the wolfer produced the gun he had taken from the bed and removed all but one cartridge. Gilkil watched him. The wolfer stepped to the couch and said slowly:

"I'll show you more mercy than you showed my poor wife. One shot in this gun. I'm giving it to you. Then I'm going outside. You can use it on me, you can't miss. Or—" Without bothering to complete the sentence he dropped the gun on the bed and slowly went to and by the robe.

Red voices were calling him. Ponies were scrambling down the twisted path. Lame Bull was in the lead. Galloping up to the wolfer he threw himself to the ground and said:

"Your red father comes to sit in your lodge. What does your father see in your face?"

"My father's wolf medicine is very strong. It makes a man kill himself. The man, a long time ago, stole my woman. He was not good to her. The wolf medicine came in the night and bit him like this."

Wolf gently pinched the wrist of the chief between his thumb and finger. Then he pointed to the rawhide box with the jaws and baleful eyes of the white wolf hanging out. He pointed toward the cabin. The muffled report of a heavy gun shattered the silence. All but the chief and the wolfer raced forward to enter the cabin.

When they emerged they were patting their open hands against their lips to express their great amazement. The wolfer seized the chief by the arm and said:

"All you find in there belongs to you, except some gold in the white man's pockets. Hide the gold with the white man in the ground. I go to find and bring back a woman, who died because she was so far from home. After another winter watch for me from the Sweet Grass Hills."

A story of Alaska, in which the wealth-hunger of three men is subjected to

The GOLD TEST

By DEX VOLNEY

ED WEST'S black shake cabin squatted in the middle of an undulating plain of white snow that extended from the frozen Bering Sea to the ragged mountains of the Alaskan Peninsula where Alai Volcano smoked and jetted steam from year to year.

Inside the shack, which was bare and squalid, Ed West stood before a rude table covered with checkered brown oilcloth. On it lay the biggest bunch of money Ed had ever seen. He stood and stared at it stupidly. A fifty thousand dollar smear of glinting gold and crinkly banknotes, with not so much as a solitary piece of silver to cheapen its green and yellow glory.

West's gaunt left hand convulsively grasped an empty canvas sack of the sort used by banks for moving coin about. His right arm was slightly flexed at the elbow; his fingers half curled toward the money on the table.

Ed West was tall and thin, not over thirty, but with heavy lines in his face—a face that looked as if it had once been frank and boyish enough—and was still honest. His red mackinaw was faded and a little frayed; in one of his brown sealskin mukluks was a patched rip. His gray eyes were now wide open and bright under his narrow dark brown brows, as he stared at the mass of currency on the pine table.

He took half a step forward, his right arm bending upward still more as he reached out with his hand and exclaimed—

"Hal Sturms had ought to lose it anyway, damn him!"

ED WEST meant just what he said. The money belonged to the Alaska Three Metals Mining Company, which had furnished it to the portly and gentlemanly young Sturms to be used as "bait". That was what Sturms had called it. Hal Sturms was buying up mines for the company. He was buying them up for almost nothing through the merciless application of plenty of cunning and up to date psychology.

Indeed, Sturms, whose full red lips had a slightly sneering twirl at the left corner, had learned a lot since he and the gawky Ed West had been schoolboy friends in Pennsylvania. He seemed to have become able to do a good many things, but he was extra good at getting mines and claims away from prospectors and poverty stricken miners.

West had gone with him the day before and watched him work old Louis Hermann, owner of a fine ledge of quartz in Silver Valley, over under the shadow of Alai Volcano.

"That ledge 'ud be cheap at twenty-five thousand dollars, an' you know it, mister," bluntly said old Hermann, who had never owned more than two shirts at one time in all his slaving life, but who knew what he was talking about when it came to quartz. "That's th' best I kin do."

Hal Sturms, in a fine dark blue suit of expensive imported cloth, smiled tolerantly and tapped old Hermann's bent shoulder lightly with an extended white finger. He lightly shook his head.

"Not these days, it isn't. The demand for gold's declining. The jewelers are going into platinum—people are getting too rich for gold. And since the metal is being taken out of active circulation as currency, the banks are cluttered with it. They are beginning to hate the sight of it—"

The muscles of Hermann's leathery lips sagged a trifle; but his old brown eyes were hard and steady as he looked at the buyer.

"You mean to say that people ain't going to want gold—after me spendin' thirty years gettin' on to a stringer with somethin' in it. Well, why're you buyin' claims, then, mister?"

Hal Sturms laughed easily. The twist in his red lips tightened a little.

"I didn't say gold's valueless, did I? I'm only telling you it's not worth what it once was. Furthermore, your claim's in a bad location—expensive to develop. Anybody can see that. It'll take a mile long piece of steel pipe to bring water from the springs on Alai Volcano . . ."

FOR HALF an hour Hal Sturms talked in this strain. Old Louis Hermann was obdurate.

"I know that claim's worth nothin' less'n twenty-five thousand, because there's four times that much ore right in plain sight. You could see it, if you'd come in th' summer, 'stead of th' middle of th' winter, when it's all under snow. I'm goin' to hold to my price. There's all I got to show for all my life spent in this country."

Hal Sturms remained imperturbable. From his canvas sack he took out a roll of crisp hundred dollar bills and a handful of twenty dollar gold pieces. He spread the lot expertly on the table. He knew just how to do it, so that it looked like a very fortune—though it was no more than twenty-five hundred dollars.

"There's what we can give you, Mr. Hermann," quietly. "I'm not trying to skin you. Twenty-five hundred dollars is all any company can gamble on a proposition of this kind these days. Believe me, there are hundreds of claims going begging that are just as good as yours."

"I—" began Louis Hermann doggedly.

But then Hal Sturms, noticing that the cabin was gloomy and poorly lighted, got out a cigar and struck a match which he carelessly held over the gold coins so that they glinted alluringly. The old man seemed to notice them for the first time. His pale blue eyes involuntarily widened a little and glistened eagerly. His frame was aging and none too strong under his ill fitting macaroon colored coat and brown corduroys. His hands were worn

and skinny, while his temples were hidden in a fringe of graying hair.

Hal Sturms regarded the old miner intently. Then he said confidently:

"Here it's midwinter and you're buried under masses of Alaskan snow. You can't do anything with your claim till summer—and nothing then but wait for another buyer. You can't work your quartz yourself, without money and machinery. I'm from the biggest gold mining company there is. Nobody will beat our offer. I'm sorry for you, but what's the use of fighting against things when you can't change 'em. I'd like to give you more, but I can't. I'd lose my job. I've risked five hundred more than I ought to. With twenty-five hundred you can get outside and take it easy while you're looking around for a light job that you can do—night watchman, or something. Better take this."

The mine buyer's full red lips barely hid a smirk. Then with a lavish yet cruel smile, he extended a white plump hand and with a diamond ringed finger again prodded the old man's stooped shoulder.

"You're getting old, Hermann. Pain and stiffness is creeping into your bones; the cold hits you like a club. How many starving old prospectors do you know? A dozen, at least. What are you going to do? I'm giving you five minutes to make up your mind!"

Sturms pulled out a thin watch and glanced at it. He again lighted his cigar, allowing the match to flame as long as possible over the table sprinkled with notes and gold pieces.

Old Louis Hermann's rheumy eyes glistened still more anxiously. His long thin fingers curled slowly over the leathery thumbs; his cheek muscles began an uncontrollable quivering. Suddenly he jerked one shoulder sharply, and a stifled groan burst from his cracked lips.

He looked unsteadily at Hal Sturms.

"What you say 'bout gettin' old an' th' pains is true," he said. "I fell down a shaft onc't and my shoulder gets some bad twinges every January. Guess I'll take your offer, mister."

"THAT was too easy," said Hal Sturms with a chuckle to Ed West, as they traveled back to the latter's cabin a little later behind a long team of powerful gray huskies. "That ledge is worth thirty thousand if it's worth a cent. Believe me, I saw it last summer, when the snow was off the ground. The old gooney was in bad shape or he wouldn't have caved in so quick as all that. Did you see his eyes get damp and his old hidey face work and twist? You'd think somebody was pulling his toenails out with pincers! Ha-ha—an' I'd only started on him!"

A silence followed, disturbed only by the steely sound of the sledge runners.

"You've changed a lot since we went to school together back East, Hal," said Ed West stiffly.

"I should hope so!" exclaimed Sturms, with another chuckle. "Sure was a green kid those days—honest and all that old fashioned bunk. And I believe you're the same gawk you always were, working yourself thin and gray like that old codger we just left, because you're so darned honest. I've made three thousand dollars today without a turn of the hand, just by telling a few good stiff lies."

THAT was what Hal Sturms had said. Ed West felt his blood grow hot at the thought of Sturms' smirking and boasting of his browbeating old Louis Hermann. West, like every prospector, had always hated mine buyers of this type; and then unexpectedly Hal Sturms, his boyhood friend, had appeared in the Katmai region, and on just that errand—the buying of mines for as nearly nothing as possible. Almost before he knew what he was doing West had impulsively invited his friend to share his cabin till he left that part of the country. And Sturms had come and brought along this fifty thousand dollar fortune.

That very morning Sturms had driven away behind a long string of gray dogs to look into the shaft of another lonely, dreaming old hermit at Port Heidon, and to prepare for his snaring, if the quartz in sight looked worth the effort. Not being

ready to buy, he had left this pile of currency behind with West, fearing a chance of meeting some of the desperate and starving codfishermen turned pirates and thieves all along the Alaskan Peninsula since the codfish markets had been ruined by Japanese competition.

A cold gust of north wind set chill drafts eddying through the squalid shack. The sagging door creaked painfully on its leather hinges, and a flurry of snow whirled in underneath it. The place was dark and cold.

West shivered and bent a little closer toward the table with the money piled upon it. His half doubled arm raised, his work worn hand moved forward, closed over some of the round yellow gold pieces. Here was his chance to get away from this cold, uninhabited north country in which he had toiled fruitlessly so many years. This was no quartz, needing buyers or machinery, but the minted, clinking coin, rich and yellow, flashing spread eagles.

Ed West remained leaning over the table for long painful minutes. His conscience was on the field in all its strength. "Thief! Thief!" it cried ceaselessly. He tried to silence it with the thought that it was not wrong to rob a ruthless mine buyer such as Hal Sturms. But his conscience asserted that it was criminal to steal at any time and pure depravity to steal from a boyhood friend. Ed West was indeed a gawk—too darned honest.

From hungrily gazing at the money and grasping the twenty dollar pieces he took to getting the whole pile hurriedly out of sight. He swept it back into the canvas sack and lashed it with a cord. He had spread it out in the first place to see what fifty thousand dollars looked like.

"Hal Sturms'll have to go down to Port Moller an' live, though," he muttered. "I can't stand another go like that."

HOLDING the gray sack of currency in his hand, he turned to put it back in its hiding place under the rude fox fur littered bunk at the end of the shack. Again a cold blast of wind streamed in through the door, which was now jerked wide open. Ed West whirled around fairly into the muzzle of a six-shooter thrust steadily into his face.

Back of that gun glowed the two evil reddish eyes of a stranger. The man stood in the doorway, a large heavily built fellow in a greasy drill parka, with a face half masked by the yellow stubble of a beard that had not felt a razor for some time and looked anything but clean. His ragged marten skin cap fitted tightly over his uncut yellow hair.

"You was about to make a break there, wasn't you, chechako?" He eyed the lanky prospector with a hard and curious smile. "I been watchin' you through th' window—was bettin' you'd get cold feet an' back down. You bakin' powder boys ain't got th' gizzards. Set that money back there!" he commanded, in a whistling voice, pointing with his gun barrel from the sack in West's hand to the table. "Easy there—"

The muscles in Ed West's arms had grown taut, and now suddenly he swung forward with the sack of currency and hurled it into the face of the intruder. The latter's gun spat fire with a hot red flash like a stabbing finger of flame; the bullet ripped through the shake wall behind West. The prospector plunged in recklessly. He was in time to grasp the other's weapon as a second shot roared out in the shack. The money fell to the floor and was trampled under foot. Panting, the two men wrestled for the gun. Sweating fingers clawed at one another and at the trigger of the weapon. There was a third report. West felt a bladelike streak of flame rake past his left side.

The two men swayed in each other's arms. West got his finger inside the trigger guard of his attacker's six-shooter and he worked the trigger furiously, emptying the gun in three more crashing shots. Then the hammer clicked on empty shells.

With a whistling curse, the stranger wrenched the gun away from West, who unwarily let it go. The intruder balanced

it in his hand, got hold of the barrel and swung the butt against West's head. West saw a flash of stars and reeled to the floor.

When his sight cleared he found himself sitting on the chilly black boards and propped against the wall, while the intruder sat at the table peering into the sack, which had been opened. He looked down at West.

"No more of that funny business, young fellow," he said menacingly, laying his hand on his reloaded weapon which he had put on the table.

Beside the six-shooter was West's own black automatic which the stranger had evidently found among the prospector's belongings. He remained silently watching while West rubbed a bleeding bruise on the left side of his head and got a little shakily to his feet. Then he spoke again:

"I got charge of th' shack just now, an' 'fore we get tangled up in any more trouble, you might just start bundlin' up a couple of weeks' grub an' get ready to mush. You an' me is goin' to hit th' trail—" He paused, as West stopped feeling of his injured head and stared with slightly opening mouth at the other. "Come on, now—" surlily—"shake a leg before I spike you in your tracks with a string of bullets."

West dazedly got out a grimy sack and began filling it with bacon, flour, coffee, prunes and a few other articles. When he finished, he found that the stranger had gotten up and moved. He was now sitting over on the edge of West's bunk, with his gun still leveled in his broad hairy backed hand, and with the sack of cash lying beside him.

"Now you set down an' write a little letter to yer friend—this damn' slick cuss, Sturms. Got writin' paper an' pen or pencil—yep, there it is. All right, square yerself to th' table. I'll tell ya what to write, an' you write it."

Of course West wrote. It is certain that no man with the cold barrel of a .44 Colt looking him in the face would resist. For that matter, one could easily explain any sort of letter one might have to write under the drop of a yawning six-gun. So, at the stranger's dictation, Ed West wrote:

Deer Friend Hal,

I've tooken the money. Im sorry but I bin workin too long for nothin an I'm going to have a hot ole time now after I lite out from here. I wisht it were ennybody else but you, but there aint no help for it. So long.

—ED WEST

The stranger ordered West to the other end of the cabin, then he arose, walked heavily to the table and nodded at the letter.

"That's all right." A sinister whistling sound came into the outlaw's voice again. "Now bundle up your beddin' an' clothes. Pack up like you was movin' fer keeps, 'cause that's what yer doin'. You ain't never comin' back."

A FEW minutes later the packing up had been finished. The stranger walked about pulling things down from the walls, rooting into boxes of dry stores and generally creating in the shack an appearance of deliberate abandonment.

"All right," went on the intruder to the dazed and speechless prospector, "out to th' dogs, an' harness 'em up to your sledge."

The two men went outside. The stranger carried the sack of money and the bedding, while the other man lugged the rest. Under a lean-to of shakes built against the cabin lurked West's dogs. They looked at the outlaw with a slight upraising of their short gray ears as their owner quietly harnessed them to the long narrow sledge.

"You're a codfisher from th' Shumagin Islands, ain't you?" queried West heavily as he worked.

"You hit me right first time, chechako," returned the other, with a harsh laugh. "I got froze out of hand lining cod by th' little rice eatin' Japs, an' I'm takin' mine anyway I can get it. Hustle up there; it's cold standin' here waitin'."

It was indeed cold. The white blanket of snow lay immovably over the immensity of the Alaskan Peninsula, hiding under

its frozen mantle the vast swamps that swarmed with mosquitoes and bears during the summer months. It was a gloomy region, desolate, uninhabited; nothing to lure a man but the hunger for gold.

The prospector sullenly trailed his dogs out into line.

"Say, what d'ye aim to do with me?" he demanded bluntly, as under the other's direction he loaded the sledge with the goods from the shack. "Looks t' me as if fer a fellow that's got th' drop like you have, you're actin' mighty ugly."

"Yes, an' I'm feelin' mighty ugly, too," returned the codfisher. "You get on th' sledge an' ride. I'll drive from behind, where I can keep my eyes on you."

Ed West had to get on his sledge and see himself driven off behind his own team by the stranger. The outlaw headed the dogs on to a trail to the southwest, toward the upthrust white shoulders of the peninsular mountains that jutted like gigantic sawteeth into the grayness of the sky.

After traveling several hours in absolute silence the codfisher called a halt to eat.

"I hope you know where you're goin'," said West glumly during the stop. "I'd be pleased to be told a little somethin' about it."

The outlaw looked up from the tin can of beans he had cut open and was eating, and glowered at West with his reddish eyes.

"Hell of a lot it'd help, if I told you, wouldn't it?"

"I ain't sayin' it would—" persistently —"but I'm bein' carried off like a kidnaped baby, an' I figger I got some right to know where I'm bein' took to—"

The outlaw grinned, threw away the emptied can and wiped the yellow stubble that covered his lips.

"Just keep cool, West. An', say, my name's Johnson—Dory Johnson, they used to call me. Call me that, so I'll know you ain't talkin' to yourself."

The codfisher got out tobacco from under his greasy parka and made a cigaret, meanwhile holding on to his heavy six-shooter expertly with his left hand. His yellow brows were drawn down with curious and studious interest as he watched West.

"YOU MAKE me sick, West," he said suddenly as he puffed on his cigaret and looked at his prisoner. "Don't you see we got to work this thing together?"

The prospector's blue eyes widened, then wrinkles formed on his forehead.

"Got to work together?" he echoed.

Johnson nodded.

"That's right. Surprisin', ain't it?"

Ed West glanced yearningly at his own big black automatic pistol which lay, emptied of cartridges, among the articles on the sledge.

"You can talk big, Johnson—" he began, then broke off.

The other grinned again.

"I know what you're thinkin', West. You're goin' to raise th' wind, onc't you git loose. Well, don't forgit—if you should git away—that there's fifty thousand dollars missin', after it was left in th' hands of a poor digger like you—an' with nobody to watch you, you just took it an' made off with it. What are you goin' to say? If I got your friend Sturms trued up right, you'll never get by him with no rusty old yarn like you got to tell. He'd figger it was all a frameup. Ain't no doubt about that, eh?"

Ed West could say nothing. It was evident that a true account of this adventure would sound anything but true. A stranger had robbed him, forced him to write a letter of confession and then to go away with him. It was a poor yarn with which to explain the vanishing of such a pile of cash. He would be taken to Valdez and placed before lawyers and a judge. He would have to explain to them why he had taken the money out of its hiding place under the bunk, why he had spread it all out on the table. And once he admitted to them that he had thought of turning thief, what would they think?

Johnson was speaking again:

"Of course, I ain't lettin' you git away, if I can help it. You got to come along, until . . ."

Dory Johnson. "He drilled me through the chest—see— Listen, you're white, West! He's worse'n any of us. He fixed all this up. He hired me, an' we was goin' to split th' cash. You was to be th' goat, with th' minin' company an' all th' people that ever knowed you markin' you down for the thief. I was to leave you in a' ice slip somewhere. Sturms would be clear, what with your letter, an' you gone with your outfit."

He stopped, whistling loudly.

The moon was now directly overhead. Around, the black rocks stood like listening giants on the snow. An icy breath of air moved slowly along the surface of the mountain.

"I decided to double cross him. I was goin' to have you get me out of these parts, then I aimed to write th' company at Cordova about th' whole layout. I been workin' a good while fer Sturms, drivin' round lookin' up claims fer him to buy for nothin'—if he could.

"Say, West, you got all that money now, an' you just keep it. Git back to your shack an' burn that letter. Nobody'll know. Then you can git out of this God forsaken country— Is that a girl singin', West? Where are you? It's gettin' dark now, ain't it? I wish I was . . ."

The coarse lines of Dory Johnson's face slowly stiffened with a ghastly rigidity. But there was a change in the aspect of his features, an honest, rugged look, that struck West, even at that harrowing moment.

After awhile the prospector turned and stared questioningly at the still form of the man who had been his boyhood friend.

A HEATLESS sun rose feebly out of the Pacific, to the southeastward of the great peninsula and cast its reddish rays over the ragged white vastness of the volcanic peaks. The air was full of a biting chill.

West was on his sledge behind his harnessed dogs. He paused to look at the results of his hours of hard work—two shapeless piles of rock rising side by side from the snow. They marked the resting places of a rude desperado and of a polished scoundrel. Under Ed West's worn red fox parka reposed the gray sack of gold coins and yellow notes.

Dory Johnson was right. No man could ever find him out, now. All he had to do was to burn up that letter lying back there in his shack and nobody would ever know what had become of the money. This was his second opportunity. But he'd have to think it all over again, very carefully, whether he should take this sack of gold or not . . . Geeing his dogs around, he drove north, with a steely whine of sledge runners, into the icy chill of the Alaskan morning.

Some distance off, among the gigantic black rocks that littered the portage, stood a motionless parka clad figure behind a string of dogs, forming a dim silhouette barely visible against the gossamer emptiness of the Alaskan sky.

Dory Johnson cursed to himself.

"You've hung on fer fifty miles, eh, Mr. Sturms. We'll wait, West, an' see what he does. I'd snoop over an' get him, only you been so white. Folks 'ud say you killed him. I ain't goin' to drill him, if I can help it. If we git a chance, we'll make a run for it."

Ed West remained speechless. He was aghast at the certainty of impending disaster. Yonder stood Hal Sturms. Sturms was sure West was a criminal and had followed up his sledge trail as if he were a thief.

The lone man had vanished. As West and the outlaw began hurriedly repacking their gear on their sledge, a revolver blazed from behind another boulder, hardly more than fifty yards away, and the bullet plowed with a savage rattle through the iron utensils bundled together on the snow. Three other bullets hissed about the sledge with little white spurting clouds, like plumes of steaming silvery vapor in the moonlight.

West threw himself flat behind the sledge and lay still. He was unarmed and helpless, and Hal Sturms had certainly shot to kill.

The mine buyer had again disappeared. He returned into sight almost immediately and, as before, was in a position of vantage. He was just opposite the camp shack now; his sealskin cap was plainly visible. It was black, while the whiteness of the snow beyond revealed it sharply, a projecting knob upon the edge of a sheltering black boulder.

Dory Johnson kept his glistening eyes on that spot. Slowly he brought his heavy Colt to bear on it, took aim and fired.

The cap jerked, seemed to pause for an instant and swung unsteadily sidewise. A wild scream burst from its owner. A few seconds of deathly silence fell over the snowy wastes. Then to West's ears came the deep groans of a man badly hurt—

"Good Lord, you've got him!"

The prospector ran forward—ran, without stopping to think straight to the black rock behind which Sturms was moaning.

A MAN knelt bareheaded on the snow, in the satiny moonlight. It was Hal Sturms. Instead of being wounded, he had just finished refilling the empty magazine of his automatic with a clip of cartridges. At the sight of West he stopped his groaning and got to his feet.

"It's you, eh!" in bitter tones. "I'll settle with you later, Ed. Just now I want him—"

The moon was shining full on West's face. Sturms, watching him warily, saw the other's eyes shift suddenly and widen swiftly, while his mouth started open, but without making a sound. Sturms whirled around. Behind him was Johnson. He was a dozen steps away, stealthily approaching in his mushers.

As one, both men fired. West leaped wildly from the path of the deadly lead.

"You double crossing—" began Sturms, whipping out a stream of curses addressed to the outlaw.

He stopped, gasping agonizedly. Then he staggered, caught himself with a supreme effort, and held back the trigger of his heavy pistol. The gun roared out a string of shots in one long red blaze. In four seconds the white moonlit silence of the night returned, while a little smoke curled crisply into the icy air. Where three men had stood there now remained but one.

Hal Sturms lay huddled in a curiously helpless heap on the snow, his right arm doubled back, his smoking pistol slipping out of his plump white hand.

Johnson was still alive. He hung across a crackling alder bush, breathing loudly.

"West!" he gasped. "Lay me down, please! I can't hold out . . ."

Ed West plunged forward, laid the dying man on the snow.

"Anyway, I settled his hash!" whistled

Dory Johnson. "He drilled me through the chest—see— Listen, you're white, West! He's worse'n any of us. He fixed all this up. He hired me, an' we was goin' to split th' cash. You was to be th' goat, with th' minin' company an' all th' people that ever knowed you markin' you down for the thief. I was to leave you in a' ice slip somewhere. Sturms would be clear, what with your letter, an' you gone with your outfit."

He stopped, whistling loudly.

The moon was now directly overhead. Around, the black rocks stood like listening giants on the snow. An icy breath of air moved slowly along the surface of the mountain.

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A Story of the Java Seas

by

R. V. GERY

FOUR-TIMES-HE

THE MAN who told me this in 1910 lolled half naked in a canvas chair, gulping rum and tepid water. He is now dead of the same rum, and I make no doubt suitably damned. His name doesn't signify—Dennis is as good as another—but I have reason to believe that many people would recognize the other, Osborn, if I set down his real entitlements in this place.

You must picture Griggs as a ratty little Cockney, run to paunch, greasy, narrow faced, and shaking in his chair as he expands to me, a stranger in his loneliness . . .

THIS ain't strictly for publication. It might make it awkward for me if it is got about. But if you'd like the yarn, why, set down, an' the bottle's 'andy, an' I'll tell you about the feller that was 'ere before me.

You go to Batavia, or Sourabaya, or across to Macassar, or even round through Bali an' Lombok, and ask, an' I'll bet you'll find some one most everywhere who'll have 'eard of 'im. This damn' Java sea's a kind of a funny place; everybody knows everybody, an' yet no one knows anybody, as you might say. Not an easy place to 'ide in, this ain't—unless you're like me, don't mind what any one says, an' let 'em talk. Anyhow, it don't matter about me; I ain't anything but what I look.

But 'im—the Right Rev'rend Gawda'-mighty Thomas Barbason Osborn—I found 'is name among 'is kit after 'e'd gone—'e'd been a slap up parson in England, seemin'ly; some place I've forgotten. Somethin' like Barton-cum-fiddle-me-eye or thereabouts, only of course it wasn't that; an' what in 'ell 'e was doin' sweatin' in the Java seas is beyond me.

I've often thought I was a fool to—well, I might 'ave kep' 'im alive, an' bled 'im 'andsome, knowin' what I found out about 'im in a manner of speakin'.

'E was one of them people with a good fat secret; they'll render very juicy sometimes.

(*Hi*! Om-dong! *Sharab do, Jehannum ke marfik*—fetch us 'smore rum, an' look slippery about it!)

That's me wife. Om-dong ain't 'er name, neither, but it's the nearest ever I got to it. Nice yellow girl, eh? She's got about fifteen words of Hindustani, and I've got about ten, and I've got a stick, and we get along fine.

Well, I was sayin'. 'Ere 'e was, this Right Rev'rend, livin' in a godown along there in the trees, an' dividin' 'is time between booze an' the odd woman 'e got from the chinks. What? Oh yes, they do, if you know 'ow! This ain't China, not by a long chalk! Old Osborn, 'e must 'ave 'ad a dozen of 'em, one time and another.

'E was a fat old boy, with a gray mustache like a raggety scrubbin' brush, an' a bald 'ead. 'E picked me up on the beach, the mornin' after the *Hendryk Van Dam* turned turtle—she was a Dutch tub anyway—and I reckon I must 'ave looked pretty well all in, for 'e was diggin' in the sand with a spade when I come to. It's as well to bury 'em quick in this climate.

" 'Ullo! Me *dear* fellow!" 'e says when I sneezed. "I made sure you were gone!"

'E puts down the spade as if 'e were bashful about it an' comes over to me, lookin' over the tops of 'is glasses—'e wore 'em, gold rimmed.

"Why," I says, polite, "I'm 'ere yet, as far's I can see. But the question is, mister, where the 'ell am I?"

"Java," 'e says. He'd a big full voice on 'im like an organ, when 'e was sober. "An' you're very welcome," 'e says, "to my 'umble 'abitation. We don't 'ave much society," 'e says, "but we do get a boat round now an' then, an' I'll keep you until she comes."

"And 'oo may you be?" I asks, very polite again.

"Ah!" 'e says, " 'oo indeed, me friend? There's a lot might like to know that. You may call me Jones," 'e says, "an' you'll oblige me by referrin' to me friend —whom you'll meet anon—as Smith. They're both good 'ard worked names," 'e says, "and won't take any 'arm from a little extry use. Now, if you can walk, we'll be movin' in out of this extremely tryin' 'eat."

Well, I made shift to walk with 'im to 'is godown, an' 'e gave me tinned milk and a mess of slops—I was pretty weak—an' the last thing I remember was fallin' all of a piece into 'is 'ammock, an' 'earin' 'im speakin' poetry to 'imself. At least that's what I figured it out to be.

MIDDLE of the night, must 'ave been, I woke up. 'E was sittin' readin' in a singlet and no more—'e never did wear any more—an' drinkin' steady out of a bottle. There ain't nothin' in that, in these seas; but 'e was sittin' on the floor, with 'is back to the wall, an' 'e'd got the lamp there as well. 'E was pretty tight, too. I reckoned that was why.

'E 'eard me turn over, and looked up. Then 'e put down 'is book, an' crawled—crawled, mark you—across, an' peers at me, 'is 'ead on a level with the 'ammock, an' 'is eyes peepin' over the gold spectacles. Very queer 'e looked, too; like a big dog. There was a Winchester rifle against the wall be'ind 'im, an' a box of shells open on the floor.

'E looks at me very solemn for a minute, an' then 'e says:

> "Thrice is 'e armed 'oo 'as 'is quarrel just . . .
> But four times 'e 'oo gets 'is blow in fust!"

"Thanks!" I says. "I don't quite get you, but no doubt it's all right."

'E squats up on 'is 'unkers, an' begins to laugh.

"Mr. Griggs," 'e says, for I'd told 'im a name, "it ain't every one thanks me for the immortal bard. Your 'ealth an' better acquaintance!" 'e says, an' takes another go at the bottle.

Then 'e crawls back to the wall, low along the ground, an' picks up 'is book again.

"This means of locomotion," 'e remarks, "ain't what it's cracked up to be." He

grins again, silly. "It's 'ard on the 'ands an' knees. But me friend Smith," 'e says, "renders it ob-obligatory, a matter of tactics—"

"Barmy!" I says to myself, an' then I must 'ave gone to sleep again.

When I woke up it was daylight, an' the old boy was still sittin' on the floor, nod-noddin' like an idol. 'E was properly lushed by now.

I put a foot to the ground, and as I did a girl come in the door. She gives a kind of squeal, seein' me, and old Highty-Tighty wakes up.

"Ah, me dear!" 'e says, gettin' unsteady to 'is feet. "Good mornin'! An' 'ow's your pretty self?"

'E tries to put an arm round 'er, but she ain't 'avin' any.

She warn't any bad looker, for these here yellow girls, as you can see. (Hi! Om-dong!) They're a funny lot, though, these banana skins, till you get used to 'em. But they ain't no ways so dusty, I reckon, sometimes.

WELL, she goes to gettin' breakfast, an' fussin' round. There was an open window one side of the godown, an' across a clearin' in the trees there's another 'ut the spit an' image of ours, with a fellow leanin' on the window sill. Old Kiss-Me-Quick peeps at 'im round the corner.

"Mr. Smith!" 'e says, dignified like. "Me only white company hereabouts, me companion in adversity—an' me recreation!" 'e says, smilin'.

'E waves out of the window at the man, an' the man waves back.

"Pretty manners, 'e's got, Mr. Smith!" 'e says. "A grandee in 'is own country, which is Portugal," 'e says.

The girl sets breakfast on the table, an' I see 'er starin' at me. Osborn—might as well call 'im by 'is name—takes 'is, an' drops on the floor again with a grunt. The girl goes out of the door, an' I picks up me cup an' plate off the table.

Ping! A bullet comes through the window, an' there goes me coffee, cup splintered into bits out of me hand.

"Cripes!" I says, stupid like. And another bullet hums over me shoulder into the wall.

"Get down, y'fool!" says the old man, scramblin' across the floor like a crab, draggin' the gun with 'im. "I oughter 'ave told yer!"

'E peeps over the windowsill, sniffin', an' cautious.

"The dirty devil!" 'e says. " 'E might at least 'ave respected me guests. But I'll get 'im yet!" 'e says, an' starts singin' again, out loud.

"Thrice is 'e armed 'oo 'as 'is quarrel just . . .
But four times 'e—"

and 'e pumps three shots across the clearin',

" 'oo gets 'is blow in fust! . . .

"It may not be good grammar, Mr. Griggs," 'e says, "but it's mighty good sense in these parts. I'm surprised at Smith."

"No more than what I am!" I says. "Will you oblige me by tellin' me what all that was about?"

"That?" 'e says. "Oh, that's just a little matter of tactics, as you might say, between me an' Mr. Smith. You'd better step out of it. Keep down, away from the window, when Om-dong ain't in 'ere, or 'e'll 'ave one of us, sure. 'E won't fire when she's in 'ere, fear of 'urtin' 'er."

"But what in—"

This spit in the eye business 'ad me guessin'. 'E looks at me thoughtful.

"Well," 'e says, "seein' as 'ow the boat won't be 'ere for two months or more, an' you'll 'ave to stop with me until then, per'aps I'd better tell you—or stay!" 'e says. "We'll call a truce," 'e says "an' I'll introduce you to Smith. Nice fellow, Smith, if 'e is a bit apt to forget 'imself. We'll 'ave to come to some arrangement about you, anyway."

"I'm glad to 'ear it!" I says. "I ain't used to all this attention."

'E goes to a corner an' takes out a footy little flag—Union Jack, it 'ad been—an' props it up in the window. Then 'e

peeps over the sill again, very careful. In a minute there's another flag showin' across the clearin'.

"Truce is on when them's up," 'e says. "Now come along an' meet Smith. Nevertheless" 'e says, "there's nothin' like precaution; 'is temper's short this mornin'."

And 'e takes 'is rifle, snaps open the breech to see she's loaded, an' walks out into the sunshine with 'er over 'is arm.

"Come along!" 'e says. "'E won't 'urt you now. It's me 'e's after!"

THE OTHER fellow walks out of 'is 'ut; 'e's brought 'is gun too, an' we goes to meet one another. This Smith's a tall skinny guy, yellow to beat the devil, with a droopin' mustache like a bootlace, an' broken teeth. Except that 'e was long an' stringy, an' old Highty-Tighty fat an' greasy, there wasn't much to choose between 'em. They was both shakin' with booze, an' dirty as dogs, an' neither of them ran much to clothes. No more did I, for that matter. But their manners was very correck.

"Mr.—ah, Smith," says Four-Times-He, and he takes off his hat, very grand, "permit me to make you acquainted with me friend Mr. Griggs, a castaway among us," 'e says. "I've taken the liberty," 'e says, "of referrin' to you as Mr. Smith, an' to meself as Mr. Jones, for reasons you'll perfectly appreciate." He looks very old fashioned at the man. "I trust," 'e says, "you'll be good enough to consider 'im as your friend. You nearly 'ad 'im just now!" 'e goes on, cool as you please. "Very pretty shootin', Mr. Smith! But I believe we'll 'ave to come to some understandin' about this."

The other man's got 'is gun over 'is arm, but I can see 'e's mighty watchful. He talks kind of broken English.

"Another stalkin' 'orse, Mr.—ah, Jones?" he says, quiet.

I cuts in right there.

"Excoose!" I says. "But I ain't a bit 'appy with this 'ere! What's all the shenanigan, anyway?"

Four-Times-He laughs.

"Mr. Smith an' me," 'e says, "'ave a little affair on 'and—"

"Well?" I asks.

"Me dear fellow," 'e says, "it's difficult to explain to a stranger. It's a little matter concernin' a lady."

"Om-Dong?" I asks.

"Precisely!" says 'e. "Mr. Smith an' me are rivals for the lady's—er, affections. She ain't particular, but—" 'e looks at the Portugoose—"we are, as you might say. An' among men of honor," 'e says, "such matters are only reg'lated one way!"

"Of a surety!" says the Portugoose, quick an' hopeful. "Ten paces, senhor, and your honorable self to see fair play—"

The old man puts up 'is 'and.

"One moment!" 'e says. "I 'aven't the youth nor the vigor of Mr. Smith," 'e says, "An' moreover I'm a poor shot. Besides, I've the right in the matter. I saw 'er first."

The Goose rips out about a fathom and a half of jabber in Portuguese, chatterin' like a monkey, an' fumbles again with 'is Winchester. Osborn stares 'im down, as if 'e was in the pulpit at 'ome.

"Put it away!" 'e says. "Remember the flag's up!"

The Portugoose rests arms slowly, an' the two glares at each other. Old Four-Times-He goes on:

"So we've come to an arrangement, Mr. Griggs," 'e says, "under which—excep' when there's truce declared—either of us is at perfect liberty to destroy the other by any means that may occur to 'im," 'e says. "At present the sitivation is somethin' of a deadlock; we're both too careful." 'E smiles, humorous. "Me friend 'ere as tried poison once, but 'e won't again." The Goose grins very savage, all round 'is back teeth. "And it's now a matter of sharpshootin'. My eddication," 'e says, "against 'is proficiency with the Winchester!"

"See 'ere!" I says. "What's all the fuss anyway? There's more'n fifty *toms* 'ereabouts for you to stretch out an' take—leastways, I never saw a place in

these seas there wasn't—an' what's the sense of quarrelin' over one?"

Blimey, see 'em both turn on me! The Goose sneers, sarcastic, about "common sailors", an' old Four-Times-He throws up 'is 'ands.

"A hopeless type, senhor!" 'e says to the other man. "It is impossible to make any appeal to their higher instincts. I much regret that I have caused you to meet!"

"No more than I do!" I says. "There's somethin' damn' fishy 'ere," an' we've the makin's of a very pretty row.

JUST then Om-Dong comes out of the woods with an old man. She walks up to the three of us, that's fair itchin' to be at one another, an' pushes us apart.

The two of 'em turns round, an' the old man—'e's a dignified buffer in a silk sarong—bows to 'em both, an' begins a long palaver in a lingo I don't savvy. I guess 'e's complainin' about their carryin' on, judgin' by the way they look at each other, but they don't answer 'im any, I notice, an' that sets me thinkin'.

Om-Dong stands there, don't care an' sulky as you please, an' at last she begins to make eyes at me.

"Oho!" I thinks. "So that's what's what, is it?"

'Ereabouts, these girls want white men, an' nothin' so bad; an' I looks at old Four-Times-He, an' at the Portugoose, that's a livin' case of droppin' to pieces, an' then at the old chink, or whatever 'e 'is, an' I winks at Om-Dong, an' she laughs at me, an' from then on trouble's scheduled.

By an' by the chink stops talkin', an' old Four-Times-He looks at the Goose. "A well deserved reprimand, senhor, doubtless," 'e says, "but somehow I don't see it alterin' our 'appy relations, do you?"

The Portugoose puts 'is gun over 'is shoulder an' walks back to 'is godown without a word. Four-Times-He looks at 'im goin', an' then 'e scuttles 'ome 'imself. In a minute down come the flags, an' the two of 'em starts snap shootin', 'igh an' wide, at each other, fit to make you cry with laughin'.

"The damfools!" I says, out loud, an' Om-Dong laughs at it.

"Damfools—damfools—damfools!" she says, as if she's tickled with the sound of it; an' then she goes off, lookin' over 'er shoulder at me, an' very glad I am that those two idjits is too occupied with each other to see 'er.

WELL, I reckoned I'd walk on the beach awhile, until that couple of loonies got tired of each other. It was just like now, the sea flat as a dish, with little oily waves rollin' in, an' a tremenjous great thunder an' lightnin' sky—the backlash of the storm that'd put the *Hendryk Van Dam* down. And, by cripes, who'd I tumble over, half buried in the sand, but old Andries, that was 'er quartermaster.

"Well," I thinks, " 'ere's some one was out of luck, anyway," an' I looks 'im over.

'E 'adn't much on 'im, except' a couple of dollars an' a pipe; but—we'd 'ad trouble with the crew in the storm—'e'd a loaded automatic strapped to 'is waist.

" 'Ere's salaam!" I says. "You was a nasty tongued old dog while you was alive, Andries, but I'm not sayin' you ain't makin' up for it now!"

And I cleans the gun on the tail of me shirt, an' goes paradin' up the beach again. I'd been feelin' lonesome an' naked with these two shootin' fools; but this 'ere throws a new light on the case, as you might say.

GOIN' back, with the gun in me 'and, 'oo slips out of the bushes but Om-Dong, dancin' on 'er toes like they do, an' looking' sideways at me. She was pretty nigh stark-o, the little devil, too; I'm not strong at slingin' any *bat*, and she'd no English—'asn't yet—but it's clear enough what she's after.

She comes up to me an' begins pawin' the gun. Must 'ave seen 'em before somewhere, 'cos she takes an' points it at one tree, an' says "Damfool!" again, an' then at another, an' says the same, lookin' over 'er shoulder at me, laughin' an' languishin' like.

"Good!" I says. "Same thing 'ad occurred to me, kid. But the question is, what do I get out of it?"

I points to yours truly, for I was beginnin' to be sure that there was money in this, the way them two 'ad been actin'.

"Money?" I says.

She grins again, an' rubs 'erself against me like you've seen a cat.

"Money, me girl!" I says. "'Ow much?" An' I 'olds me 'and out an' scratches the palm. She savvys all right. She begins to nod 'er 'ead, an' runs off into the bush an' fetches the old man.

'E bows to me very partic'lar an' starts talkin' some kind of imitation English.

"She—want—you!" 'e says. "I—give plenty cash—copra—*bêche de mer*—all t'ings!"

'E looks at the gun.

"Good!" 'e says. "Them feller no good! You kill—'ave girl—'ave plenty money!"

"You're a nice old cup o' tea!" I says to 'im. "But on general grounds, I'll think it over."

An' I goes back to old Four-Eyes in the clearin'.

'E'S SITTIN' there, still on the floor, fingerin' a book an' mutterin' to 'imself.

"Ah, Mr. Griggs," 'e says, "been takin' a little walk? A fine day!"

"'Ave you finished that nonsense?" I asks 'im.

"What nonsense?" 'e inquires, stiff.

"That stuff with the Portugoose." I says. "A damn' fine couple of fools you are, to be raisin' all this bobbery about a *tom*. Think shame of yourself, you gray 'aired old rummy!" I says, for I was wishful to pick a quarrel with 'im.

'E gets on the 'igh 'orse at once.

"Mr. Griggs," 'e says, "I'll thank you to keep your dirty 'ands out of gentlemen's concerns. Or," 'e says, threatenin', "I'll be reluctantly compelled to take steps," an' 'e reaches for the rifle.

I covers 'im at once.

"Stick 'em up!" I says.

'E sticks 'em up, an' goggles at the gun.

"Where'd'ja get it?" 'e says.

"Never you mind!" says I. "I got it, an' that's enough for you, you psalm singin' old bag o' lard. Now," I says, "spit it out! What's be'ind all this, with you and your Mr. Smith?"

'S FUNNY, 'ow a gun'll affect some people. So far, 'e'd been very 'aughty an' pompous. I didn't know 'e'd been a parson, then, but 'e'd been actin' like one. But now, with 'is shaky old 'ands over 'is 'ead, 'e got stuttery an' flustered, an' began 'alf cryin'.

I picks up 'is rifle.

"'Ere!" I says. "Come on now, take a drink if you want one, an' let's 'ear the yarn."

Well, 'e comes across, an' it was short an' sweet.

"Griggs," 'e says. "There's not many I'd tell it to—but what do you figure me an' de Sousa wants this yellow woman for?"

"Ah!" I says to myself. "Now we're gettin' at it!"

"You know 'ow it is," 'e goes on. "These people 'll give anything almost to 'ave a white man, any white man—" an' 'e looks at me, pitiful—"mixed up in the family, so to speak. An' the old man's got money—'eaps an' 'eaps of it—"

"'As 'e, be gosh?" I thinks. "An' you two . . ."

"And with money," 'e goes on, "not much money neither, I could get out of this frightful 'ole," 'e says. "I've been in eight years, my God!"

'E breaks down, an' blubbers, an' swigs at the bottle.

"De Sousa, 'e's been 'ere six," 'e says. "'An' 'e's fixed same way. Let 'im or me get out of this—to Singapore, say—an' maybe we'd get 'ome again. 'Ome!" 'e says, like 'e was sayin' 'is prayers. "Think of it! Lighted streets, an' good things to eat an' drink—'stead o' this bad gin! An' white ladies," 'e says, lickin' 'is sinful old lips.

"So it's 'im or me. An' d'you know, Mr. Griggs," 'e says, "that there de Sousa's a lyin', thievin' 'ound. 'E wants

the girl for 'imself, an' for 'er money, an' 'e'd kill 'er in a week. Now I'd treat 'er like a gentleman," 'e says, "so long as I was 'ere. But I'll get 'im yet. I've the right on my side, an' I oughter!"

'E starts 'is old business again:

" 'Thrice is 'e armed'—Mr. Griggs, there's a lotter truth in that, but it's gettin' in first counts 'ere!"

An' 'e looks very 'ungry at the pistol.

"WELL," I says, "there's somethin' in all that, maybe. But it's up to you. Take an' kill 'im," I says, "but keep me out of it. I don't want mixin' up with your quarrels. I'm a decent focsle 'and," I tells 'im, "an' I'll go up on the next boat from 'ere, an' collect me back pay from the comp'ny, an' go on a spree, an' then to sea again. I don't want no yellow girls, I don't! Not in any ways permanent.

"Now," I says to 'im. "I'm goin' a walk again," an' I lays the pistol on the table. "I'll take the rifle, an' maybe knock down a monkey or somethin' for the pot. I'll leave you, Mr. Jones," I says, "to your own affairs."

'E looks at the gun, an' then at me, bitin' 'is fingers, an' I see 'e's fly all right, the damn' dirty old swine.

"Griggs," 'e says, "Gobblessyou!" 'E was pretty drunk again by now. "Come back in an hour," 'e says, "an' maybe I'll 'ave news for you," an' 'e picks up 'is flag an' sticks it in the window.

IT WAS all dead simple an' easy. I goes off into the bush, walks around a bit, an' then crawls very quiet to the edge of the clearin' an looks out. Maybe forty yards away, Four-Times-He an' the Goose is palaverin', friendly like.

The old man's wearin' a lousy old coat now, 'is 'and in the pocket—the murderin' ruffian. Sousa's got 'is rifle over 'is arm, an' they walks to an' fro, talkin'. Four-Times-He's all of a shake with nerves, an' I draws a bead on 'is fat belly, follow-in' 'im back an' forth. I can 'ear 'em talkin'.

"De Sousa, me dear fellow," says he, "I'm seein' the error of me ways. There's much to be said for your side of it, an' maybe I've been 'asty. Still," 'e says, "I did see 'er first, an' right's right, an' on my side. I think you should remember that!"

De Sousa turns round, objectin', I guess, but I couldn't 'ear, an' the old man edges up to 'im— I reckon they was both away too full to be anyways watchful. I could see 'im stammerin' an' tremblin' with excitement, an' I 'eard 'im begin 'is piece—

"Thrice is 'e armed 'oo 'as 'is quarrel . . ."

De Sousa whirls round, 'is face twisty up with rage; but before 'e can get 'is rifle up, old Four-Times-He plugs 'im twice, shootin' through 'is pocket. I see the smoke driftin' away.

"Amen!" I says, as de Sousa slumps in an 'eap. "Now for you, old bladder belly!" An' I lets 'im 'ave it, fair an' easy through the spine, as 'e's staggerin' round, wavin' 'is arms an' shoutin' about "'is quarrel just."

Om-Dong's been 'angin' round, seemin'ly. She scuttles up an' plumps down by me.

"Damfool!" she says, pointin' to the two of 'em.

She's a little wildcat. (Ain't you, Om-Dong?) See 'er, grinnin' at you? That's 'er kid there; quite a boy, ain't 'e?

WELL. As I was sayin'. This Java sea's a funny place. You've got to take it as it comes. But it ain't no place for old Four-Times-He an' his likes, 'oo've been 'igh-ups. They've got too much to 'ide, and anyhow they're not 'ard enough for this country. You want to be like me, not give a damn what people say . . .

Concluding

IN THE YEAR 2000*

A Novel of a Kingdom in the Heart of the Amazon Jungle

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

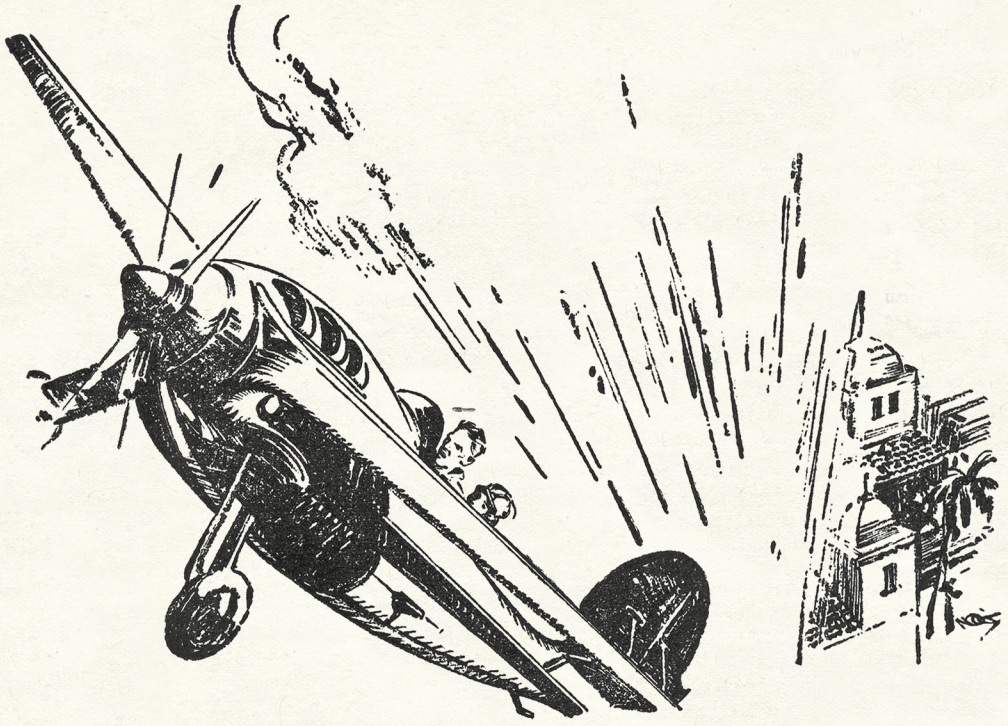
THE YEAR 2000 was not far away. Meredith McKay, American air hero of the most terrible of all world wars, had gone to the upper Amazon country to visit the lost kingdom of Hoserán, which his Grandfather, McKay, and Martinez, had founded almost a century before. The kingdom which had begun so flourishingly was fallen on evil days. Isolated from the world except for occasional air observers from Ecuador, the tiny country of the White Ones had accumulated gold and developed in vice.

Vicente, the king, was not a White One. He was partly of the Jivero blood—of the degenerate Jivero Indian slaves. He had driven the rightful princess, Nuné, to serve as a virgin of the flame in the sacred temple where lights burned to the honor of José Martinez and Rand, whence came the very name Hoserán. There in memory of the two men who had made a jungle ruin into a home was the double visaged statue of José and Rand.

Only one of the Old Ones remained, Cononaco, a faithful ancient who remembered McKay's ancestors and loved them. He urged McKay to flee the country which had received him so coolly before Vicente seized his airplane and made him captive. But McKay was obstinate. He hoped to save the country for the White Ones.

Cononaco, with great secrecy, took McKay to the secret temple of the flame. The great double statue was almost dark. The virgins were gone. King Vicente, but vaguely seen in the shadows, was leering cruelly at the statue. Then McKay saw what was happening. A group of swarthy Jiveros were lowering Salazar, the captive Ecuadorean, into the top of the giant image. For a moment the translucent stone glowed, red!

Although warned to be silent, McKay could not control his anger at the desecration of the statue. He pushed old Cononaco aside and strode toward the blood



drunk Vicente. Three steps he took before a slight shuffle sounded behind. One more. He staggered. A silent, agonizing blow had struck his neck. Life halted. Eyes blurred. While he struggled mentally to regain control another blow fell. A fiery streak of pain shot to his brain. Then came oblivion.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT MIDNIGHT

RAIN beat heavily on the roof when realization returned to McKay. For an instant its formless rumble seemed a part of the confusion of his dazed senses; for his brain was dizzy, his sight dull, his tactile impressions vague—until he tried to lift his head. Then a keen pain in his neck aroused every other lagging nerve and, though warning him to be still, cleared his consciousness.

The canny blows by which his assailant had halted him had been ruthlessly efficient. He had been totally comatose for some time. In that time he had been moved for some distance; indeed, into another world. The dim corridor, the grisly shapes of brute men, the satanic king, the demon god—all were gone. In their stead were a soft shaded room, a comfortable couch, an anxious eyed old man and a fair faced young woman, both standing close beside him.

By what miracle he had been transported hither he could only guess, and he gave scant time to guessing. Nuné, loose haired and hastily clad, could hardly have had a hand in bringing him to this spot. Therefore his heavy weight must have been borne entirely by that astonishing veteran who not only persisted in living far beyond his normal span but retained unsuspected reserve powers on which to draw in time of emergency. For the moment, however, he felt anything but gratitude toward the

self-constituted regulator of his movements. After a surprised look at Nuné and a glance at his new surroundings he bent on Cononaco a glower of growing rage.

"It is good," calmly declared the man who had struck him down. "Oom Keh lives again. The heart of Cononaco is glad."

"But I do not understand the matter," said Nuné. "You say a man sprang upon him—"

"Just so, *princesa.*" Cononaco's gaze, sharp with warning, combated the hot glare of the supine man. "Oom Keh would look again at the Old Ones. So Cononaco brought him secretly across the plaza. And just as Cononaco felt for the door of entrance some man leaped on Oom Keh from the darkness. And Oom Keh threw him over the wall, aye, out over the edge and down to the rocks far below! A mighty man, this Oom Keh, *princesa!* But after he had thrown that one to his death he fell and was himself like dead. So Cononaco made shift to bring him here."

His tone was matter of fact, his countenance expressionless, his eyes inflexibly fixed on those of McKay, who read in them a command to support his perversion of truth. Nuné looked long at his inscrutable visage, then down into the gray eyes which now had lost some of their resentment and taken on a glint of amusement.

"Is this true, señor?" she asked.

"Altogether, as I remember it," he prevaricated, "and my name is Meredito, not señor."

A faint smile and a look of relief crossed her face.

"You are not badly hurt if you can joke," she judged. "Have you pain anywhere?"

"A bad one in the neck. That's where the club hit me."

"The club? It was a club?"

"Well, it felt like one."

Cononaco grinned. A slight movement of the right hand indicated, or would have indicated, if observed, that the incapacitating blows had been struck by nothing more formidable than a sharp edged palm, which had hit hard but silently on expertly selected vertebræ. But neither of the younger folk now was watching him. Perhaps this was just as well. Had McKay seen the motion he might have suspected that the method of attack had been the same as on the Jivero watchman, and that it had come perilously near breaking his spine; so near, in fact, that the old jungle fighter had since been badly worried lest he had struck too hard. The fighting tricks of Cononaco were killing tricks.

Now, however, the involuntary betrayal passed unseen, and at once the culprit covered himself. In a dry tone he remarked:

"When Cononaco traveled the war trails he cured many a hurt by use of hot water. But it must be used quickly."

Nuné acted at once. Her head turned, her lips opened, as if about to call some servant. Then, realizing the inadvisability of such a summons, she held her tongue and glided away through a near doorway. McKay's eyes followed her until she vanished. Then they turned to Cononaco—and hardened again.

"CONONACO," he said grimly, "this makes twice you have attacked me. That is once more than any other living man. Let there be no third time!"

"If Oom Keh had done rightly there would have been no second time—nor first time!" came the tart rebuke. "And there will be no third time. If Oom Keh has not learned wisdom he can walk alone —and fall alone! Cononaco grows tired."

Glare met glare, unwavering. Then the retaliatory mood of antagonism passed, and the former mutual liking reasserted itself.

"To throw himself without weapons into the den of beasts is not the act of a wise man," added Cononaco, more mildly, "and the time is not ripe for—"

He broke off, listening; then stood mute. A few seconds later Nuné reentered, bearing in her hands a steaming double handled basin and over one arm a couple of towels.

"Cononaco will do the work," volunteered the old man.

"No, no, I will do it—"

"The hands of Cononaco are old and tough and not easily burned. And they know the work that must be done here. The queen is not skilled in handling the flesh of warriors. Let a warrior do what he knows how to do. Turn, Oom Keh!"

Thus cavalierly he took command of the situation; and, after a short hesitancy, Nuné yielded the basin to him. With difficulty McKay turned face downward, his neck aching wickedly as he moved. Forthwith Cononaco fell to work, placing on the injury a dripping towel so hot that the localized pain was forgotten in the more widespread protest of flesh almost scalded. McKay stifled an impulse to jump, set his teeth and lay rigid.

Before his shut eyes arose again the images of the flush faced idol, the beastly Jiveros prancing, the vanishing Salazar, the diabolical king. For the moment the burning of his neck seemed a torture inflicted by those abominable creatures, and he gritted his teeth harder in sudden return of rage. Then he resolutely banished them from his mind, concentrating on the task of holding himself unflinchingly.

Steadily Cononaco worked, changing cloths, pressing them firmly here and there, removing them to knead muscles and deal occasional sharp knuckled blows on cunningly chosen portions of the spine, then slapping on another dose of heat. It was rough treatment, and more than once Nuné opened her mouth to order its cessation; but she spoke no word. McKay stoically endured. At length, after a flat palmed stroking of the scarlet skin, the sweating healer grunted:

"Lift the head."

McKay lifted. Save for a slight lameness, pain was gone.

He sat up, turning his head from side to side, then stood, smiling down at the incongruous pair.

"Cononaco, you are a wizard," he declared. "And, Nuné, I thank you for getting me into hot water."

"It is you who have done that," she returned, with a toss of the head. "Are you still determined to stay in it?"

"The longer I stay the better I like it. I'm getting used to it—"

Abruptly the half jesting answer died, and his mouth set. Unbidden, undesired, again flashed before his brain the immolation he had seen just before being struck down. He would never grow used to the conditions which made that possible.

NUNÉ, regarding him closely, seemed to catch an intuitive glimpse of the cause of his halt, or, at least, of the fact that some dire thing was being withheld from her. When she spoke again her voice held a note of sternness.

"Señor, what is the truth of this matter? Who was the man who struck you, and why?"

"Too dark to see," he evaded.

Unexpectedly then Cononaco volunteered—

"The smell was that of a Jivero."

"A Jivero! Here?"

Both stared at him, Nuné in incredulity, McKay in surprise. Why disclose the presence of Jiveros? Then, however, he realized that in the morning Nuné would probably hear of the finding of the dead Jivero on the rocks below.

"Here," echoed Cononaco. "Lying in wait at the door of the passage which leads to the face of Ho Seh. It is in the mind of Cononaco that he was a slave set there as a watcher and that his master was inside."

"His master? But there is only one man on this rock with power to permit Jiveros here at night! You mean Vicente? And why should he be at that place at night?"

"Cononaco does not presume to say, neither who the master was nor why he was there. But," deliberately, "it is also in the mind of Cononaco that one of the *vírgenes* is not all she should be."

"What!" Anger darkened the fair face.

"How dare you! The maidens of the flame are above suspicion!"

"Perhaps." The answering tone was calm, the old eyes unwavering. "Yet when a disease creeps across the land it is possible for even the best to catch it. Cononaco has seen more than one loyal soldier fall sick and die from nothing but the breath of a small swamp in the forest; and not only fall sick but become a danger to all near him, even his commander. And the flesh of maidens is no stronger, their hearts no harder, than those of warriors.

"There is a creeping disease on this rock, and for those who have caught it nothing can be done to cure them. Let the *princesa* remember that! And let her make no effort to look too closely into it! Instead let her guard herself at all times, so that the ones who have begun to rot may not strike her down! For it is the nature of this disease that those who have it become like snakes and bite those who walk above them. So let the *princesa* move with care, yet give no sign. In this way she will be most safe. There is a cure for this thing, but it is not in the hands of the *princesa*. Until that cure shows itself let her beware!"

Again the younger people stared at him, both seeking to interpret his characteristically oracular statements, half clear, half abstruse. Nuné, though long accustomed to his indirect mode of speech, plainly did not grasp his entire meaning. McKay felt himself even more in the dark. Why insinuate evil against some unnamed girl guardian of the fire? Why not tell Nuné plainly what danger she must guard against, if indeed any danger actually existed? Why warn her against even attempting to ascertain its nature? Why be so devious in some of his dealings, so amazingly straightforward in others? Or was even his apparent openness at times merely another twist of inexplicable duplicity? The more the Northerner saw of him the less he felt that he comprehended him.

Into the questioning face of Nuné came again the searching look which McKay had learned to recognize and, wordless, she gazed deep into the brown eyes which hung unswerving on hers. But she found no enlightenment there. Cononaco, old before her birth, knew well how to baffle all efforts to read his mind.

A long minute passed, filled only with the dull roar of the rain. Then McKay moved.

"WE'LL be going," McKay announced. "Now that I think of it, it might not look well, if anybody knew, for the Queen of the Flame to be harboring a couple of men here, especially at this time of night. And besides, I don't want to keep you up. But before I go let me apologize for—er—well, for last night."

Another flush crept into her cheeks. A quick glance at him; then her eyes dropped.

"You do well to regret that," she told him.

"Oh, I'm not sorry I did it. But it wasn't quite the way to do it. And maybe it was a bit premature, though I think it was inevitable."

A slight pause. Another fleeting glance. Then—

"Did you say you were going?"

"Exactly. Good night, Nuné."

"Good night, señor."

"Meredito," he again corrected.

Cononaco was already moving outward, leaning heavily on his cane, his lame leg responding more slowly than usual. McKay followed. He was at the door when Nuné looked after him.

"Good night, Meredito," she amended.

Then she swiftly turned her back to him.

Out along a half lighted corridor the men moved to a heavy door which Cononaco opened cautiously, peering out. Rain and night alone waited outside. He slid through, McKay, after him, quickly shutting the barrier. They stood in watery blackness.

"Now listen—" began McKay.

"Not here. Come!" A jerk at the arm enforced the command. And, mindful

of the possibility—small but not altogether lacking—of listening ears, McKay obeyed.

Out into the empty plaza they made their way. No light now shone anywhere. The lashing rain destroyed all sense of direction or location. Yet Cononaco seemed to know where he led. Presently he stopped and spoke close to a wet ear.

"Oom Keh has seen. Let him think on what he has seen, and be thankful that he lives to think! Let him think deep. Tomorrow an old spy may come again to learn his thoughts. Now it is time to rest. Talk must wait."

With that he limped ahead. McKay's lips opened, but closed without sound. Indeed it was high time for the nonagenarian to rest. His every movement bespoke fatigue bordering on exhaustion. So they fared onward, McKay shielding his nostrils with a free hand from the stifling onslaughts of rain, until they stopped again beside the wet wall of his house.

Cononaco left him a few minutes, felt his way along to the dog door, opened it and returned; he steered him to the opening, gave him a parting squeeze of the arm and, when he had passed through, shut it behind him. Then he departed.

Outside, all the guards huddled under the small roof of the front porch, taking such shelter as it afforded. Inside, they supposed, the señor slept tranquilly in his comfortable bed. They would have been vastly amazed if they could have looked through the wall. The bed was untouched. The señor, wet haired and unclad, sat in his plane, his drenched clothing strewn around behind him. His chin rested on clenched fists, his narrowed eyes dwelt on blank blackness, and his face was iron hard. All the Knowlton good humor had vanished from that countenance which hitherto had been so whimsically mobile. It now was the ominous face of the grim old McKay who had marched and fought with the Old Ones.

CHAPTER XIX

BEFORE BREAKFAST

MORNING, clear and bright. A sky brilliantly blue, wherein moved only a blinding sun and an occasional high flying bird. A city washed clean by recent rain and swept by brisk breeze. Alow and aloft, in street and on mesa, cheerful people engaged in customary routines of industry or indolence. To all appearance the little world was a place of pleasantness and peace, wherein prosperity ruled, strife and want were not, and happiness was unalloyed.

If the externals truly portrayed the actualities of the life of Hoserán, then the faces of two men who gazed abroad from the mesa should have mirrored contentment with the achievements of the Old Ones who, starting with a few hundreds of men and a forgotten ruin, had created amid the wildest jungle a wealthy kingdom. One of these two was the bronze José Martinez who, from his block in the middle of the plaza, looked ever across the still growing realm which his hands and brain had wrought. The other was the bronzed McKay, leaning in an embrasure of the stone wall which encircled the verge of the precipice, who had come from afar to see what his forefathers had helped to build and now was seeing it. Yet the changeless eyes of the Spaniard looked ever into the west, whence he had first come, as if seeking there some enemy. And the gray gaze of the American was somber, as if he too visualized violent change in the tranquil vista before and below him and found the vision oppressive.

He had strolled over to this opening, which happened to be nearest to his house, because there was nothing else to do and because some impulse moved him hither. A few feet away, one of the day guards lolled against another hole in the wall, unobtrusive, almost unobservant, but nominally watchful. His presence protected himself and his fellows from any charge of negligence; and the Northerner, if aware of it, gave no sign. Still farther

away, the inhabitants of the two nearest houses watched covertly, and on one veranda a good looking woman had taken strategic position in a hammock, feigning ignorance of his proximity, but keeping an eye in his general direction and practising tentative smiles for use whenever he should turn his head and she could artlessly discover him. But his head did not turn.

Meanwhile, across the open square, a priestess in flame colored robe walked with leisurely pace through concealed corridors and entered a wide room wherein stood a two faced statue. All was as usual. The sacred fire burned in unbroken ring; the twin heroes still watched all before and around them, though with sleepy eyes, for most of the wall lamps now were extinguished; the large doors facing the plaza, but rarely opened, were tight shut, and the light was dim. If there was any deepening in the coloration of the faces within the low burning circle of flame it escaped notice in the prevailing dullness. The Queen of the Flame cast a slow glance around, found everything in its customary condition and spoke pleasantly to a drowsy lidded virgin who awaited her greeting.

"*Buen' dia'*, Alicia. *Qué tal?*"

"All is well, *Reina*," came the soft voiced assurance.

"What news of the night?"

"Nothing." The girl stifled a yawn. "Rain, that is all."

Nuné nodded, glancing casually around again.

"And Cristina had no report when you came on duty?"

"Nothing," repeated the other. After a slight pause she added, a little shamefaced but honest, "I—I was a little late, *Reina*. I overslept nearly an hour. But Cristina said it did not matter, there is so little to do. And the fire was as usual when I came in. I will take her place an hour earlier tonight to make up for it—"

"You are forgiven, dear. Go to breakfast. I'll wait here until Silvia comes."

Alicia smiled and went, after a look at the smooth burning flame to reassure herself that it was as it should be. When she had gone Nuné walked seriously all around the statue, scanning fire and stone. Then she stopped and stood before the green eyed half, face uplifted.

"Father Ran," she breathed, "are all your maidens true to their trust?"

Father Ran answered not. But his green eyes seemed momentarily to grow a shade more dull, his sculptured countenance a trifle more dark, as if a shadow had crossed it. The questing face upturned to his reflected that shadow. The robed figure moved away and passed slowly the length of the silent room, head bowed in troubled meditation.

IN ANOTHER room, at the western end, were two men who could have thrown glaring, ghastly light on matters very close to her heart, particularly on this demideity which she so revered, if they had chosen to reveal stark truths to her. But they did not so choose. On the contrary, they withheld truth even from each other. Facing each other across a table laden with a profusion of breakfast tidbits, they hid thoughts behind unreadable eyes and spoke with unrevelatory tongues.

The two were Vicente and Cononaco. The king, pajama clad, lolled in a massive chair and toyed languidly with a bitten fruit as he listened to the drone voiced *capitán* before him. The counselor of his fathers stood erect, stiff backed, as befitted a soldier in the presence of his commander. The lavish breakfast littering the board was not for him, nor even a seat beside it; nor did he evince the least wish for either. His attitude indicated unwavering attention to the subject of his narrative. The lounging king, on the other hand, seemed half day dreaming, indulging one part of his mind in pleasant reminiscence while otherwise attentive to the talker. In his easy pose, his half closed eyes, his absent play with the soft fleshed fruit, was a similarity to the physical and mental satisfaction of a cat with blood lust temporarily appeased by a recent kill.

"And so the talk of the Old Ones and their deeds led to nothing," monotonously lied Cononaco, concluding his report, "because one of the *soldados* outside leaned a moment against the wall and made it squeak. Oom Keh looked once at that wall, and after that he spoke no word worth remembering. So Cononaco must try again."

A short silence. The king continued his recurrent pressing of the fruit, sinking his fingertips into it like a feline exercising its claws.

"It is in the mind of Cononaco," bluntly added the speaker, "that the keeping of those guards there is foolish."

A shade of displeasure crossed the Spanish face; but the answering tone was indulgent.

"Why so, wise one?"

"They are useless. Oom Keh does not seek to go. There is no way he can go, except by flying off in his sky bird, and he knows it. So—"

"How does he know it?"

"He asked yesterday about the ways through the mountains. Cononaco told him they were so strongly forted and so sharply watched that not even a mouse could pass through without permission, and that not all the armies of all the world could force their way."

A complacent smile touched the thin lips.

"A good answer," approved the ruler. "So he did speak of something besides the Old Ones, eh?"

"It was just then when the wall squeaked. If Cononaco is to learn more the walls must not squeak. And Oom Keh must not be made to feel by sight and sound of those guards that he is watched. He knows well that they are put there not as guards of honor but as watchers. Much better it would be to take them away—and the sky bird also. Then he can not fly away. If he can not fly he can not go. Even if he passed out of the mountains he could not escape. He is not skilled in following the forest trails, like the old Oom Keh; a child of the White Ones could hunt him down. But even if the sky bird is left with him the *soldados* should be taken away. Otherwise nothing can be learned."

Vicente regarded him sneeringly.

"You are an old fool!" he jeered. "Take away the guards to prove confidence, and at the same time take away the machine to prove lack of trust? Your mind fails! Besides, I mean to make him show me the operation of that machine before taking it from him."

"It would be better to leave the machine and remove the men," admitted Cononaco, "except perhaps one man who could watch from a distance by day and at the door by night. None but Oom Keh himself would touch the bird. And if he tried to fly it away he could easily be shot down before it could rise. The doors must first be opened. And even if the guard should miss with his rifle Salazar would not miss with the big gun. Cononaco says again that all these guards are foolishness."

Thus inferentially he claimed ignorance of the visit of Salazar to the plane, his capture and his death; and likewise opened the way for some disclosure of one or more of those facts. But Vicente gave no sign of having heard that sentence, unless a sinister glint of the jet pupils might be so interpreted. Discarding the fruit with which he had toyed, he picked up another, bit, munched and gazed speculatively at the outwardly untactful advisor.

"There may be a little sense in your words," he conceded. "I can put men to studying the machine and so learn all about it, but that will take time. Hm! No, for the present I will leave it where it is. Meanwhile you will warn the guards to stand farther away before you talk to the foreigner. And if you learn nothing today—"

"The *soldados* will take their orders only from the Capitán Oliverio," maliciously interrupted the ancient. "Oliverio allows them to obey no commands but his own."

"To the devil with Oliverio!" flared Vicente. "The men will do what I say! And if Oliverio dares open his mouth I will

make him crawl and wash my feet with his tongue! Obey my orders! And, as I was saying, if you learn nothing today you show yourself a failure, and you can slink into your hole and stay there until you die. Now get out!"

CONONACO obeyed, outwardly offended but inwardly exultant. Indeed, the vision of the self-important commandant of the fort groveling on the ground nearly made him snicker openly. And he lost no time in availing himself of the temporary authority won by playing on the vanity of Vicente.

Straight to the Casa del Extranjero he made his way. Brief inquiry from the guard on perfunctory post at the door elicited the information that *el señor* was up, out, and viewing the city from the southern wall. A few more rods of progress, and he stood beside the musing McKay.

The two regarded each other a moment without speaking; McKay inquiringly, Cononaco penetratingly. The level gaze, unsmiling mouth and somber expression of the younger man brought to the older face a flitting gleam of approval. The careless twinkle which had been so often in the gray eyes was there no longer.

"Well?" curtly prompted the Northerner.

"There are words to be said. At the house."

"Let them be said here."

"At the house."

A sidewise nod directed attention to the overly innocent woman, hitherto unnoticed, on the near porch. McKay's lips tightened. Unspeaking, he strode back toward his quarters, looking straight ahead. The woman threw at him a calculated glance of surprise, as if observing him for the first time; loosed her practised smile; then bit her lip and flushed as she found him deliberately blind to her presence. Before he was halfway back to his house she had flounced into her own, burning with chagrin.

Cononaco turned to the guard and voiced harsh dialect. Surprised, perplexed, the fellow stared, followed uncertainly and heard the same autocratic commands delivered to the three on duty about the house. One began an uncertain protest, to be quickly silenced. All four drew off to a distance. Then one marched to the fort to learn whose orders held good, Cononaco's or the commandant's.

At the door McKay halted, turned and repeated—

"Well?"

"Well, the spy has again seen the king. The king learned nothing and told little. But it is in the mind of the king to remove the sky bird, so that Oom Keh may not fly away."

"So?" A bleak smile curved the corners of the set mouth. "Then Oom Keh should go at once, before he can do it, eh?"

"If Oom Keh would fly from danger, now is the time."

Eye held eye. McKay made no move to act on the advice.

"Oom Keh has looked on Hoserán," continued the informant, his tone subtle. "He has seen its weakening people, its treacherous Jiveros, its foolishly true boys. He has beheld the splendor of its king, the beauty of its women, the nobility of its lords; learned of its impenetrable defenses and its wealth of gold; witnessed the worship of the Old Ones and won the love of the fairest queen of Oriente." McKay started. "All this has Oom Keh seen and done and thought upon, within three risings of the sun. If he is content he may now fly back to Norte Amerikaa and leave all these things behind him. Now is the time!"

THE GRAY eyes flashed toward the north, to dwell for a second on the facade of the porchless building which must be the domicile of the Old Ones; then fastened once more, with added sternness, on the crafty face of the man who verbally tempted him to take flight but thereby dared him to stay. His answer was blunt.

"Cononaco, you are a damned old humbug. You say one thing but mean another. You are working steadily to carry out some plan of your own, and you are either a mean, underhanded hypocrite, willing to sacrifice everything and everybody for your own personal gain, or a patriotic strategist moving people into various positions for the good of your country. If I were sure you were the second I'd shake your hand and stand with you. If I knew you were the first I'd break your neck, here and now. As it is, I'm not quite sure—yet. But now you tell me the straight truth about one thing. You spoke just now about Nuné. Was that true?"

"True, Oom Keh!" The voice of the *capitán* came full and strong. "Nuné loves. For the first time—and the last. Cononaco knows. Other women may take love lightly. But not Nuné." A short pause. "And the man who would arouse the love of Nuné and then leave her deserves the fate of Salazar!"

"Well said!" The steely eyes warmed. Then, "Answer me another question. Just what was done to Salazar inside the Old Ones?"

"Of that it is best to speak at another time, Oom Keh. It is done. He is gone. The way of it can be made clear later. Now there are other things to speak of."

"All right. Speak."

"*Bien.* Oom Keh has seen and heard and learned much. His face shows that he has put many things together and thought upon the condition of Hoserán. He knows what his fathers did here; what the Old Ones did here; what their sons have carried on, until the Jivero bastard took their places. Now that Oom Keh has seen and learned and thought, what is in his mind?"

"It is in my mind that, no matter what follows, this dirty king should be wiped out and every other Jivero with him, and the sooner the better! Now if you're really a spy trot to that king and tell him what I've said. And tell him that the minute he comes to take my plane he'll get what's coming to him, and it won't be what he wants!"

The recklessly aggressive retort brought to Cononaco's puckered countenance a wide grin. For a moment he fondly regarded McKay. His spoken reply, however, though approbative, partook also of habitual sarcasm and of warning.

"Cononaco goes to win favor and to have Oom Keh shot." He made no move to carry out his threat. "But let Oom Keh hold his hand a little longer from the neck of Vicente. And of Cononaco. What if the sky bird is taken away? Unless Oom Keh means to fly on its back it is no loss. And later it will be returned to its cage, unharmed. But let Oom Keh hold hand and tongue until certain things are done. Then—"

He broke off, eying a couple of men advancing across the plaza. One was the commandant Oliverio, whose every stride bespoke anger; the other, at the rear, the countermanded sentry who had gone to ask instructions. Oliverio did not deviate toward the new house, though his look toward Cononaco was eloquent of vindictive hostility; he kept straight on toward the home of the king. The trailing guard stopped when he reached his fellows.

While old Cononaco still watched the passing commander, around the corner came servants bearing McKay's breakfast.

"There is another who must be attended to," muttered Cononaco. "That Oliverio is cousin to one Basilio. Basilio does not love Oom Keh, nor does Oliverio. Harrrumph! *Buenos dias, señor.* Breakfast is here."

"Come in and share it with me."

"The old dog has another bone to gnaw. Later he may come again."

The servants passed inward. Cononaco hobbled hastily away, not toward the king's end of the mesa but toward the fort, temporarily bereft of its commandant.

McKay looked after him; then, with preoccupied mien, he walked in to eat breakfast.

CHAPTER XX

CIGAR SMOKE

FULL fed, physically and mentally, the outlander who, only two days ago, had at this hour been speeding across interminable jungle in search of Hoserán now sat drawing at his first cigar of the day and staring absently at his open door.

The servants were gone. Breakfast was gone. And, in great part, curiosity also was gone. Between the things he had seen and those he had heard, most of the questions which had been in his mind before landing here were answered. Thus present hunger of body and mind were appeased. Yet, just as forthcoming hours must inevitably bring recurrent need of body fuel, so they would also impose new problems on his brain. Indeed, the solution of questions of no great personal concern had already brought up others far more grave.

Yesterday morning the decline and possible fall of Hoserán had been virtually nothing to him. If its people were decadent, its king degenerate and its lords and ladies mere sycophantic courtiers and courtesans, then it might as well die out of the world; and the manner of its passing, whether by gradual continuance of inner decay or by sudden external violence, would matter but little. Kingdoms much greater than this had, in past centuries and other continents, succumbed to one or both of these destructive agencies; and the world not only survived without them but forgot their existence. This jungle bound domain of Oriente would be small loss, he had felt yesterday. But today his mood was radically different. There was much here worth saving.

There was still an inherently clean, strong manhood, typified by those adolescent soldiers who had marched behind him in the bystreet down below. There was womanhood of the best type as well as of the worst. As for the material wealth of the place—the great store of mined gold and the greater deposits of precious mineral still unmined—that was of secondary importance in the opinion of McKay who, as he had told Cononaco, already possessed more riches than he could comfortably use. What troubled him was the creeping doom of a naturally decent race, the destruction of ideals inculcated by the Old Ones and fought for by successive generations of kings and warriors. To see all their endeavor and sacrifice made futile by a snaky halfbreed, half fop, half fiend, who had won his power by poison and still was poisoning the community under his rule, was tragedy.

The sober realization of this tragedy, intensified by recurrent memory of an individual tragedy seen last night, aroused in him various emotions, chief of which was a fierce anger against the source of all the evil here—Vicente. The scene witnessed in the temple, the revolting performance of the slaves for the pleasure of their king, the bloody profanation of the Old Ones by that king had caused coalescence of hitherto disunited impressions into a burning entity of hatred for the human reptile responsible. Had he attempted coolly to analyze the reason for this sudden solidification of feelings he probably would have failed; for the death of Salazar was of no personal concern, the statue was only a statue, the temple was not sacred to him.

But he made no effort to account for what he felt. He felt it, and that was enough. Basically it was the instinctive loathing of a decent man for something damnable and the equally instinctive desire to annihilate it. Which, perhaps, had been foreseen by Cononaco when that stealthy schemer led him to look upon indubitable proof of the nature of his king.

It was plain enough now that Cononaco desired the removal of this king, by death or otherwise, and the accession of a ruler who would loyally carry on the old order of things. At least it seemed plain on the surface. McKay had no means of knowing exactly what the Machiavellian plotter had really said to his ruler, or to others. He had only Cononaco's own word for that, and that word seemed

habitually deceptive. Yet, granting that this was his object, how did he purpose its accomplishment?

On the one hand he virtually goaded McKay into acting as the tool, on the other strenuously withheld him—even to the extent of almost killing him last night. At that moment the Northerner had been angry enough to shoot Vicente and as many of the Jiveros as his gun would kill. But still, Cononaco had been unaware that he possessed a weapon. Nobody but McKay himself knew that. So the oldster had undoubtedly believed that he was saving the hothead from virtual suicide, and himself from discovery and lethal punishment. In any case, he was at present averting the thing which he seemed bent upon—the end of the power of Vicente and all his evil influence. Why? Because, in his own words, certain things remained to be done. What things? And when they were done, what then?

WITH Vicente removed, some one else must assume control at once. There could be no interregnum. A sudden coup, with the old cry ready for the populace: "The king is dead! Long live the king!" That must be the procedure. McKay nodded. That was why the time was not yet right. The new king was not yet ready, or the people not yet ready for him, or her! As that thought struck him the thinker nearly dropped his cigar, and for a moment he stared with growing smile at the blank table top. Nuné! Nuné, queen not merely of the flame but of all Oriente! Why not? Cononaco had said she had better right to rule than Vicente. And there could be little doubt that he was devoted to her. Since men had failed to keep the throne clean, might he not now be planning the accession of a woman?

Then, slowly, he again grew somber. Cononaco himself had declared that no woman could rule the White Ones. And Nuné, gentle hearted as she was—afraid even of a thunderstorm, he recalled—could never become a militant queen of an innately warlike race. He knew that; and, somehow, was glad that she lacked those hard masculine qualities so essential to command. Well, then, who was the logical successor to the power of José and Rand? Perhaps, Cononaco!

McKay frowned. That thought might explain everything. Embittered by the incipient degradation of his proud race, Cononaco might well have determined to make himself king, to wield the knife mercilessly on the growing cancers of the body of Hoserán, to restore it to health, and to provide a worthy successor to carry on his work after him. He could not live many more years; but in only a few months, even in weeks, he could chop away the present disease at the roots and purge the whole realm of foulness, And where, indeed, could be found a better king than he, with his shrewdness and callousness and loyalty to the Old Ones? His worst obstacle would be that confronting every commoner aspiring to kingship—the lack of royal blood. Yet more than one commoner had become dictator, if not actual king; and the empty trappings of royalty would be least of this hardshell's desires, so long as he accomplished his work. Was this, then, his real goal in his present meanderings? Was he playing one against another and using all to advance his own personal ambition?

The thinker chewed on his cigar, then shrugged a shoulder resignedly. Surmise was useless. Cononaco would show his hand fully when ready. And he would have to be ready very soon now, or find his intricate schemes knocked into nothingness. In the mind of McKay was already established a time limit for his own participation in affairs hereabouts. What he would do in the interim would depend on whatever developments might arise. If those developments included the seizure of his plane, as hinted by Cononaco, then much might happen in rapid sequence. He joggled the gun under his armpit and smiled a thin, hard smile.

The thought led to another which brought to his eyes a speculative squint.

It was odd that Vicente should contemplate taking away that machine now, when he had not yet learned whether it would fly or how to fly it. Had that intention been put into his head by some one else, for instance, by Cononaco? Perhaps Cononaco, having a definite use for the Northerner somewhere in his plans, felt it advisable to make sure that no means of escape remained within his reach. It was quite possible. In fact, though McKay merely guessed at it, that was the exact truth.

Now the airman drew a long final puff from his cigar, tossed the butt out of the door and arose. Out to his machine he passed and up into it he climbed to reassure himself that no meddling hand had touched it since he had last gone over it. The clothing worn last night, still soggy, lay there as he had left it when he stalked stark to bed. He straightened it out and laid it on the wings to dry more presentably; then, on second thought, he rolled it all up and secreted it in the baggage compartment, where lay also the damp, soiled clothes worn on his first secret journey across the rainswept plaza.

He turned the black thumb key. The soft hum of the power responded. He turned it off, descended and walked back to the outer door. There he stood idly gazing about the plaza, awaiting the next thing to come.

He had not long to wait. Something had already come—and passed. While he had been eating breakfast, in fact, that thing had gone by, a thing on two legs, summoned from the *cuartel*, where it had recently been discreetly awaiting its best time, to the palace, where sat a cruel mouthed king and a humiliated, vindictive commandant.

The face of that thing was that of Basilio, erstwhile dagger wielding sycophant. And now Basilio had spoken words which had banished from the mind of his supreme lord all thought of the new airplane and all other inanimate things. And as the result of those words new developments were already under way.

CHAPTER XXI

A PROPHECY COMES TRUE

THE LONE guard who had replaced the former half squad came to rigid attention.

McKay, gazing absently toward the obelisk whence the bronze José Martinez looked steadily back at him, caught the sudden stiffening in the soldier's posture and straightened slightly himself. The face of the sentry was toward the western end of the plaza, where stood the house of the king; and in his punctilious assumption of soldierly respect could be read the approach of very high authority.

The observer's right hand lifted and loosed his half buttoned shirt front. Then he stepped back inside and entered his bedroom.

Came a soft tap on the door, a softer footstep in the vestibule. There stood Vicente.

"Ha! Good morning, my mighty drinker!" he jovially greeted, extending his hand. "*Por Dios*, you look as if you had never touched a goblet, and men tell me you toured the city yesterday in the hot sun, while I was completely paralyzed! *Á fe mía*, my head is a little foggy even now! How do you recover so quickly?"

So comradely was his tone, so engaging his laughing look and winning air that the icy gray eyes momentarily thawed. But the dour Northerner made no move to accept the tendered grip of fellowship. After a barely perceptible pause Vicente's hand moved aside as if merely continuing an idle gesture, and his tongue formed another question without awaiting answer to the first.

"And now that you have looked well at Hoserán, *compañero*, what do you think of it?"

"I think," deliberately replied the visitor, "that the city itself is a credit to its founders, but that its people could be bettered."

"Ah! So? In what way?"

No resentful frown accompanied the query, nor was the king's voice piqued. Rather, it expressed eager concern.

"By driving all Jiveros out where they

belong and keeping the city clear of them. They befoul the whole place."

The brows of the half Jivero lifted. But still no hint of anger was discernible. Instead he looked frankly puzzled.

"But," said he slowly, "they have always been used as house slaves, Meredito, as well as in the fields; and if we put them all out of the city what are we to do for servants? It has been so ever since the time of José and Ran. But perhaps they are growing bold, and if they are, be sure they shall be put in their place! You found nothing else to criticize? Be frank, my friend! It may be that you, who are new here, have observed things not noticed by me."

"Nothing else," briefly answered McKay, "that I care to speak of now."

"*Bien*. There are still some things you have not seen. The army, for one. I should like to have you, who have seen the armies of North America and Europe, look at mine and suggest any improvements likely to be useful. We shall have a parade of all men within the city at midforenoon and you shall review them with me and tell me your opinion of them and their arms and discipline. And after that we shall inspect the forts. Is that agreeable?"

"Decidedly."

The ex-captain's face betrayed unmistakable interest. Few proposals could have intrigued him more than that of watching the White Ones march under arms. Vicente smiled.

"Good," said he. "And while the preparations are made let us look at something else. There is a sight across the plaza which you must not miss, Meredito, after coming so far to see all that pertains to José and Ran. Perhaps you have thought we moderns do not honor the Old Ones as we should. But you will change your opinion when you have seen this. Let us go."

HE MOVED indolently outward. McKay stood still, brows contracting and hands curling into fists. The promised sight could be none other than the double statue which he had not yet openly visited but of which he already knew too much. For a second he felt that if he again gazed on it, with Vicente at hand, he was likely to smash Vicente's head against it. But then, wordless, he picked up a loose coat, donned it and moved forward. Certainly there could be no plausible reason to refuse the invitation. And, since it was evident that the caller not only had no present intention of removing the plane but had temporarily forgotten its existence, there was little use in remaining on guard over it.

Outside loitered four of the silken lords of the mesa, whom he had last seen stupid with drink at the king's bacchanal dinner. Like their ruler, they probably had been prostrated yesterday, for none of them had been visible in the interim; but now, like him, they seemed not only recovered but in rare good humor. Merry greetings and robust jests, accompanied by a humorous staggering about by one of them and a comic assumption of "morning after" headache by another, greeted the appearance of their quondam tablemate. He thawed again, bantering each in turn, while Vicente snickered. Toadies though they were, their hilarity was infectious; and aside from a measure of contempt for their sycophancy he had no feeling against them.

As the little party moved at a leisurely pace toward the temple of the Old Ones, with the king and his guest prisoner in the lead, McKay briefly wondered whether those jocund lords knew the infernal secret of the statue toward which they were advancing. He doubted it. The fact that the half Jivero surrounded with such stealth his indulgence in atavistic savagery at night, with no other White One at hand, and with armed Jiveros on watch against all possible comers—this was strong indication that none but he and his slaves was allowed to know what passed there.

Although the repeated disappearances of strangers would inevitably cause considerable conjecture, quite likely all mesa dwellers deemed it best not to betray

curiosity. And when not even Nuné suspected the existence of the opening at the top of the stone or the mechanism, whatever it might be, concealed below, why should any one else?

That thought brought to his mind a sudden practical explanation of the custom of keeping the encircling flame always alight. While it burned, nobody could climb to the top of the stone head and discover its hollowness. How infernally ingenious the whole thing was! And what hideous irony lay in the devotion of the lives of pure women to the ceaseless care of a bloodstained monster born of madness.

He scowled, shut his teeth and forced himself to take notice of other things. Some one behind him voiced another quip, and he tossed back a light reply. His gaze roved along the square, casually observing that the porches were becoming populous as word passed that the royal party was abroad. Over at the *cuartel* several soldiers grouped at the big doorway as if about to march, and the lookout on the roof seemed talking to somebody below, out of sight. Ahead, as they approached that porchless wall behind which must wait the Old Ones, a door swung slowly open. Beyond it shone lights, pale and lifeless compared to the sun glare, yet banishing the darkness which otherwise would have lain in the portal. Toward this Vicente ambled at the same languid pace, broaching some inane jest as he drew near. The courtiers laughed politely, but none responded in kind. All grew silent.

INTO the broad room, with its golden lamps and its soft fire and its bright eyed double head, they passed in turn; Vicente first, as befitted his supreme status, with McKay next and the little retinue following. Behind them the door closed noiselessly. With the exclusion of daylight the hall resumed its wonted aspect, the wall lights exerting their usual influence on the expressive carvings and the blazing jewels. From this point of entrance both faces were visible at once, both watching sidelong, their austere features standing out in profile against other lights beyond. And, either because of the play of the fires or because of McKay's mood, both seemed foreboding and heavy with threat.

He stopped. To the nobles behind it might seem that the halt was impelled by amazement and awe. But it was not the statue which caught at him. Below the colossus was another face, a face in which hazel eyes had fastened instantly on his, and above which a great topaz flamed in a circlet of gold. Nuné, in full robe of office, stood beside the fire which to her was still sacred, but which to him had become a demoniac mockery of all things decent. Her poise was regal, her face impersonal; but in her gaze was a warning, invisible to all but the man for whom it was intended, yet to his alert senses as palpable as the impact of an unseen electric current.

Something was wrong. What, he did not know. Neither, perhaps, did she. But something.

He looked again at the statue. Nothing new was there. He glanced to either side of it. Nothing there, either. Cornerwise, he glimpsed the black eyes of Vicente regarding him keenly. Nothing strange about that; he would naturally look to see the effect of the weird creation on the son of the McKays. Behind him he sensed only a silent respect for the impressive deity. After that brief pause he resumed forward motion.

Without a word he walked slowly all around the statue, giving it the attention due from a stranger. And without a word Vicente accompanied him. The four satellites followed halfway; then, at a short gesture from their king, they drew off to one side, unnoticed by the upward looking Northerner. As the steadily moving pair rounded the pedestal and came close to Nuné, McKay let his eyes drop and looked straight at her. She did not return his look now. Apparently ignoring his presence, she gazed toward the door by which he had entered. Something in that gaze turned his own atten-

tion to the same point. For an instant he almost stopped again. Against that closed door stood a soldier. In his right hand was a naked machete.

An armed guard, here, inside the temple! Decidedly, something was wrong!

THERE were two other doors on the same side. A swift glance proved that at each of these also stood an armed man, hitherto half hidden by the thickness of the adjacent walls, but now plain to any eye from this central viewpoint. None had a rifle. But each held his short sword drawn.

Then, as the slow pacing pair came again under the hawk face of José, the Northerner discovered another disquieting development. In the hitherto empty space beyond him stood the four lords whom he had supposed to be still following and, with them, other nobles of Hoserán. Unheard, the newcomers had entered from some passage way, perhaps one or both of those previously used by McKay and Cononaco, where, obviously, they had been waiting. Now all looked with cold gravity at the outlander. And he, staring back at them, suddenly felt himself in a trap.

While he stared, Vicente quietly walked several feet aside, stopping on almost the exact spot where last night he had watched the reddening of the carven stone. Now, gloating on the theatrical scene he had so cunningly arranged, he grinned widely at the astounded American and at Nuné, who, moving slowly after them, had cleared the intervening pedestal and in her turn discovered the increase in the purple clad array. Wide eyed, hand lifted to her breast, she stood with all color suddenly drained from her clear skin. The lords of the rock looked back at her without change of expression.

"As I was saying," came the voice of Vicente, careless, yet edged with malice, "this is a sight you should not miss, Meredito *mío*. And, as I think I also said, if you have thought we do not honor the Old Ones as we should you shall change your opinion. Yes. Yessss!

"These are the Old Ones, Meredito, above you. José Martinez on this side and David Rand on that. And there behind you is Nuné, the Queen of the Flame, whose duty is to keep the Old Ones always guarded from common hands by the care of the fire, and to keep herself also guarded from men by her own virtue. And we of Hoserán are as reverent toward the Queen of the Flame as toward the great fathers under her guard. If any man dares to lay hand on her he must pay for his crime by death. And if she forgets her station and allows the embrace of any man, she too must pay the penalty. Yessss!

"So there they are, Meredito, all three of them." A slight pause. Then, sharp as the snap of a whip, "Has any of them changed since you last looked at them?"

From Nuné came a low gasp. McKay glanced at her, glared at the maliciously grinning king, swept a look aside at the group of courtiers. For a long minute the big room was utterly still. Nobody spoke. Yet from somewhere sounded a voice, a tiny voice, far back in his own brain; the foreboding voice of Cononaco, dragging him at night out of this same grim place.

"*You have done an evil thing. And evil will come from it! Evil will come!*"

Prophecy had proved true. Evil had come.

CHAPTER XXII

COURT MARTIAL

A MAD impulse seized McKay. To shoot that purple snake dead, fight his way out and then—

Yes, what then? Even if he should dash for his plane he could hardly reach it; too many men and daggers were near. Granting that he could reach it, the obstructing doors must still be opened, and before he could take wing he would be shot by men from the *cuartel*. Probably those riflemen whom he had seen at the fort door were now outside these very walls. He stood still, again glaring at Vicente.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he jarred.

"About you, my simple spy from Quito!" A sudden hateful sneer leaped into the mocking voice. "About you and your sweetheart, who is plotting with you to overthrow Hoserán! Your sweetheart, our pure Queen of the Flame, who brings you here by night and, here in the very sight of the Old Ones, indulges with you in—"

"You filthy lying whelp!" roared McKay.

His gun hand shot upward to his chest, then halted and sank as he strode forward. Shooting was too easy. He would mash that mouth with his fists, break this reptile with bare hands, hurl him into the stone face of José Martinez to crumple and fall on the fire.

He might better have shot. For now Vicente moved swiftly, and in his hand a pistol pointed steadily at his raging foe's stomach.

"Halt, or die without trial!" he snapped.

With a smothered curse McKay halted. Vicente's eye was deadly.

"Back!"

Slowly the prisoner backed. And, as he retrograded, he took an iron grip on his temper. Violence would gain nothing now. Moreover, his own fate was not the only one in the balance. Reaching his former place, he glanced again at Nuné, finding her pale but haughtily defiant. When he spoke again it was with cold restraint.

"You're crazy. I never saw this young lady before."

"No? You are very forgetful, Meredito." The king spoke now in a purring tone. "Yes, your memory is very short. But others are longer. Perhaps the queen herself can recall some things you took too lightly to remember. What have you to say, *Reina?*"

"I think," Nuné proudly retorted, "that the Queen of the Flame is above the necessity of defending herself against such contemptible charges, particularly from such a contemptible person!"

The answer wiped the sneering smile from the halfbreed's lips and twisted them in rage. His pistol, still centered on McKay, twitched a little aside, as if obeying a murderous impulse to destroy the scornful queen. But the movement halted. From the watching lords had sounded a hiss of indrawn breath; and on more than one face was approval of the haughty reply. There were limits even to the despotism of Vicente and to the complaisance of his vassals.

"Well spoken!" approved McKay. "Vicente, you are a dirty liar in every particular. This lady is a stranger to me. She is not plotting with me to overthrow Hoserán. She does not bring me here by night, nor by day either. She never saw me before. Everything you've said or insinuated is a rotten lie invented by your own maggoty mind. If you still have that insane idea that I'm a spy, then stick to that point and do what you damned please about it. But leave this lady out of it."

The black eyes glimmered with sharpened hate, and the covering weapon twitched again. But the verbal answer came with sarcastic self-possession.

"Well spoken!" Words and tone mocked McKay's. "A gallant attempt, Meredito *mío*, to protect your—ah—friend, but rather clumsy and crude in its method. Unfortunately it is you who is the liar here. And, more unfortunately, there are witnesses who can prove it! You may have forgotten—your memory is so bad—that you two were not altogether alone here; also that there was a storm, with heavy rain and thunder, which might prevent you, with your attention fixed on other matters, from hearing movements around you. Ha! You do remember that, eh? We shall refresh your memory of other things without delay."

THE PRISONER'S mouth had contracted at mention of witnesses. Cononaco! The old deceiver must have played false, not merely to him but to Nuné! Such was his first sudden thought. And others—it was possible that there had been others, hidden at doors or in

passages. This whole rock reeked of espionage.

But aside from his involuntary tightening of lips he gave no evidence of concern. One thing was clear. This was to be a trial, or rather the semblance of one, rather than an arbitrary condemnation and execution by the czar of the acropolis. For all his arrogance, Vicente could not deal with McKay, descendant of the old hero still reverenced here, as summarily as with Salazar and his predecessors. There would be altogether too much talk, too many insinuations, with possible aftermath of anger among the people, to make it wise to disregard public opinion entirely. Still less could he condemn Nuné, revered by all Hoserán and better born than himself, without at least a pretense of proving her guilt. So, though he himself was judge and jury with penalty already decided in his mind, he had summoned his parrots to watch the proceedings and share the responsibility. Not all the aristocrats of the mesa were here, but enough were present to serve his purpose.

Even those whom he had summoned, however, were not altogether servile. Already some of them had manifested sympathy for the queenly Nuné. Whatever else he might do, the king must satisfy their minds of her complicity with the foreigner.

"Produce your lying witnesses," contemptuously demanded McKay. "You know very well that I was asleep in my house, led there by your own servants and surrounded by your own soldiers, when you say I was here. But bring out your liars and let me look at them. And you can put away your gun, coward."

The final sneer brought another flare of temper to the Spanish countenance. But it had its effect, bringing home to both the king and his underlings his apparent fear of an unarmed captive. The weapon did not vanish, but the purple sleeved arms folded in a gesture of disdain. The blue barrel, however, rested in the crook of an elbow, ready for swift action if needed. Plainly he had no intention of allowing the man breaking Northerner to come within arm's length.

Over a shoulder he snapped—

"Bring Cononaco!"

A silence. Then from a door opening on one of the concealed passages came a soldier, empty handed, whom McKay recognized as one of the guards hitherto friendly to him. Saluting, the man tersely reported—

"Cononaco has not been found."

"Not found!"

Vicente glared. The soldier made no reply. Suddenly the king struck him across the face with the pistol. The man gave back, blood gushing from a gash opened by the sharp foresight; then stood mute, though his hands closed hard.

"Not found, you worm!" raged his ruler. "Bring Cononaco, I said, not such a word as that! Tell your commandant to find that limping old monkey at once and fetch him here! *Vaya!*"

The soldier went, stiff backed, stony eyed. Passing through the doorway whence he had come, he threw back at his king one look, unobserved by any one. In that look was vengeful anger.

VICENTE, after that swift blow and dismissal, had riveted his gaze again on the pair of prisoners. He grinned again, and his tongue ran along his lips as if tasting the blood he had just drawn.

"Basilio!" he called.

"*Aquí!*" sounded the proud reply.

A low murmur of surprise passed among the aristocrats. Basilio, recently their peer, more recently stripped of rank and banished, was again among them and again their equal. Unnoticed, he had come up behind them, and now he triumphantly walked before them. Once more he was in immaculate white, with his sash of royal purple flaunting itself across the snowy blouse as evidence of restoration of his former status. With proud strut and venomous sidelong glance at McKay, he walked to his master's side, folded his arms to copy the posture of the king and arrogantly regarded all.

"Basilio, do you know anything

interesting about these two people?" prompted the persecutor.

"*Si*, King, that I do!" Basilio grinned evilly. "I know that on the night before last, at the start of the storm, these two and Cononaco came in here. First came the Queen, who sent away the virgin on watch. Then came this spy and Cononaco. Cononaco stopped at the door. This man and the queen walked around the Old Ones while he looked at them. Then they talked a long time very secretly, keeping well away from Cononaco. And then—"

He paused an instant, leering at his fellows and at the accused pair.

"—and then they embraced, here beside the sacred fire—and that fire is pale and cold compared to the ardor of those embraces! Ah! You should have seen!"

"That is a lie!"

The passionate contradiction broke from Nuné. Scarlet cheeked, lips aquiver with anger, eyes and brow jewel ablaze with equal flame, she threw out a denunciatory hand at the informer as if hurling a dagger. Basilio blenched. His folded arms sprang apart as if warding off a flying missile, and he gave ground. Then, catching himself, he stood and forced another leer.

McKay, starting forward with fists clenched, found himself instantly covered again by the muzzle of the king's pistol. Gritting his teeth, he halted again.

"Lies! All lies!" he rasped. "And I'll ram them all down your rotten throat yet! Come here to me like a man!"

Basilio did not come. Vicente took up the challenge for him.

"So Basilio is now the liar, eh? A moment ago it was I. And—"

"You and he both!" McKay broke in. "And if this is the best case you can make up it's a mighty poor one. You kicked this yellow dog off the rock two days ago. Now he sneaks back with this mess of lies to revenge himself on me for knocking him down, and you swallow the mess and back him up. Bah! What is his word worth? Even if this wild story were true, how could he know it?"

"I was here and saw it!" brazenly asserted Basilio. "I followed you in."

The blunt counter gave McKay pause. Nuné, though still furious, paled. Basilio recovered aplomb.

"As I have told my king," he pompously declared, "I remained his loyal servant even while under his temporary displeasure. I was suspicious of Cononaco. I kept track of his movements. He is sly, but a keen watcher like me can trail him. He brought you to this place, and I came in behind and saw all from that passage there."

He pointed. Then, without prompting, he glibly described in circumstantial detail the movements and positions of the three who had been there that night. All listened intently, McKay preserving outward contempt and Nuné maintaining her proud dignity, but both inwardly facing the fact that further denial was virtually useless. The tale of their accuser was irrefutable. His assured manner in itself carried weight. So, also with his fellows of the purple sash, did the fact that he was once more one of them. Although perhaps none of them realized it, the restoration of his insignia of favor exerted on them a psychological influence which Vicente, at least, had counted upon. By the time his statement was complete the defendants were practically adjudged guilty.

AS THE pair listened, however, both became convinced that the man built his whole story on a basic lie; that he had not been there at all that night. Most of his details were accurate, but some were, to those who knew, absurdly wrong. It became evident, though only to McKay and Nuné, who could not question those errors without thereby corroborating his charge that they had been together at that time, that Basilio had gotten this tale from somebody else. From whom? Back to both minds came Cononaco's blind warning—

"One of the virgins is not all she should be."

That was the answer. One of the

Maidens of the Flame, probably the one sent away that night by Nuné, must be in liaison with Basilio and must have spied and given him a full report. Perhaps she wished herself to become the queen. Cononaco had had some suspicion of her, but had lacked sufficient definite knowledge to forsee the present result of her treachery. Fleetingly McKay wondered where Cononaco was now. Had he gotten wind of this sudden contretemps and taken measures to save himself? The Northerner hoped so. Basilio's tale, as well as the absence of the old schemer now when his king wanted him, proved that he had not betrayed his *princesa*. Now, if caught, he would most likely pay the extreme penalty for conniving with the pair accused of plotting against the kingdom.

His mind leaped ahead to the probable doom intended by Vicente. It would not be a public execution; of that he felt certain. Rather, when the lords of the rock had concurred in condemnation, the king would dismiss them from further participation and himself attend to their fate—in private. McKay would vanish by night, as had Salazar, amid the same obscene slaves, into the same blood-stained maw. Nuné might eventually follow; but not at once; not until she had been kept captive awhile in some secret cell. In the black eyes which now recurrently rested on her was a shine which McKay could interpret if she could not.

His hands lifted, loosely gripping the long lapels of his open coat. Two finger tips crept just inside the adjacent shirt front and stayed there. From a corner of his mouth he whispered, with gaze still fixed on Basilio:

"Walk away. Get behind the stone."

Nuné studied him sidelong. Her lips opened to reply with question or objection or warning, but closed without forming words. He had moved a little away from her and was intent on the concluding declarations of Basilio.

As that pig cheeked accuser ended his maliciously distorted description of the bold embrace of the queen by the outlander, Nuné moved. Scornfully she turned her back on Vicente and his myrmidon and walked from them, passing along beside the fire ring to the other face of the idol. There she stood, proud and aloof.

The king scowled after her, but spoke no word. The courtiers watched her, and more than one looked troubled. To adjudge so fair a princess, always hitherto respected, guilty of treason to her sacred trust was not easy. Yet when the charge was brought by their supreme ruler and supported by credible evidence there seemed no other course. The grip of that ruler on their own necks was absolute; and the guilt seemed proved.

"A MOST interesting yarn," ironically commented McKay. "And since you are determined to believe it, Vicente, there's not much use in contradicting it. But explain to me one thing. With four *soldados* watching my house how could I have come to this place?"

"That is a point that needs explaining. Yesss! But I will let *you* explain it. Also explain how it happened that two of those guards were killed that night and thrown off the mesa. Or have you forgotten about that also?"

A startled look, followed by a hardening of expression, swept the faces of the lords. The deaths of those soldiers were known, but until now none had connected the visitor with them.

"It is just possible, eh, that those poor *soldados* were stabbed in the dark and carried to the path to make it seem that they had fallen from it?" grinned Vicente. "Just possible, yes. And another thing possible comes to my mind. Basilio, you say it rained hard and this man came in wet, wearing a dark suit. I will send a man to find those clothes and bring them here, so that we may see that they have been wet, and perhaps still are wet. Ha! That makes you start, eh, Meredito?"

McKay had started, and with good reason. Although these telltale clothes were hidden, they could be found. And their discovery and inspection would destroy the last thin chance.

"Never mind," he coldly bade. Imperceptibly his fingers slid farther within the shirt. "Your poll parrot's yarn is true enough, except that it's twisted all out of shape. I was here by night, and saw some very interesting things. But this lady was not here with me. And it was last night, not the night before!"

Everybody stared—Basilio, the grandees, Nuné, Vicente. Vicente, indeed, seemed petrified.

"And I saw," the American swiftly pursued, eyes boring into those of the halfbreed king, "the most damnable thing imaginable. I saw the secret of vanishing men. I saw a white man, bound and gagged, stand against this stone while naked Jiveros—yes, Jiveros!—pranced around him and a half Jivero stood and watched. I saw the Jiveros drag that white man up to the top of this hellish statue and lower him into a hole in its head, and I saw his blood come into the faces of the Old Ones! I saw the Old Ones defiled, the sacred fire out, the decency of the White Ones mocked, the honor of Hoserán and Oriente befouled by jungle brutes by order of a lower brute, a filthy animal born of a stinking slave woman and a degenerate king—a poisoner—a murderer—a traitor to all white blood—a rotter who rots the whole kingdom he rules! And I can prove it! You men, put out the fire and climb to the top of this stone and look down into it! Climb and look, and then say whether the Queen Nuné and Hoserán and you yourselves will longer be under the power of a fiend like this Vicente! Climb and—"

Across his thundering denunciation shrilled the scream of a maddened cat. Vicente, aroused from his stupefaction, had voiced that inarticulate screech of rage. Lips drawn back, teeth agleam, face writhing in fury, he jerked his arms apart, leveled his weapon, fired.

The bullet flattened on the pedestal. McKay had sidestepped, right hand darting forward as he dodged. Instantly crashed a retaliating shot.

Vicente, king of Oriente, staggered, fell on his face, and lay dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

A KING IS BORN

FOR A second nobody in the temple of the Old Ones moved. Then two moved at once.

The pistol of the dead king still was clutched in his hand. At the same instant two men leaped to seize it—McKay and Basilio. The latter, nearer, got it. It did him no good. As he swung it up toward the Northerner a bullet drilled his skull. He flopped on the body of his late lord and was still.

In another instant the twice captured gun was in the grip of the fighting outlander. Doubly armed, he whirled on the still paralyzed lords of Hoserán.

"Now, gentlemen," said he, between his teeth, "this trial is over! So is the rotten rule you have enjoyed so long. Stand still—very still!"

He wheeled again, darting rapid glances at the soldiers guarding the three outer doors. Two of them had sprung forth, machetes raised, but slowed uncertainly. The third, still in place, gave McKay a straight look tinged with respect and tossed his weapon to the floor.

"Pick it up!" snapped McKay. "Open that door and stand by! You others, drop them! *Pronto!*"

He still was turning, looking all ways at once, or so it seemed, but now covering the soldiers who had started toward him. They obeyed his command, one promptly, one slowly and sullenly. At a gesture of one pistol both backed away. At once he was again facing the purple sashed group, which seemed dazed by the rapidity of events but was beginning to scowl and finger poniards.

"Backward march!" he barked. "All of you! To the end of the hall! And stay there! You, soldier!" This over his shoulder. "Is all clear outside? Nuné, go—"

"No, señor!" yelled the man he had trusted. "There is—"

Crack! Crack-crack! Rifle shots cut off his words. *Bang!* The door slammed violently shut, shoved home by the man who had looked out. In the split second

between the gunshots and the thump all heard a babble of yells and a crackle of more distant shooting. With the closing of the thick barrier the noises sank to a muffled confusion.

"There is a fight!" bawled the man. "Men come from the *cuartel*—"

"Meredito! *Cuidado! Cuidado! Los Jiveros!*"

High, clear, dominating all other sounds by its intensity, the voice of Nuné rang in alarm. From somewhere, loathsome and evil as a pack of brown rats, had materialized a dozen or more of the savage slaves of Vicente. Silently they were sneaking toward McKay. All were armed with machetes.

They were on the side of the statue where brooded the lowering face of Ran, and where still stood Nuné. At her cry they turned malevolent eyes on her. Involuntarily she shrank a little from them, as from creeping vermin. Forgetful of all else, McKay strode at them.

"*Soldados!* To me!" he snapped. With that he began shooting.

A Jivero fell—another—another. But the rest, with sudden yells, dodged, scattered, leaped in from both sides, ran around the pedestal to come at him from behind. At the doors all three soldiers sprang forward, the armed one bounding at the nearest Jiveros, the other two snatching up their weapons and running at others of the brown men with the enmity of hereditary racial hate. The lords of Hoserán too hurled themselves into the attack, poniards agleam.

THEN the warlike Old Ones looked down on a mêlée such as should have brought grins to their harsh lips and a brighter gleam to their blazing eyes. Pistols flashed and spat in the fists of the young McKay; machetes and daggers hacked and stabbed; brains and blood gushed from blasted heads and slashed bodies; yells, screams, choking oaths and groans blended in a grisly medley. Blades dripping red heaved aloft for fresh strokes and spattered drops of wet crimson on José and Rand alike. White men and brown struck at each other with gutting steel and clawing hands, and white men also struck at white. For, while some of the courtiers fought furiously to exterminate the armed slaves, others sought vengefully to stab in back or throat the foreigner who had killed their king and, with him, their own power in Hoserán.

Nuné, torn with terror and sickened by the sudden carnage, backed away from it. Before her, unbidden, leaped three of the younger aristocrats, to stand shoulder to shoulder, with poniards ready, as a protective wall against possible harm. Others were not so worthy. Their first unreasoning rush expended, some fought from blind blood lust, some retreated as they met ferocious Jivero assailants, and one or two ran frantically from the fray, seeking any outlet to safety. And, as has been said, a few made the cause of the slaves their own, striving to slay the Northerner.

McKay, teeth agleam in a fighting grin fierce as that of any Jivero, shot right and left, dodging with instinctive prescience the sweeps of long knives. Brown bodies streaked with red crumpled and were gone from sight. Brown faces fell back at the ends of pistol flashes and vanished. Yet still brown fists with hungry blades chopped at him. And as his last shot sped, a brown body underfoot tripped and threw him.

He was down. But he came up. And with him came two machetes seized from the floor, dropped by dead hands. A falling body struck him as he rose, a body on which he glimpsed the tan uniform of a soldier, but he knocked it aside and regained his feet. Then he slashed and stabbed in indiscriminate attack on all around.

They were not many. Three Jiveros and four aristocrats—lowest and highest castes united by common hate—comprised the disordered group still assailing him. All other combatants were down. But those seven now had but one opponent, and on him they could concentrate all their ferocity.

THE THREE soldiers were dead. The three lords protecting Nuné held aloof. The American must fight his fight alone.

A Jivero, slashed wide open across the stomach, collapsed like an empty sack. A snarling grandee, stabbed to the heart, jerked sidewise and sprawled. Through the gap McKay essayed a leap for the pedestal, where his back would be covered by solid stone. But again he stumbled on a body below and fell headlong. Through the space where he had been three blades hissed in hard swings, two of them clashing with hard scrape. The fall had saved him—for an instant.

Nuné, watching tensely across the adjoining shoulders of her idle attendants, gave them sudden shoves and an imperative order.

"Help him!"

"No!"

They stepped back into their former places. She shoved at them again, seeking now to break through between them. Thereupon they closed around her, blocking further movement in any direction. Perforce she stood still.

Another of the remaining five, a Jivero, plunged away from the knot of assailants, turned around twice, and fell in a squirming huddle, hands pressed on his body. McKay, warned by instinct that he had no time to retrieve this second downfall, had turned on his back and stabbed upward at the nearest abdomen. Four attackers were left—and their man was down.

They struck. They missed. Their prey had rolled aside even as he stabbed. Then the last Jivero sprang on him, dropping his machete to close with clawing hands—a ravening beast striving to tear out eyes with long nails and to sink teeth into the throat. Instantly McKay loosed his own blade and seized the brown body in a crushing grip. Above, the three royalists halted new dagger thrusts, momentarily balked. That slave formed an involuntary shield for the man whom they meant to reach.

In another moment they might have stabbed that slave and tried to pull him away in order to flesh their steel in the regicide below. But in that moment came new antagonists. Unnoticed, a door from the plaza had sprung open and through the portal had bounded men. Men in uniform, these were, men with guns in hand and the fire of fight in their faces. They were few, but enough; half a dozen, perhaps, and all riflemen. In the lead was that wrathful soldier whose face Vicente had wantonly cut open by his undeserved blow. Last of all, outdistanced by younger legs but hobbling fast, came Cononaco.

A half second of pause, while quick eyes swept the confused scene. Then came a curt command from the lame veteran, and they charged on the purple sashed trio hesitating over the fighting pair on the floor. One of the aristocrats descried them and voiced warning. The dagger armed three confronted the gun armed six.

"Back, you dogs!" commanded an ugly jawed grandee.

For answer, one of the soldiers swung a rifle barrel against his head. Stunned, he fell.

"Smash their empty skulls!" came the hoarse countermand of Cononaco. "Oom Keh! Where is Oom Keh?"

Limping ahead at top speed, he threw anxious glances all about. Dead and dying men littered the crimsoned floor. The grappling McKay and his Jivero foe lay near the base of the pedestal, amid other prone figures and were not quickly distinguishable. For a long second the hobbling veteran's gaze rested on the purple shape of Vicente and the humped corpse of Basilio. A grin gashed his face and was gone. Again he called—

"Oom Keh!"

Nobody answered. Nobody had breath to answer, except Nuné, and she was tensely watching the clutching, crushing death lock on the floor. The Jivero, muscular and broad, was astoundingly strong and fiendishly foul in fight, and the white man was battling him desperately. Meanwhile the hitherto inactive trio

guarding Nuné had suddenly become combatants.

THE SIGHT of a common soldier striking down a courtier, the harsh behests of Cononaco to brain the others, exploded their tempers and impelled them into fierce action. To them this was more serious than an irruption of a band of vengeful slaves, more momentous than the death of Vicente, already over and therefore irrevocable, or the possible injury of Nunè. It was mutiny in the army and attack on their own lordly caste; a blow at their very existence; revolution and ruin. The facts that the soldiers were few, that they were not shooting but striking with their guns, that they obviously were under command of Cononaco and had come primarily to find and support McKay—these circumstances did not matter to the enraged nobles. Simultaneously they sprang to aid their peers and rout the rebels.

The soldiers, knocking back the two other aristocrats with hard but not murderous blows of barrel or butt, had discerned McKay and swarmed to overwhelm his slavering antagonist. Then they hesitated. Unaided, the Northerner had wrestled his enemy under and gained an unbreakable throat hold. Despite herculean struggles, the Jivero was dying. The White Ones grinned and watched, momentarily forgetful of the vindictive pair of lords whom they had assaulted and the three others who had been standing aloof. That moment of aberrance cost them their lives.

Like swooping hawks the wearers of the purple were upon them, daggers stabbing for vitals. Three of the soldiers, turning too late to meet the unexpected attack, went down as one man. Two others, a shade more speedy of instinctive movement, evaded instantaneous death but staggered from grievous wounds. With fierce battle yells they and their one unharmed mate swung guns. A grandee dropped with skull fractured. But swiftly repeated stabs brought down the two wounded men. And the one hitherto unhurt was ripped open by a low horizontal slash as he bludgeoned another noble to death.

Three sycophants of Vicente stood victorious. But only for a moment. With a harsh growl Cononaco, *capitán* of fighting men long before these pampered pets were born, hurled his cane at them, snatched from the floor a bloodstained machete and advanced to attack. He spoke no word. But his old eyes were hard as agate, his few teeth agrin in lethal menace. The blood inflamed aristocrats sprang at him. Three to one, and that one old and crippled, the outcome was obvious.

Yet the obvious is not always truth. The first to come within reach of the sinewy old arm learned that fact at cost of life. The machete did not swing aloft nor sidewise and thus waste a precious fragment of time. It darted forward and was gone—a mere jab and instant recovery. But that short movement had severed a jugular vein. And the possessor of that vein flung a hand to his throat, stared, staggered and sank among the other dead men.

Before he had struck the floor the long blade had slashed sidewise across the face of another assailant. With a ghastly scream that other reeled aside, both forearms jerking across his forehead. His eyes were gone.

Only one of the three drew blood from the canny veteran of a hundred battles; and that blood came only from a flesh wound. The poniard struck from the left for the heart. But a skinny forearm, automatically outflung, intervened to take the steel. As the dagger was withdrawn the machete swung overhead for a skull splitting downstroke. In the bare nick of time the stabber sprang back from under the chopping edge. Then, while the old man recovered balance, he stooped, grabbed a fallen rifle, shoved its muzzle forward and pulled the trigger.

A dull click was the only response. The gun was empty. So were all others brought in by the soldiers, who had shot

away their loads in a running fight outside and carried no reserve ammunition.

WITH a harsh chuckle Cononaco hopped forward, his blade again lifted. The rifle jerked aloft in instinctive parry. The machete hissed down, but did not clack on the gun barrel. Instead it pulled back, evading the blocking weapon, then licked forward in a still descending lunge. An appalling groan sounded. The purple sash fell apart, cut in two and dyed with a swift rush of red. Its wearer doubled forward and pitched headlong, completely eviscerated.

"Ha!" gloated Cononaco, sweeping a hungry glance around.

His eye lit on the bowed form of the man whom he had just blinded. With scrambling step he approached it, and with ruthless efficiency he swung his blade once more. The crouching figure dropped and was still, beheaded.

Coolly the *capitán* surveyed the room in search of further foes. He found none. In all the hall only one other person stood—Nuné, who, repelled yet uncontrollably attracted by the bare handed homicide at the foot of the statue, had drawn much nearer to it. On that grimly silent termination to the most primitive form of fight Cononaco now advanced with quick hops. Then he stopped and stood idle. To his wounded arm he gave no attention, though it steadily dripped.

The Jivero, with one last convulsive tremor, died. McKay relaxed his iron grip and cast a quick look around, then arose. Hard jawed, he surveyed the scene more slowly. His eyes came to rest on the attentive brown orbs of Cononaco.

"What's going on outside?" he demanded.

"Nothing—now. There was a fight. Now this rock is cleaned. We had to shoot Oliverio and a few other fools. Now the fort is held by our own men and the rock by Oom Keh and Nuné and Cononaco. Ho!" A grin cracked his face again. "It was fast work, Oom Keh, and most unexpected. Matters were not yet ready. But the thing is done. *Agh!*"

He gasped, staggered, reached blindly for support. McKay caught him. From Nuné broke a startled cry of alarm, anger, grief. The ancient had been stabbed from behind.

That ugly jawed lord who had fallen under the first blow of the entering soldiers had risen again. Dazed and disregarded, he had lain among the dead; and now, venomous and stealthy, he had crept up and leaped, reckless of all save revenge. As his victim reeled from his stroke he jerked his red blade out and lunged for the face of McKay.

A backward jerk of the head evaded the thrust. With a roar of rage the Northerner threw Cononaco aside and closed with his assassin. The old man fell, still living but mortally hurt. Nuné sprang to him. Feebly he pushed her away, eyes fixed on the last fight he was to see.

IT WAS soon over. A stab for the body failed, fended aside by McKay's left hand. In another instant the murderer was disarmed and half helpless, his right arm so wrenched and twisted that his knife fell and the arm itself was practically dislocated. But, spitting through his teeth like the veriest savage, he clawed with his good hand for the frightful gray eyes glaring at him. Into his own eyes smashed terrific fist blows, and into mouth, nose, ears and jaw as well, battering his face in berserk fury, pounding his brain into stupor. Then he was heaved from his feet, swung aloft and hurled head foremost against the stone body of the Old Ones. With skull shattered and neck broken he dropped and lay limp on the sacred fire.

"Ha!" grunted Cononaco, breath laboring but fierce eyes aglow. "A good end to a bad rule! So goes the last of the purple snakes. And so goes the last *capitán* of the Old Ones."

His gaze went to the carven faces above him, alive with swiftly changing expressions as the wall lights waved wildly in breeze from the open door.

"Cononaco!" implored Nuné, on her

knees beside him. "You must not go now, *abuelito mío.* You must live—you are needed! Meredito! A doctor, have a doctor brought."

McKay, already stooping and examining the wound, slowly shook his head. The dying man himself broke in:

"The old dog is done. There is no—more need for him—and he goes. Bring no doctor. But—bring *soldados*—"

At that instant soldiers came—a score of them, headed by the giant *sargento* of the fort, streaming through the doorways from the plaza, fully armed and tensely alert. McKay threw up an imperious hand, beckoning. They swarmed to him.

"*Bueno!*" gasped Cononaco. "Lift me. Let me die on—my feet. Up, Oom Keh!"

Swiftly, though gently, McKay lifted him erect. He coughed, gasped, swallowed. For a few seconds he peered at the hard jawed White Ones. With unexpected strength his voice surged forth in its last command to fighting men.

"*Atención!* The *capitán* of King José, and King Ran, gives you a new king, a fighting king—and a new queen! The King Oom Keh! The Queen Nuné! Salute!"

A sudden slap of palms on gun butts, a simultaneous upward lift of vertical steel barrels, a thundering yell.

With that roar in his ears and a grin on his mouth, Cononaco dropped forward and hung limp in the grasp of the man whom he had made king.

CHAPTER XXIV

REVOLUTION

IN THE temple of the two faced Old Ones ruled darkness and silence and death. The sacred fire on the stone, the flames of the golden lamps on the walls, were extinguished. The ogrish statue stared with lackluster eyes at rows of motionless bodies. On the one side of the hall lay a rank of dead lords of a dead régime and, with them, the man of tainted blood and brain who had been their master—Vicente. On the other side had been thrown the savage creatures who, though slaves, had possessed a racial kinship to the king.

Nowhere in the place remained the bodies of the soldiers, or that of Cononaco, who here had also met their doom. These had been removed to the fort, where they might lie in the companionship of fellow fighters until time served for honored burial. The rest—king and courtier and slave alike—waited in obscurity until some one should concede them further attention.

With the extinction of the heretofore revered circle of flame had disappeared also those ordained to keep it alive. Now its guardians all were gathered in the home of Nuné, past Queen of the Flame, present Queen of all Oriente. Clear eyed, clean souled girls, these were, all clad in the same symbolic flame colored silk as that worn by their mistress, but without her jeweled crown or sandals. Clear eyed, yes, all but one. That one, unwillingly facing her queen across the broad table, showed in the depths of her shrinking pupils a desperate fear and a harrowing grief. She was on trial, in star chamber court, before a judge and jury of her own inviolable caste; and at each searching question of the highest lady of that order she betrayed increasing perturbation. Suddenly she crumpled and sobbed a confession.

She loved Basilio, who had subtly tempted her and conquered. She had met him secretly many times, in the temple itself, whither he had come when she was alone. She had told him all she knew and spied to learn more. She could not help it; he held a power over her and could make her do whatever he wished. Now that he was dead she could not live without him. She would kill herself and follow him.

Into the faces of her sister priestesses came unspeakable loathing and merciless condemnation, But the queen, having established her guilt, regarded her with sorrowing yet sympathetic gaze; for the queen herself had lately learned how a

man could grip the heart of a maid. After a long period of silence she pronounced an amazing judgment.

"You were weak, Cristina. You did wrong, very wrong. But you did not not know what you were doing. There are powers too strong to be overcome—sometimes good, sometimes evil. And sometimes we can not even be sure of what is good or what is bad. Even that thing to which we all have vowed faith and devoted our souls has proved to be not the good power we believed it to be, but wicked. But we shall not throw away our lives because of that. Nor shall you, Cristina, throw yourself after Basilio. That would be much more wicked than anything you have done, and altogether useless too. In time you will find another man, more worthy, and you are to live for that time. And then you are to be a true wife to him and bear strong sons for the good of Hoserán. So you can replace some of the lives that have been lost today by better ones, and the wrong you have done will be righted."

SHE TURNED then to the other girls. "And you, my sisters, are to say no word of this. Nobody but ourselves knows of it. Let nobody know that one of us failed in her trust. Aside from that, you are free to do whatever you will. None of you is bound longer by the oath you took when you became a virgin of the flame. That flame is out and the oath is dead. Every one of you is at liberty to love and marry like other women. And if I, your queen, can help you to meet and win men you admire I will do so. Let us have among us no more empty lives, devoted only to stone men!"

She smiled, and a sudden ripple of light laughter brightened the serious faces about her. Only Cristina, who turned and ran into an adjacent room where she could weep alone, remained somber. Yet in even her flooding eyes the tragic desperation had lessened. Quietly Nuné crossed the room and closed the door beyond which the guilty girl had taken refuge. Then from the innocent sisterhood she invited confidences, and received them.

IN OTHER domiciles along the mesa other women not so innocent worked and schemed with selfish zeal to make themselves superlatively attractive to the eye of the new king and whatever lords he might create. Some among them mourned bitterly and vengefully for paramours now lying dead in the temple, yet simultaneously planned artifices to capture new ones. Some rejoiced over the sudden demise of consorts whose existence had long been inconvenient, and arrayed themselves in their most striking robes and jewels. Some few, more perspicacious than the rest, sat long in narrow lidded thought and then, eschewing ornamentation, adopted simplicity of attire and modesty of mien as the most effective road to favor.

Each in her own fashion, wise or unwise, laid her plans to ingratiate herself with the man from the sky who had previously remained impervious to her charms but who, she fervently hoped, might now be more susceptible. As yet it was but imperfectly known that he was more than casually interested in the winsome Nuné. Moreover, even though Nuné now was queen, she lacked experience in the game of luring men—a game wherein these others were not amateurs.

MEANWHILE the man for whom all these selfseeking stratagems were in process of invention was giving no thought to any woman, nor even assuming royal prerogatives or pomp. A most unkingly figure, disheveled, dirty, scratched and blood spattered, he stood in a spot where the foppish Vicente had never deigned to set foot; up in the sentry box atop the mesa fort. Behind him, alert for any word, waited two riflemen. Below, the garrison stood to arms at the gun slits dominating the cliff path, while their new commandant—the huge *sargento*, now created highest officer by three crisp words from the new king—

prowled softly and vigilantly behind them, saying little, but keeping all taut for possible action.

A good soldier, this *sargento*, and worthy of his swift elevation to high command; for, in the stress of premature revolt and unexpected emergency, he had taken care to do a workmanlike job of smashing all opposition on the mesa and to insure the safety of his own stronghold before rushing his men to the support of the little flying column of Cononaco. So, though Cononaco now was dead and the King Oom Keh had had to win his own fight, the acropolis was firmly in the hands of the rebels. And the path of ascent from the turbulent town was not only dominated but, thus far, empty of attacking forces.

Down below, however, and all over the city, raged revolutionary war; war scattered, informal, individual, but vindictive and merciless. From far and near echoed the pops of irregular shooting; and occasionally on the breeze sounded small yells of fighting joy or thin screams of fear. Sometimes, in short visible portions of otherwise tree masked streets, little figures came together in fighting knots, then dispersed, leaving motionless forms behind. Sometimes a man or two dashed into view, pursued by others, and either fell headlong to remain down or fled on to be overtaken or cornered elsewhere.

Hoserán was undergoing a ruthless purging of former rottenness. Jivero and semi-Jivero and incorrigible convert to the degeneracy inculcated by Vicente and his degraded father were being hunted down and exterminated by the clean blooded White Ones; or, banding together, were committing such atrocities as they might succeed in perpetrating while life remained to them. If there was any unanimity of campaign among the cleaners of the city it was not discernible from this eyrie. Nevertheless the cleaning was proceeding with relentless thoroughness.

If Queen Nuné and her gentle companions could have glimpsed the scenes enacted in the streets they could hardly have sat now in such carefree mood. Nor could the other, more hardened, ladies of the rock have devoted their thoughts so assiduously to their own self-advancement. But the walls about them excluded virtually all sounds from below, and they remained there by command of McKay himself, whose first order, on gaining an inkling of outer affairs, had banished all on the mesa to the interior of their homes. Not even Nuné had seen fit to evade that dictum. The king's behest still was law here. And, since no street fighting had ever before taken place in Hoserán, none but the men at the fort appreciated what was going on.

THOSE men, from king to lowest private, were well satisfied to let the lower city attend to its own purification. They were comparatively few, and their place was here, holding the citadel against any rush of malefactors who might seek to storm it. All forts of the city now were following the same plan—to hold their own and let none pass. All cañon gates were shut, all garrisons standing to arms, all egress or ingress blocked until the internal throes were over. McKay's second command had gone to the commanders of those cañon fortresses by helio and by runners, and it had been terse and explicit. They were to hold their places, stop all comers, and await further orders. The replies had come so promptly and heartily as to indicate that the accession of McKay to power and the anti-Jivero uprising in the city had been neither unforeseen nor unwelcomed by those officers.

"The command is obeyed."

Such was the laconic assurance.

So now the new monarch coolly eyed the barred city and gaged the progress of its cleansing by sight and sound. And down inside the fort, in such company as he would have chosen could he have expressed preference—soldiers who had died fighting and men ready to die in the same way—lay the old irreconcilable who had brought about all this upheaval, Cononaco.

In the short time allotted him by Fate that ancient *capitán* had achieved marvels. Long embittered by the pollution of his native land, knowing well that the same bitterness smoldered in the hearts of many of his compatriots, he had seized upon the miraculous appearance of a descendant of the old heroes as a veritable godsend for the salvation of the kingdom.

Here was a man who, he hoped, might become another Rand; a man who, by ancestry, must be a fighter when aroused, and whom the hero worshiping White Ones might accept as king, if aroused. So he had set about to arouse both man and people to the fighting point, working secretly, yet inflexibly, toward the consummation of a *coup de main*. If by the purposed revolution he could also seat the Queen of the Flame as Queen of Oriente, if history should repeat itself and the latter day Rand should mate with the reincarnated Nuné, so much the better. But in any case the blood and breath of Vicente should be wiped out and the kingdom of the Old Ones brought once more under a strong hand. Of this he was determined. Wherefore he had begun his work of preparation at once.

Before McKay had lain half an hour in siesta on his first afternoon here, Nuné had known both who he was and what sort of man he was, as seen through the eyes of Cononaco. Before sunset every malcontent White One had learned the same facts through channels best known to the cunning *capitán*, and had received in addition a subtle hint provocative of deep thought.

Since that time more than one message, clear or abstruse, had passed among them by the same routes, each adding a bit of fuel to a gradually mounting flame. In the mesa fort, key to the control of the rock, most of the soldiers had been adroitly maneuvered into a frame of mind which they themselves scarcely realized, yet which made them potentially ready for the climax as yet unforeseen by anyone but the arch plotter.

Yet the actual dénouement this morning had been unexpected even by that sagacious schemer, even though he knew Basilio to be skulking in the fort. Basilio knew the value of a shut mouth; and while awaiting the recovery of Vicente from debauch and consequent evil temper he gave no indication of his knowledge to any one but his cousin, the commandant, and even to that kinsman he revealed almost nothing.

So Cononaco, working continually at new details of his dangerous design, gave the disgraced lord too little thought. And when that revengeful informer received his summons from the king he went without Cononaco's knowledge; for at that moment the ancient was in secret conference near the fort, but not in it, with several men from the city who had come up ostensibly on petty business but actually to deliver and receive words of vital import.

Thus the ensuing events escaped his notice until, with volcanic suddenness, the fires he had been feeding burst into eruption.

It was a common soldier, not the erstwhile *capitán*, who exploded that secretly nurtured flame into devastating fury; the soldier cruelly struck by Vicente and ordered out to find Cononaco. Straight to the fort he had gone, saying no word to his half dozen mates on post outside the temple, but inwardly vowing vengeance at every step. At the fort he had walked grimly to the arms rack, seized his own loaded rifle and stalked doorward, to be halted sharply by an abusive command from Oliverio—

"Halt, dog!"

To which, while his fellows stared, with brows darkening, at his slashed face, he stonily retorted:

"The Jivero bastard struck me for no cause. King or cur, the beast that draws my blood pays with his own. You or any other foot lapper that hinders me will go the same way the Jivero is going. One side!"

And, as Oliverio yelled an oath and reached for his pistol, the mutineer shot him dead.

THAT shot precipitated citywide rebellion. In the fort the spirit of revolt swept most of the garrison instantly. A few stubborn loyalists attempting resistance, including a dissipated lieutenant nominally second in command, were overwhelmed. The big *sargento* seized control and held it. Then followed a lull while Cononaco was sought and, after some difficulty, found and apprised of the startling events within the *cuartel*. Thereafter developed a short but decisive fight on the plaza, in which the riflemen on guard outside the temple and various lesser nobles who had not been called into attendance at the trial attacked the advancing rebels, with fatal results to themselves. Meanwhile the confidants of Cononaco had, at his behest, dashed down the cliff path and spread word which loosed the dogs of war.

And now, while the king maker lay silent and still below and the king stood equally silent and almost as still above, that war seethed in the streets of Hoserán —a war wherein the actual men at arms took no part but the home dwelling White Ones cleaned their own neighborhoods and passed on to others. This, McKay wisely judged, was by far the most efficacious method of obliterating the Jivero stain from Hoserán, since each citizen knew best the conditions in his vicinity and could work best unhampered by commands.

Many small forces scouring the city could accomplish far more than larger bodies of troops moving under orders based on imperfect knowledge. The time for unified control would come later. Meanwhile he was virtually powerless to halt the carnage even if he had wished to do so. And, knowing what he knew of the human brown rats hereabouts, he had no such wish.

At length the scattered popping of rifles grew less and less frequent, dying into virtual silence. Machete work might still be going on, but it was evident that actual fighting now was negligible. A little later there came from the mountain heights at the south, above one of the two chief cañons of entrance, a winking of helio flashes. One of the watchful men behind McKay spoke.

"King, all is finished at the south. The commandant of the fort there asks orders."

"Watch for other messages," came the curt reply.

Soon came from the north, the other main route through the natural wall, a similar series of lights. Then came a repetition from the east.

"There are no sun signals at the other two roads," volunteered the interpreter, "but the work must be complete. There is no more shooting anywhere."

McKay stirred. A slow survey of everything visible below, a moment of listening, and he stretched his arms wide and drew a long breath.

"All right," said he. "Go below."

They went. He followed. At the foot of the ladder he stopped to glance about at the riflemen still ready for action. Then he spoke to the recent *sargento*.

"Commandant!"

"Aye, king!" responded the pleasant faced giant.

"There is a sun signal on this rock? And it works in all directions?"

"Aye, king."

"Then signal to the commanders of all forts that they are to come to me at once. Send runners also to the principal men of the city with the same message. You know who they are. All are to come here immediately. If any come armed they will leave their arms on the path below this fort. Your men will watch all comers."

"Aye, king."

Then the king walked out, unattended, heading for his palm house to wash his face and get a cigar. As he walked, the deserted porches of the plaza began to show life. Women, in dresses grave or gay, appeared as by magic and gazed ardently at him. But he saw none of them.

As in previous hours, he glanced into the sky—not once but several times. And his lids were narrowed as if, up in that void, he sought something unseen by all others, something real, something hovering, something dangerous.

CHAPTER XXV

REVELATION

IT WAS noon in Hoserán; time to dine and then relax in siesta. But few White Ones thought of food, and none of sleep. The city buzzed like a hive, its people moving restlessly about in review of the rigorous work already accomplished, in search of any possible refugees still deserving of dispatch, or in animated speculation as to the next probable development. Rumors flew wild. Yet not even the wildest prediction approximated the incredible truth.

Up in the mesa fort a score of soldierly men with the air of habitual authority exchanged brief bits of news while they awaited the appearance of their new ruler. Some of these were the commandants of the cañon forts; the others, captains of different districts of the city. From time to time each cast a glance at another man whom all had known well, but whom they should see no more hereafter—Cononaco, lying straight on a six foot bier. On his relaxed face seemed to rest the ghost of a smile.

"The king comes."

At that quiet announcement by a soldier on watch all talk ceased and all faces turned to the big double door opening on the plaza.

Across the open space strode the American, unhurried but unhesitating, except once, when he slowed for a second and looked at the northern walls beyond which must be Nuné. Perhaps the thought in his mind was that she, as queen, should participate in the forthcoming conference. But he came on without deviation. He was king here, and he knew what he was about to do; and the sooner it was done the better.

Aside from the fact that he had bathed hands and head and taken a thoughtful smoke, he was as he had been on leaving the fort; and when he reentered it the waiting officers viewed him in surprise. So accustomed were they to the trappings of royalty that, unthinkingly, they had expected him to appear garbed in the kingly purple. This man carelessly wearing fight stained clothes and bearing on his face unconcealed lacerations left by gouging nails, he was a slipshod sort of king. But then, as this first impression passed, they eyed him in mounting approval and respect. This was no fop. This was a fighter. Withal, this was a king big enough to disregard petty personal considerations.

With a slow sweep of the eyes he surveyed them and moved to the body of Cononaco. There he stood, regarding them gravely.

"Do all here comprehend English?" he asked.

An affirmative chorus answered.

"Then I'll speak to you in that language. It comes easiest to me.

"As you all know, I am McKay. By the workings of Fate, and of this old *capitán* of yours, I am now your king. It was largely a matter of chance that I came here just at this time, and partly luck that I have continued to live since coming. But most of that good luck was due to Cononaco, and the fact that I am king of Hoserán is altogether due to him. So is the fact that you now have cleaned this city of Jivero rottenness. I wish he could stand among us now, instead of lying here, and glory in what he accomplished. But he is gone. And perhaps it is just as well. He would not like what is to come."

He paused. All eyed him in perplexity, frowning a little at the ominous tone of his latest sentence.

"THERE is an order to be given," he resumed. "It will be unwelcome to you and it will make a great change in your lives. The change will come in any case, order or no order, but if you fail to obey that order it will be much worse for you. But you have every right to question the command unless you know the reason for it. So I'll give you the reason first and the order afterwards.

"Now, in the first place, you all know that it was not the plan of your Old Ones, José Martinez and David Rand, to keep

this kingdom always shut against the rest of the world. They intended that condition to exist at first and to continue until this nation was strong enough to command the respect of its neighbors. After that time they expected it to establish friendly relations with the rest of the world and grow greater in peace. But that idea was not carried out.

"Your crazy king Gerardo and your poisonous king Vicente disobeyed the will of the old wise ones. Your nation expanded no further, but lay still and began to rot. You made no good use of your wealth or your strength. Worse yet, by keeping a barrier between yourselves and the other nations you kept yourselves ignorant of what they were doing. You were, and you are, so far behind the times that you didn't even know you could be whipped in war. But you can be. And you will be!"

The frowns deepened to angry scowls. A fort commander demanded—

"By whom?"

"Ecuador."

"Ho!" scoffed two at once. "Ecuador?"

"Ecuador. Ecuador is as far ahead of you in war power as you are ahead of the head hunting Indians of the jungle. You men think you have an unconquerable stronghold here; you think you have gun power and man power enough to hold it against the world; your conceited king Vicente even thought you could cross the Andes and conquer all Ecuador and perhaps thrash all the rest of South America as well. He was a fool. You can hold your own against ignorant bare backed Indians, yes. You can hold your whole kingdom against them. And you can hold this city against civilized armies that come against you in the old fashioned way—by land. The forest fights for you, and so do your mountains. But what about armies that come by air?"

"We have guns!" promptly countered a commandant. "We can shoot them down as they come, as you were shot down!"

"You mean you can shoot down small scout planes that come one at a time and fly low. That's the only kind that has come here, and the only kind you can reach. I've had a look at the gun that fired on me, and the commandant here says your others are all the same; and it's a weak, old fashioned thing, good enough in its day, but hopelessly out of date now. The planes used in modern war are much bigger and more powerful than anything you've seen, and they fly too high to be hit by ground guns. They are flying battleships, carrying two or three hundred men apiece, or loaded with bombs powerful enough to blow this whole place to nothing. The only defense against them is a fleet of the same sort of ships, able to go up and fight them at their own height. I have just been an air captain in a great war in Europe, so I know what I'm talking about. Against such ships your ground guns and your ground fighters are useless."

THE LISTENERS glanced at one another, then studied him, a shade of apprehension growing in their faces. One blurted:

"Has Ecuador such machines? If so will they come against us?"

"Ecuador has, and they will!"

A deathlike silence. Eyes and lips narrowed; jaws set hard. None spoke.

"The machines are few," continued their king, "but they are enough, more than enough. Ecuador has for many years been a backward nation, as nations go. But she now has a government more progressive than any previous one, and this government has bought from one of the European nations several of the latest war planes and trained men in their use. And now those planes are coming here to blow your forts out of existence, gas all your people, seize the gold mines and hold all this Oriente country for good! And nothing you can do can defeat them!

"I learned this several days ago. I flew down here from my own country to visit this kingdom founded by José and Rand. I stopped in Quito to ask some

questions and get my bearings. I told very little and asked a good deal. Because I was an air officer in the recent war I was made welcome by the air officers of Quito and asked for advice on technical matters. Then we had a dinner, and the commander in chief of the air force got drunk and let his tongue run loose.

"There is now in Quito a man who came here to Hoserán and learned certain things and returned. Who he is and how he escaped do not matter. The important point is that the Quito government now knows these facts:

"That you people have shot down airmen who came in peace. Up to the time of this man's return it was considered possible, though not very probable, that those men had died in accidents of flying. Now it is known that they were deliberately killed by order of your king. This is an act of war and entitles the Ecuadoreans to retaliate with war.

"That you have an enormous quantity of gold and an almost inexhaustible source of more gold. This makes war worth while.

"That you people not only kill strangers who succeed in reaching Hoserán but sacrifice them alive to a man eating idol, a double faced thing of stone that stands on this mesa and swallows men whole. I myself know this to be true, because I saw the gunner Salazar swallowed by it last night. You people did not know that this sort of thing was done; the queen and her maidens of the flame didn't know it; nobody but Vicente and his pet Jiveros—and his mad father and the mad Del Rio—knew of it. But the Quito government knows now that it has been done. And the fact that it has been done puts you people on the same level as the ancient worshipers of Moloch, idolaters who gave human lives to a fire and are abhorred by all modern people. This gives Ecuador the moral support of the whole world in wiping you off the face of the earth.

"For all this you can thank your last two kings. And when I say 'last' I mean 'last'. Unless you people are absolute fools you will have no more kings—at least not hereditary kings. You have already learned how rotten the rule of a royal family can become. And if you have any sense you will have no more such kings. You will choose a man like Cononaco, if you can find him, to command you as long as he can rule wisely; then pick another chief."

HE PAUSED again, glancing down at the still face of Cononaco. All eyes followed his; and more than one of his auditors nodded shortly, as if his condemnation of royalty struck a responsive chord. Others stared in blank amazement at the king who, by this counsel, virtually renounced his newly won supremacy.

"I left Quito at sunrise," he resumed, "and I flew north until I knew I was far out of sight. I wished all who had learned of my original plan to think I had given it up and gone back home. Then I turned east and crossed the mountains at a good pass, and came south again to have a look at you. That was what I had come down here for, and I was determined to do it. Besides, I thought I might give you a warning and a chance to save yourselves. But after I landed here I decided not to. For awhile I felt that you had deteriorated so far that you deserved to be annihilated. But then, after seeing more of you, I changed that opinion. I saw that you were a decent lot but under the heel of an indecent king; that what you most needed was to rid yourselves of that king and his parasites.

"I began to understand that Cononaco was working toward that end, although I didn't see just how he meant to accomplish it. So I kept my mouth shut and let Cononaco go ahead with his game, so that I could learn just what it was. But Vicente upset everything this morning. The result, though, was practically what Cononaco wanted.

"Now we have swept this rock clean. You have done the same in the city. A good job has been done. But there is a

bigger one to do. And now I give you your order:

"You will prepare without delay to abandon this city!"

His voice, hitherto coolly dispassionate, suddenly turned authoritative. The officers of forts and city stiffened, but made no other move. Their minds refused to grasp such an order, even though the long explanatory preamble had made this conclusion inevitable. Abandon the city? Desert the stronghold which they and their fathers had been trained to defend to the last shot? And, above all, forsake it before any enemy had even been sighted on the farthest frontier?

Even though this man was their commander in chief, even though he held their respect and his eye and tone carried conviction, this was incredible. He was mad!

"The great war machines, loaded with bombs and guns and men," he calmly went on, "are to come by night—unless the plan has been changed. The intention was to dispatch them on the night of the next full moon."

"That is tomorrow night," somebody half consciously spoke.

"Yes. The plan is to fly by night so that you will get no warning, by drums or otherwise, from your lookouts, who might see the planes by day; to ride high above the night clouds, if there are any at that time; and to bomb you at sunrise. They intend to make a complete job and smash you absolutely, with no chance to escape. They may even change the time set and come earlier; tonight, or even today. I have been a bit uneasy on that point. It is just possible that they may learn of my turn eastward and smell a rat. If they do they won't wait.

"So you must move at once to evacuate the city. The first bombs will be explosive, and they will be dropped into the cañons, to destroy your forts, block the exits and bottle up the people inside the mountains. After that they will drop gas bombs all around the town to kill all the people but leave the city undamaged. If you're not out of here before the bombing begins you'll never get out.

"Where you will go after leaving here is for you to decide. You know the country; you know where you can best establish new quarters. But make no mistake about this: Your kingdom is ended, and you'll never live here again. Ecuador is seizing this region and its mines, and she will keep them. You must go elsewhere, and the faster and farther the better. But you can decide that point after you are outside the mountains. The first need is to get outside them.

"Carry your gold with you if you can. If not, leave it. Carry all arms and ammunition you can handle, of course. You'll need them more than the gold. But first of all, carry yourselves! Start the women and children out. Send messages to all lookouts to watch for planes. Then let all men work at carrying out necessities. By sunset I want every man, woman and child out of this city. If nothing happens before tomorrow morning you can come back inside and remove more of your belongings. But you yourselves must—"

"*POR DIOS!*" flared a wrathful captain. "This is madness! I will not desert my—"

"You will obey orders!" The king's tone was icy. "If you refuse I will have you shot here and now! Commandant!"

"*Sí*" snapped the former *sargento*.

"Two riflemen! *Pronto!*"

"*Sí!*"

Grim jawed, the giant barked a command. Two soldiers with guns ready sprang to the king's side. The officers, several of whom had opened lips to echo their comrade's rebellious refusal, stood mute, undecided. For a second there was a tense silence.

Then from overhead, where a sentry watched in the lookout post, broke an urgent call:

"*Capitán!*"

"*Qué?*" The commander strode to the ladder.

"A message comes from the north! Some great flying machines have been

sighted west of Archidona! They fly this way!"

Another silence. Jaws dropped, and dazed eyes met. McKay swiftly calculated. Archidona, a pueblo east of the Andes, lay about two hundred miles northwest.

"Out!" he thundered. "Open the cañons! Empty the city! In one hour Hoserán will be attacked!"

CHAPTER XXVI

EXODUS

CHAOS reigned in Hoserán; chaos wherein a populace astounded by an incredible command and appalled by swift approach of inflexible doom swirled in fruitless conflict of thought, word and act.

Consternation and confusion ruled also on the acropolis of the dead kings, where women who had never faced any exigency more momentous than a love quarrel now found themselves confronted by the alternatives of flight into the jungle or violent death. Panic stricken, they dashed about their homes in frantic endeavors to save not only valuable jewels and silks but useless baubles and impossible loads of furnishings. Only the Queen Nuné and her maidens of the flame showed self-control or sense; and even these were pale from perturbation.

"Everybody off this rock in fifteen minutes!" was the order which the soldiers had yelled into every house. "The king commands it! Death comes through the air! Out!"

Already every servant had bolted down the path, leaving mistresses to escape as best they might. Now remained only the ladies of the rock—ladies real and spurious—and the garrison and the king. That king, who had virtually renounced his future power but retained it during the present emergency, was standing again in the lookout box atop the fort, watch in hand and eyes sweeping city and sky. To every other fort, large or small, to the heavy armed strongholds at the cañons and the concealed nests scattered among the thorn patches, had gone an identic message by helio—to abandon and march out. If the recipients of that command should disobey and stay to the finish they could pay with their lives for their obstinacy. They had been warned.

The minute hand on the watcher's timepiece crept inexorably on. Then the turmoil below showed unmistakable signs of yielding to order. The district captains had reached their own precincts and issued to their own men military commands, and the men were obeying with soldierly promptitude. Street sections heretofore alive with figures moving at apparent haphazard now showed columns taking shape. By the expiration of the quarter hour allotted by McKay for clearing the mesa, some of those street columns had begun to move at brisk marching pace. In military formation, men, women and children were starting for whichever of the five cañons of exit lay nearest to their lost homes.

"Good!" said he, with a sigh of relief.

Then, glancing at the plaza, he frowned. Women were running in and out of houses or chattering shrilly in terrified knots, but doing nothing toward vacating the mesa. Only one group was coming toward the path; a group gowned in flame colored silk and headed by a girl with golden crown. Each of these bore on her shoulders a small bundle, slung like a knapsack, holding her few most prized possessions. The maidens of the flame and their queen were ready for the long trail leading—whither? None knew. But they came with step unfaltering.

"Commandant!" he called down. "Time's up! Get those women off the rock! Drag them out and drive them down, if you must! Get them out of here!"

"Aye!" boomed the voice below, with a note of satisfaction. Apparently the ex-*sargento* had scant regard for the professional pets of purple lords, but had thought it best to refrain from drastic suasion until ordered. Now he and his men sped to haul forth the unready and herd all down the path.

McKAY, with one more quick look into the blank northwestern sky, descended the ladder and made for the door. As he reached it the little band of virgins, whose leader had directed her steps toward the same door, met him.

"Meredito," swiftly spoke Nuné, "what does this mean?"

"Come in, all of you," he bruskly bade. "You will go down last, with the soldiers. Those other women have no sense, and when they start they will run like sheep. There may be accidents."

They entered and stood gravely regarding him. He swung the big doors together, forestalling any attempt by other women to dash in and attach themselves to him.

"This means," he then answered, "that Quito is sending airships to destroy Hoserán and seize the gold here. I knew they would come, so I hopped over to warn you people. They were not to come until tomorrow night, but they have been sighted near Archidona today, and that means attack. The forts can not cope with them. So you must go or die."

A moment of silence, broken only by scattered shouts and screams from the plaza.

"And the kingdom falls?" questioned Nuné, as if unable to accept the inevitable fact.

"The kingdom has fallen," he corrected. "Vicente killed it. The kingdom was based on a dynasty. Vicente's father polluted the dynasty; Vicente poisoned it. It's dead. And there will be no more kings—or queens—of the White Ones. They're through with royalty, or will be, as soon as they think it all over. Hereafter they will elect their best man as chief, regardless of his descent. The tradition of royal lineage is as dead as Vicente."

The hazel eyes widened, and in them shone for an instant a strange light of gladness, as if a burdensome duty had been lifted from her future. McKay regarded her oddly. Did she, a princess born, care as little for sovereignty as he? His own eyes warmed. Then her face sobered.

"Then what of you?" she pressed. "You do not mean to be king—or chief? What are you to do?"

"I'm only a visitor. I came out of the air, and I'll go back into it."

"Your machine will fly?"

"As well as it ever did. When the Quito planes come close I'll hop off and be out of here in no time. Meanwhile I've a few things to do. When they're done I'll be off and away, and gone."

"And—your machine can carry only one?"

"Two. And I'd like mighty well to have it carry two, Nuné. But the air road I'm taking is dangerous. I learned that on my way down here. And if anything goes wrong when I'm in the air there's only one end—death."

The blunt statement seemed to make little impression. The hazel eyes warmed with a swift glow, and the questioning face softened with a smile. The girl who, two nights ago, had blanched at the empty noise of a thunderstorm now betrayed no fear at the mention of real danger. But then, as quickly as before, the light died out. She looked down into the still face of Cononaco, who had given his life for his country; glanced aside at her attendant maidens, who, though free, still depended on her for leadership. Those girls seemed to typify the finer womanhood of all Hoserán, tacitly looking for guidance to the one who, though perhaps now only nominally their queen, was revered above all others of her sex. The ancient warrior and adviser of her fathers, though mute, was an eloquent example of inflexible devotion to the welfare of the White Ones. So were the priestesses who, with one exception, had hitherto repressed all natural inclinations. And even if all the world of Oriente was toppling toward disruption and later reorganization might find all things vastly changed . . .

AT THAT instant the outer doors creaked on their hinges, a narrow bar of sunlight shot in, and the herculean shape of the commandant materialized in

the vertical glare. Outside sounded a slither of rushing feet.

"King, the rock is cleared!" he announced.

Then, as his sun contracted pupils perceived the group of maidens whom he had supposed to be well down the path ere now, he stared.

"All right."

McKay listened to the receding retreat of the courtesans; looked again into the troubled face of Nuné; then curtly continued:

"These are to go down now, commandant. You and your men will escort and protect them. And you must march fast. But before you go show me your powder. You have it in bags? And fuses?"

The girls turned doorward, all but Nuné. The giant hesitated.

"There is bagged powder, yes, and fuses," he replied, "and the men will go as the king commands. But, may I not stay here and try a few shots at the sky machines with the sky gun? I know how to sight and shoot it."

McKay regarded him with eyes twinkling but face stern.

"No!" he refused. "They fly too high. And you are too good a man to be sacrificed uselessly. You will go with your garrison. Now fetch a large bag of powder and a long fuse. *Pronto!*"

"The command is obeyed," conceded the big fellow, though his tone was wistful.

Without further words he swung away toward the magazine. McKay turned his eyes again to Nuné, to find her still soberly regarding the tranquil face of Cononaco.

"I suppose," she said, half to herself, "that I brought this fate on Hoserán. If I had not commanded Cononaco to help that man Martinez to escape—"

"It would have come in time," he broke in, "and probably at a much worse time, when you'd have had no warning. Martinez isn't the only one who has told tales. Traders who brought European goods up to your Amazon ports have picked up rumors of what went on in here and have spread them abroad. Quito heard them. Martinez's story only substantiated the same reports. So you've no cause to reproach yourself."

She made no answer. For a moment the big room was very still, the two who stood there very serious. Upon the one still rested the phantasmal but powerful hand of habitual loyalty to the people who had always been loyal to her fathers. Before the other hung the memory of endless leagues of jungle without landing spots, of mighty mountains breeding violent twisting winds, of air pockets and bumps and terrific currents which more than once had nearly wrested his tiny craft out of all control to hurl it down to annihilation. These hazards, though met with zest when he had flown alone, now loomed doubly grim. He could not ask Nuné to risk them with him. On the other hand, he could not make himself counsel her to take the safer course and go with her own people.

So they stood wordless until the commandant suddenly strode back into their ken, bearing a heavy bag of powder and a long fuse. Then McKay spoke, a queer tightness in his throat.

"It's time to go—if you're going."

Gray and hazel eyes held each other. Then she stepped closer.

"Yes," she answered, in a tone of restraint. "I—must go with my people. *Vaya con Dios*, Meredito."

And she kissed him, turned, and glided out into the sun.

He took a long step after her, checked and stopped. His hands closed. Slowly he turned to face his officer.

"What shall I do with this powder?" bluntly asked the commandant.

"I'll take it. You go. And remember, guard the maidens of the temple from all harm."

"Aye. But when do you come, king?"

"Soon. I'll fly out with my sky bird. Now go!"

"*Bien. Hasta luego.*"

Passing the bag to his commander in chief, the soldier went without further hesitation. McKay looked after him

with a thin smile at his nonchalant parting. The big fellow believed he was soon to meet his king outside the mountains. The king knew otherwise.

Again he consulted his watch. Half an hour now had gone. The death bringers were a hundred miles nearer their goal. But there still was plenty of time for what he meant to do. With bag across shoulder and fuse looped over fist he stood a moment looking soberly at Cononaco. Then he raised a hand in formal salute.

"*Adios, capitán,*" he said.

With that he strode out.

CHAPTER XXVII

DRAGON FLIES

DESERTION had claimed the mesa. Doorways yawned wide, piazzas were empty and the open space was vacant of life. Here and there lay some half corded bundle or some crumpled dress dropped in the scurry enforced by the hard handed garrison. Across these vestiges of flight the man who had caused it trod alone, squinting into the northwest for the dots which, he knew, could not yet be visible there but which natural alertness prompted him to seek. Straight toward his own quarters he marched first, there to set down his bag and fuse at the entrance and disappear within.

In his purposeful progress he had given but one rapid look at the abandoned dwellings. So he had failed to note that he was not entirely alone on the rock; that, nearly hidden behind a half closed door in the domicile nearest the fort, another figure stood and watched him go. Now, as he vanished from sight, that figure emerged and, walking along close to adjacent porches, advanced toward his house.

In five minutes McKay had thrown his more important belongings into his machine, opened the wide doors hitherto blocking its exit and wheeled it forth into the open. This done, he strode back to the powder bag, heaved it up and glanced about. As before, the plaza was empty. In a shadowy corridor of a near house that following figure watched again, unperceived. He swung away toward the temple of the Old Ones.

Again he disappeared, this time through the same portal which, not long ago, had admitted him and a subtly treacherous king and suave courtiers to a brightly lighted trap. Now the forbidding shadow beyond that door halted him until his sight could adjust itself. As the lowering visages of the blood drinking stone and the pallid countenances of the slain king and lords grew more distinct an eery feeling crept over him, impelling him almost to retreat into the sun and leave the dead gods with their company of dead men. But he had come here with a purpose. So, after a motionless minute, he walked to the fireless pedestal.

At its base he set down his bag. Then he vaulted to the upper level, experimented with holds on the half shaped body of the idol and, finding the right vantage, climbed to the top of the head. There, on hands and knees, he peered down into the cavity which last night had swallowed Salazar—a cylindrical hole perhaps a yard in diameter. It was empty.

From a pocket he drew his small torch. A click, and white light poured down into the interior.

The orifice was some seven feet deep. The bottom was bare stone. But the sides were not so innocent. In vertical recesses stood four tall metal plates, each thickly thorned with long spikes. Between plates was a space of the bare stone, dyed, like the bottom, a sinister dark red.

McKAY scowled down into it. Then, taking the torch in his teeth and bracing himself with one hand, he reached down, grasped a spike and pulled toward the center. A slight movement of the plate was his reward. A harder tug brought a little more motion; the plate advanced slightly toward the middle. Then his fingers slipped, and he narrowly escaped dashing his arm against

the opposite spikes. He made no more effort to move any of the heavy rectangles. Instead he grasped his light again and directed it up and down along the metal. Then he turned it to the bottom once more and spat.

The saliva stood a second, then slowly disappeared, absorbed by the stone. He nodded, put the light on the rock close beside his supporting hand and inspected it minutely. Then he nodded again with full comprehension.

The stone was porous. The plates were movable by some mechanism not visible here, but probably consisting of rods and levers, the rods running beneath the stone floor, the levers operated from some secret cubicle in the thick wall, unknown even to the priestesses. At any rate, all four plates could be made to close in on one another, the numerous spikes first penetrating a human body in a hundred places, the plates themselves then crushing the victim until he was squeezed dry. The stone would absorb the gushing blood, which would creep to the sculptured features outside and stain them into temporary verisimilitude of life. When the diabolical performance was done the drained body would be hoisted out and disposed of by the Jiveros. The relighting of the flame below would dry out the stone faces, and the thin, fragrant smoke from the prescribed bits of fuel would conceal and dissipate any unpleasant odor.

Perhaps the mad Del Rio had meant his damnable invention to be used only for the execution of arch traitors to the realm, whose blood might conceivably be forfeit to the Old Ones. Perhaps such executions were to be enacted before representative men from all the city, as warning that any plotter against the safety of the kingdom created by José and Rand must inevitably be obliterated by them. It would seem that a man who lavished such genius on the creation of these heroic faces could hardly have meant them to serve as masks for the sating of blood thirst by a half savage; that, not knowing Vicente, he had not realized what a profane abomination his head and hand had wrought. Whatever he had intended, however, that was just what he had created.

McKay growled and slid down. He seized his bag, climbed again and, after a few minutes of work, had it in place inside the man destroyer, with a length of fuse attached. Then he lowered himself for the last time; stood on the pedestal, struck a match, ignited the fuse, and leaped to the floor. Toward the door he strode, then turned. To the Old Ones who were not the Old Ones, but insane mockeries of the real characters of José and Rand, he gave farewell as to Cononaco—but not in the same words or spirit.

"Goodby, you devils! You're not fit to cumber the earth any longer, and you're not going to. You're nothing but demons, wearing the faces of men far better than you ever were. Now you can go back to hell and stay there!"

The sardonic counterfeit of José Martinez, the prognathous semblance of David Rand, which had winked and grinned when a far flyer imperiled a princess at midnight and eyed the couple hungrily when they were brought to condemnation today, now only stared, hard eyed, at the rows of corpses. At the crown of their mutual head glowed the creeping spark destined to shatter them into irreparable fragments. The man about to disappear forever from their demesne turned his back on them and walked out.

HALFWAY across the plaza he halted short. His eyes had gone again to the northwestern sky and seen something. High, small, but clear to the naked eye moved a military formation of dragon flies, their speed visible despite their distance. He had spent more time in the desecrated temple than he had realized; and the flying power of these destroyers was greater than he had estimated. Now they were almost here, and coming with terrific velocity.

Behind him crashed a thunderous explosion. The roof of the temple bulged upward and settled again, awry and

punctured. Something blown through the open door hummed past him, struck, bounced, rolled, stopped, to lie flaming in the glare of the sun. The concussion startled him into a jump and a dash toward his plane. As he ran he glanced again at the glittering thing on the ground. It was one of the jeweled eyes of the smashed effigy of José Martinez—a topaz.

A parting mockery, it seemed; a taunt to remind him of a topaz in a golden crown, of warm hazel eyes and a lovable form in flame hued silk which he had allowed to go from him forever. He shot a look along the desolate plaza to the forsaken fort, and his fight scarred face set in deeper seams. Then he strode all the faster to his machine. Two steps from it he again stopped short.

From the yawning doorway of the plane room darted the figure for which he had just looked without hope. Nuné, though she had left him, had not departed. Out in the sun, with the face of Cononaco left behind in the shadows and her maidens fading from sight down the path, rebellion against further denial of the promptings of her heart had swept aside all else; and, halting at the top of the downward road, she had crisply told the following commandant that she would fly forth with the king, and ordered him to proceed. The ex-*sargento*, still habitually obedient to the orders of the royal caste, had gone unquestioning. Any doubt which might later have assailed him had come too late for him to turn back.

So now, after hiding and watching and stealing after the far flyer in whose hands must hereafter lie her fate, she ran to his side. The golden circlet with its flaming jewel, symbolic of her dedication to service for the White Ones, was gone from her brow. Her eyes were twin stars, alight with a great daring.

Neither spoke. One straight look, then the reckless smile of Knowlton once more swept the bleakness from the face of McKay. Powerful arms seized her and lifted her into the waiting speedster. A leap, and he too had left the soil of the royal mesa. An instant of rapid motion inside, a quiver of released power, a forward rush—the ground fell away.

"Hold tight to me!" he prompted.

She laughed and clung close. The humming craft tilted sharply upward. Both looked into the high sky.

THE WAR fleet had arrived. Far above, it was swirling about with lessening speed, swinging into position for the first discharge of shattering missiles. The little dragon fly below also wheeled, and its master swung a last swift survey around Hoserán. The streets were empty.

With a glance at the compass he straightened into a direct course to the northward, gradually ascending as he shot forward with whistling velocity. The top of the mountain rim flashed beneath him and receded. The gray green jungle slid below and lengthened behind, yet lay ever ahead. The city of the White Ones vanished.

In the cañons of that city now burst roaring, rending destruction. The first explosive bombs had fallen, seeking the forts, blowing great pits in the roadways, knocking ponderous fragments of stone from upper walls to fall in crashing, crushing confusion. Others plunged in rapid succession, and from the deep gorges rolled smoke and thunder, while the mountains quivered from terrific concussions. Meanwhile on the city itself rained smaller bombs from other destroyers, dropping in sinister silence, breaking with little noise, but spreading abroad invisible death to all things which breathed. Here and there a Jivero hitherto hidden in some safe covert sprang forth, ran frantically along a street, and suddenly fell, to move no more. No other human creature perished; for none remained.

Outside the mountains, the sturdy race for whom that devastation had been loosed were marching swiftly but steadily away along roads masked overhead by the forest canopy of lofty interlaced branches and thick foliage; a race which generations ago had come out of the

jungle shadows to live in the sun and now went back to the shadows to start anew. As those White Ones went, within them grew implacable resolution to allow no revival of royalty, which had first raised and then ruined them. Stride by stride they drew away from the spot of their pollution, recking less and less, as they marched and thought, of the fact that that spot was lost to them forever. In their lives its use was past.

So, as the thunder of demolition ceased and the breath of Death permeated every room of their lost homes, they passed and were gone into the clean green forest where waited a sterner, stronger life. And far away to the northward, riding on wings magically swift, their last king and queen also passed and were gone; gone into the thin blue haze beyond which lay another world, wherein would be no more restless death daring by the one, no more devotion to false gods by the other. And behind all of them, in the fort on the mesa, the last *capitán* of the Old Ones rested tranquilly, still smiling his ghostly smile. Though the kingdom to which he had given his life was no more, all was well.

THE END

THE GALLOPING GOOSE

By Leonard H. Nason

SOUTH of Bordeaux, in the pine forests of the Landes, was a camp that was first used by the Senegalese or black troops of France, then given to the Russians, and finally turned over to the Americans as a replacement and training camp. The name of this place was Le Courneau.

It was a terrible place, miles from anywhere. To the north was a small town called La Teste de Bouc and to the south was another town called Cazeaux. These two towns were served by a train that ran twice a day most days. If the engineer of the one engine was sick, the train did not run. It rarely was in action on Monday, because of the wear and tear of Sunday on the train crew.

This train brought the soldiers from La Teste to Le Courneau. The train from Bordeaux got into La Teste at noon, but the "Galloping Goose" did not leave until five o'clock, for if the engineer left La Teste at noontime, he would have nothing to do from three o'clock when he arrived at Cazeaux until six, when he was through for the day. That he had to lie around La Teste half the afternoon did not occur to his superiors.

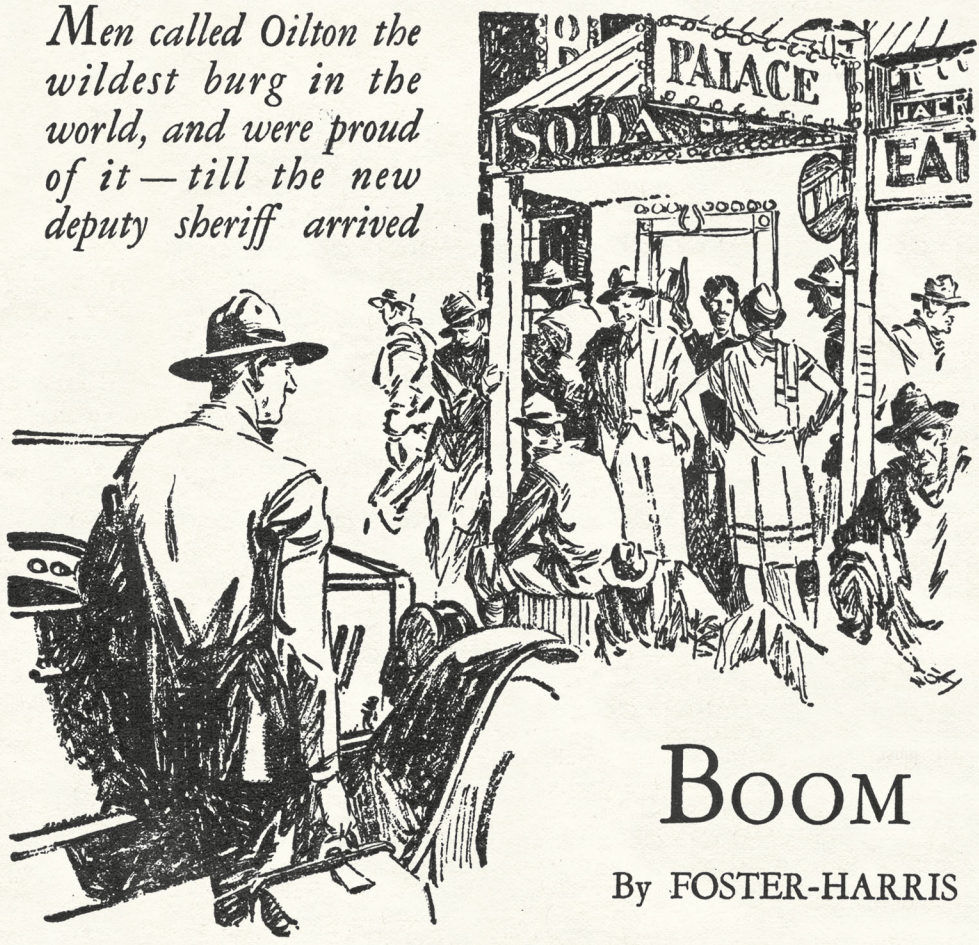
Well, then, at four the fire would be kindled in the stove and the water heated, and by five the Goose would gallop.

The one engine had no cab, and the engineer used to stand on the running-board, his beard flying, a handful of stones ready to hurl at cattle that frequently disputed the right of way with the engine.

The soldiers who rode this train were all men coming from hospital, or returning from some detached duty, and there was a force of M.P.'s always on hand to see that these soldiers did not fall off the train and disappear into the scenery.

Many tales are told of the encounters between the men on the Goose and the M.P.'s along the road. One of the best is that once a soldier, seeing an M.P. watching the passage of the train, hurled a can of beans at him. The M. P. pursued the train, caught the last car and climbed aboard. The man who had thrown the can thereupon leaped to the ground, ran ahead to the next car, boarded it and uncoupled the car on which the M. P. was riding. The M. P., undaunted, leaped to the ground in his turn, ran alongside the train, passed the three cars of which it was composed, and getting ahead of the engine turned around and flagged it. He then apprised the engineer of the fact that a car had been uncoupled, went back along the train and arrested his man.

Men called Oilton the wildest burg in the world, and were proud of it — till the new deputy sheriff arrived



BOOM

By FOSTER-HARRIS

THE CONES of brilliance from the headlights swept up and down over the bumps in flashing arcs and fell full upon the crumpled figure of a man lying squarely across the road.

"Damn it!" said the driver. "Hold all—"

Swinging the wheel, he smashed the accelerator into the floorboard and whirled straight for the fallen figure at roaring speed. With a catlike bound the lying man flung himself out of the way, the wheels missing him by inches as the driver veered again in a wild attempt to run him down.

An instant volley crashed in the bushes by the roadside, an upper corner of the windshield screamed as a steel jacketed bullet went through, and the big car was by, rocketing down the road.

"Reception committee?" inquired the sole passenger in the stage, who sat beside the driver.

"Hijackers," explained the driver aggrievedly. "E-magine 'em trying that guy in the road stunt on me, wouldja! I never do have no luck or I sure woulda collected me one jackroller."

"You're shooting over my head," commented the passenger. "Come again."

"Why them was hijackers—stickup men, y'unnerstand," the driver explained condescendingly. "You're supposed to stop and see what's wrong with the fella in the road, see? Then him and his buddies in the bushes pokes artillery in

yore ribs, lifts the roll, bats you over the dome and departs in your car, see? This guy mus 'a' had a eye open."

"The country," commented the passenger thoughtfully, "seems to have changed some since my day."

"Huh? Was you here before?" asked the driver.

"My old man owned the Oldham ranch," observed the passenger dryly.

"The hell he did!" exclaimed the driver, impressed. "Why, gosh, man, he owned the whole field!"

"But he sold out just before the War," continued the passenger, even more dryly. "He always said there was oil under the place though."

"Then you're Breck Oldham, ain't you?" surmised the driver. "Heard of you. You're the guy that won the Congressional Medal in them Oregon Woods, ain't you? They got your name on the soldier boys' monument over in Palo Rojo. Where you been all these years?"

"Lotsa places," replied the passenger evasively. "How about this Oilton?"

"Boy, she's some wild burg," affirmed the driver enthusiastically. "Th' wickedest town in America the newspaper boys is calling her, and she is. Booze, gamblin', wild women—Oilton's got 'em all. Yes suh!"

"Sounds sweet," commented Oldham.

"Yes, suh, she's wooly and plenty wide open and wild," continued the driver. "Y'know, I was out there a week after the Magnus No. 1 come in a gusher and they wasn't nothin' there—not a house, tent, tree, not one damn' thing! And three weeks later they was two thousand people.

"And now look at 'er! Biggest gusher field this country's ever seen. Less'n a year old, ten thousand people, railroad comin', wildest town in th' world. Brother, and how!"

"Uh," observed Oldham succintly.

"You looking for a job, maybe?" the driver queried abruptly. "If it ain't personal."

"Thought I might get on the police force," explained Oldham. "Chance, you reckon?"

"You go see Drumright Saunders," advised the driver. "Drumright, he runs the town. He's some tough baby, but he'll likely put you on. They's plenty uh oil work—rig buildin', production or line gangs, if you don't land there."

"Obliged," said Oldham. "I'll look him up."

THE CAR went over a series of roller coaster hills and the lights of the Magnus field appeared, far away in the black night.

Great waving plumes of flame, the burning flares of waste gas, here and there cast up a wild and lurid light against the heavens, while clear to the horizon flickered the pale electric bulbs on the drilling rigs. Just under the faint rim between earth and sky a brighter haze proclaimed the site of Oilton, the new boom city.

"Oilton," eulogized the driver. "You'd think the burg all come in cans from the piles they is around it. Some hot cookie!"

They began to pass drilling wells, the hiss of steam, rhythm of engines and the ponderous thump of walking beams coming to them clearly through the dark.

They were jolting up the mile long, incredibly rutted and rough main street of Oilton. Solid ranks of cars of every conceivable age and condition of servitude fringed the swarming sidewalks and the high center of the street.

"Well," said the driver, throwing his car abruptly into a small open space reserved for the stages, "here you are. Hell and two miles south."

Oldham climbed out.

"Hotel here that isn't crummy?" he demanded.

The driver spat tobacco juice and regraded him sardonically.

"Brother," he remarked, "this here is a boom oil town."

"Well."

"You might try the Derrick. It's prett' near clean. Two blocks back, this side the street."

"Obliged to you," said Oldham, picking up his grip.

He shouldered his way slowly through the amazing throng which jammed the rough, uneven board walk, eying the faces as he passed.

Immaculately dressed men rubbed shoulders with tall giants in oil stained khakis, laced boots and battered hats, all liberally besmeared. Soft fingered, hard eyed gamblers, bootleggers, geologists, toolies, casing crew men, drillers and lease men flowed by. Women, very young for the most part, yet with the indefinable stamp of the oldest profession, passed here and there. Glaring light from stores, movie shows and dancehalls beat out upon them. From the dancehalls came pouring strains of jungle music, the roar of voices, brittle with high laughter. Over it all a dark sky, dyed spottily red by the flares of gas. Boom town. Booming.

Oldham edged through a swiftly gathering crowd. The attraction was a tall, rangy figure of a man in gigantic white Stetson, fancy cowboy boots and unbuttoned vest, disclosing a broad belt and two gun holsters, who beat upon the head of a cringing unfortunate with the barrel of a heavy frontier Colt, blood spurting at every blow.

"Who is it?" Oldham asked a short, khaki garbed driller.

"Drumright Saunders," said the driller. "He's pistol whippin' a bum."

"Saunders? Who's he?"

"Who's he! Fella, Drumright's the guy that owns Oilton! He's the Law!"

"Uh," remarked Oldham.

The gaudy officer suddenly ceased hammering his victim, swung him through the crowd by the collar, and booted him harshly up the street.

"The Law?" said Oldham coldly. "Hell!"

He went on slowly to the hotel. Something about his eyes caused the frowsy clerk abruptly to change his intention of declaring that the hotel was full, and assign him a room instead. Noticeably as he prepared to sleep, he set a chair against the door so that it would fall with a crash should any attempt to enter. From inside his shirt a grim, beautifully kept .45 appeared and this he placed in the bed at about the point where his right hand would naturally fall.

These simple preparations made, he turned off the single bulb and dropped almost instantly to sleep.

MORNING at last—the dead end for a boom town. Shifts or towers on the drilling wells change midnight and noon. The afternoon towers, the gamblers, the dancehall girls, the tinhorns—vermin sleep long into the new day after the night's business. The day workers rise soddenly in the gray hours. It is never quiet in a boom field, but it is at daybreak as quiet as it ever becomes.

Oldham came out of an early opening restaurant, into the main street up which the giant trucks already were opening the day's parade. Compared with the night before, the crazy sidewalks were free, although still far from deserted. A trim, clean cut, fresh faced girl went past with a swinging stride and Oldham's eyes followed her with a tiny puzzled frown.

Passing one of the "drug stores," which sell other things than drugs, he saw a drunken man come reeling out and speak to the girl. Ignoring him, she attempted to pass. With a sodden grin he caught her arm. Her palm cracked like a pistol against his face. Swearing, he seized her roughly by the shoulders. And then Oldham was at hand.

He did not seem to move at all hurriedly. The force with which he swung the offender around appeared almost gentle, and his fist, moving to the left side of the fellow's jaw, certainly traveled less than ten inches at speed. Yet the smack was clearly audible and the man went down like a poleaxed ox.

"I am very sorry," Oldham said politely, taking off his hat, "that this happened to you, ma'm, in our town. We'll try to see that it don't happen again."

"We will? Who the hell are you?" a cold, angry voice came crisply.

Oldham whirled. Standing in the door of the drug store, great hat pulled over

one eye, hands hooked in his belt just in front of his guns, was Drumright Saunders.

"Why, I'm Breck Oldham," Oldham replied mildly. "New deputy sheriff for this town. You're Saunders, the police chief, I take it?"

"New deputy, eh?" snapped Saunders belligerently. "Well, set yourself on straight, fella! I'm the Law in this town. All there is, see?"

"You was," replied Oldham significantly. "We'll get along."

For a moment the two stood eye to eye. Saunders' pupils contracted. His fingers twitched spasmodically as he glared at his opponent. A slow grin crept over the deputy's face and abruptly Saunders turned on his heel and went back into the store.

"Nice fella," observed Breck to the girl, without, it seemed, even a hint of sarcasm.

The girl's eyes flashed her opinion.

"I'm Carol Williams," she changed the subject. "I teach the young idea to shoot for the Magnus Company's school here, you know—and I thank you muchly, Mister Officer."

"You oughtn't to teach 'em to shoot," demurred Oldham, mock seriously. "Gosh knows they is already too much knowledge of that in a town like this."

"Well, I only try to teach them to get what they're aiming at," amended the girl with a smile.

"'S a fine idee," grinned Breck, "providing they ain't aimin' with a six-pistol."

He bowed again, gravely, as the young teacher took her leave with more thanks, and watched her swing on out of sight up the street toward the neat brick building the Magnus company had erected as a school for its employees' children, and which now was becoming Oilton's first public school.

The school, with a dancehall just across the street, a drilling well towering behind the yard and a not too irreproachable rooming house on a third side, somehow epitomized the boom towns, he thought. First the tough crowd, with only a bare minority of the good people. Then more and more of the good people, driving out the scum. Finally another clean, quiet town.

So— He pushed his hat back from his forehead and strolled on casually up the street.

Sharp on ten o'clock he went into the newly opened First National, as yet the only bank in town, spoke briefly to a teller, was ushered speedily into a bare little private office in the rear, where a portly, elderly man sat at a battered desk, chewing a long cigar.

"Glad to welcome you," said the portly man. "I'm Melton. Sit down? Smoke?"

"Thanks," said Oldham, accepting handshake, chair and cigar.

"Well, what do you think of our town?" the bank president asked abruptly.

"I have seen worse," commented Oldham dryly. "Match?"

"It's hell," agreed the banker, extending a light. "That's what we got you for. Your job is to clean up."

"Nice job," said Oldham.

"Yeh. Listen now. You probably don't know what it's all about, do you? Well, you're here because we put the pressure on to get you. You're the one man who can do what we want done in this town, and that is clean it up quiet."

"Yeh?" drawled Breck, blowing smoke rings.

"Yeh. Now listen some more. The way it has been stacking up the crooks have been running this town and they're running it wide open. They got everybody with 'em or scared of 'em and the Law's protecting 'em. It's rotten!"

"Maybe you don't know these boom towns like I do. Just let a boom town get off on the wrong foot and it's gone! They drive you by and say, 'There's where she was'. Just a little too much of this wild and wicked stuff, that's all it takes. Why, man, one of these boom towns can die almost overnight, and it's just too bad for the fellows who've been investing in the place, figuring it was there to stay.

"We got our money invested in this town. We're here to stay and build a town. We got you because everybody down in this section has heard all about you some time or other and you're supposed to be the Great Ringtailed Terror. We'll help you all we can, but we're men with bay windows like me, not killers, remember. It's a hard job. Take it?"

"Well, I kinda like the looks of parts of your town," said Oldham. "Reckon I'll hang around a while anyhow."

"That's fine," declared the banker heartily. "Have another cigar. Have a pocketful. I'll see that the boys drop around and wise you up all they can."

"Aw right," assented Oldham. "I'll be in the office."

HE STROLLED leisurely out, down the street to the unpainted shack which housed the unoccupied offices of the sheriff's force. Here during the day men came and went, never more than one or two coming at a time, yet with hardly an interval when no one was present. Introducing themselves quietly as sent by Melton, they talked. At the end of the day the new deputy had a very good idea of the entire workings of the town.

There existed, it was certain, one of those strange criminal organizations indigenous to boom oil towns, a "Line". The Line, it was assured, was the moving factor behind the whole show. It held the monopoly on the wholesale liquor trade, exacted a weekly tax from every gambling hell, hooch joint, bootlegger, dope peddler, redlight house and light woman, and gave in return immunity and protection.

"Jelly" O'Hara, much wanted bank robber and bandit, had been seen about town several times. He had apparently been under protection, as the Law had let him alone.

Drumright Saunders, the city police chief, was the key man. A deadly, lightning swift two gun killer, said to have ten notches on his guns, Drumright was obviously the gun law which held the town.

Dad Callahan's dancehall, gambling parlors and what-do-you-want apparently was the focal point of the underworld element.

The mysterious agencies financing the Line were unknown, but obviously exerted enormous pressure where and when needed. The mayor and other city officials, elected principally by the townsite company, were more or less stuffed shirts.

These were the summary points of the situation. Oldham summed them up, one by one, after the last man had gone. Scratching his head, he lit a rank and blackened pipe, and went strolling toward the school.

It was long after letting out hour, but a group of great boys still were playing baseball in the shadow of the school yard drilling well. Carol Williams, the teacher he had aided that morning, came out of the building and spoke to him cheerily.

"Maybe I better see you home, ma'm," he said with embarrassment. "Somebody might be a little brash."

"All right, come on," the girl assented.

Two of the lingering players—overgrown, husky youths who towered above the comparatively tiny teacher, almost as tall as Oldham himself—passed and spoke.

"How do you manage th' little hellions —beg pardon, ma'm—anyway?" Oldham asked. "These oilfield kids couldn't help being tough if they wanted to. And that big!"

"Oh, just a matter of morale, you might say," laughed the teacher. "I have them all bluffed."

"Uh huh, morale," nodded Oldham understandingly.

He thought about the teacher's careless statement as he returned from seeing her to the private home where she stayed, within the cyclone wire fenced enclosure of a great oil company's camp.

Abruptly he shook hands with himself very gravely.

THAT NIGHT he held conference with Victor Melton, the banker, leader of the better element.

"They have a hoosegow in this place?"

he asked. "Police station? Where does this Saunders do his hanging out?"

"They have a species of station and jail," the banker answered. "It's pretty awful. It's on Denton Street. Why?"

"Just wanted to know. Where does Drumright do his practising?"

"On the poor devils he arrests, I reckon—oh, you mean his gun work? They got a sort of target range rigged up back of the jail. Probably there. What's on your mind?"

Bending forward, Oldham explained.

"Coo-coo," said the banker decisively.

"Sure," asserted Oldham. "It's absolutely damn' fool. But it'll work."

"Well, it's your funeral," Melton said, with a shrug. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come along with me," explained Oldham. "Have somebody drop in, maybe. Oh, you can *sabe* what to do."

"Well, all right," consented Melton reluctantly. "Just the same, it sounds plain bugs to me. You ready now?"

"Come on," invited Breck.

"Let me get two or three of the boys to trail along," hesitated Melton. "We might need 'em."

"All right. Let's go."

They went out of the darkened bank, stopping up the street at a weird hardware store to confer briefly with the proprietor, a hard bitten ex-cowman who walked with a limp—and who forthwith slid a worn single action into his breeches band, shut up shop and departed to play his part in the plan of action.

"You need help?" asked Melton irresolutely as they pushed their way through the throng packing the sidewalk.

"Naw," declared Oldham scornfully. "Here's a place that'll do. Little Pappas, the Greek. Come on."

They dived into a rudely constructed soft drink parlor, wherein a rough bar, a row of slot machines, a peculiarly sour odor and sundry denizens hinted of other things besides strictly soft drinks.

"Two whiskies, guy," ordered Oldham, leaning an elbow on the bar and winking at the dark skinned attendant. The Greek stared at Melton uneasily. It was doubtful that he recognized him; certainly he did not know Oldham. Nevertheless he was cautious.

"Ain't got a thing nearer than near beer, gents," he replied with false geniality. "How about two off the ice?"

"Now listen, fella, don't get funny," barked Oldham. "You spread two slugs of rat killer and don't try to run in no wildcat, get me? Line stuff, guy—pour it! We're that dry."

The bartender stared at him, then without a word lifted a bottle and glasses from under the counter and poured two drinks of amber liquid.

Oldham raised his to his lips, sniffed, hesitated, tasted.

"That's fine, Pappas, old boy," he snarled suddenly, dropping the glass with a crash and whipping one hand under his coat. "Push 'em up! We'll let the Judge hear you tell all about it!"

The bartender shrank back against his back bar, half panic, half mutiny in his face.

"You—you Federal men?" he inquired stubbornly, his hands tensed like claws in front of him.

"Hell, no!" snapped Oldham, flipping his coat with his left hand, giving a lightning glimpse of a glittering badge. "You—put—them—hands—up!"

"Rangers!" exploded the bartender suddenly, taking in the officer's wide white Stetson and turning pale. His fat hands rocketed heavenward.

"Git in behind there and collect a basketful of evidence, Vic," Oldham directed his companion. "Aw right, funny face, you come out here and let papa see what's in your pockets."

Obediently the bartender moved from behind the counter and submitted to a fast but thorough search for weapons, while Melton piled a small box full of bottles of beer and high power whisky.

"Let's go," drawled Oldham. "The rest of you guys get t' hell outa here. Come on, fella, and if you feel like runnin' why you just make a break."

Locking the door, the trio departed,

Melton carrying the box of bottles, Oldham strolling along on the right hand of the prisoner, who clung affectionately to the side of his captor, scrupulously avoiding even the barest semblance of an attempt to run.

THEY turned into Denton Street and came to a rough, unpainted building upon whose front a cluster of unshaded lights revealed the sign, "Police Station." Marching through the entrance, they walked into a long, illy lighted hall bisecting the building from front to rear. On the right a door opened into a large room divided in the middle by a rail and netting; behind a window sat a man smoking a fat greasy cigar. On the left of the hall wideswung doors revealed the single room that was the Oilton jail.

Bedlam would better have described it. A rough bench extended the length of the room. At its foot a huge rig timber lay, while waist high a giant chain was stretched. And the prisoners, seated on the bench, were handcuffed to the chain and their feet shackled to the timber.

Spreadeagled flat on the floor, between the timber and chains linked to rings set into the floor, were more prisoners. Men and women alike on the chain. At the end a man whose head had been hammered to a pulp sagged unconscious in his bonds. A drunken woman was laughing, shrilly, maddeningly. On the floor a great roughneck raved and shouted, fighting drunk, while stretched flat beside him a venomous faced rat turned a sneering face to watch. And there were no bars of any description.

Such was the jail.

Oldham led the way briskly into the room where the man sat behind the wicket.

"You the sergeant?" he asked. "I'm Oldham, new deputy sheriff. Gotta prisoner here want you to take care of for me."

The man behind the wicket removed his cigar from his mouth with infinite leisure.

"I don't give a damn who you are," he announced calmly. "You ask Drum-right about keeping that prisoner. He's the Law here."

"Fella," said Oldham coldly, "you come out here and lock this guy up. If I was you I would."

The man behind the wicket caught a full glimpse of the officer's eyes and grudgingly came out, jingling some handcuffs.

"You skunk!" he observed. "Catch me with no gun on!"

"Yo're a damn' liar," retorted Oldham cheerfully. "We'll get along, fella."

"Where's that pistol range?" Oldham asked curtly as the prisoner was added to the chain.

"Back there," replied the sergeant sullenly. "Why?"

"Need practise," answered Oldham. "Only need one bottle for evidence."

"They's only one light," said the sergeant, a trifle more respectfully.

"Don't need much light," retorted Breck. "Come on, Melton. By the way," he observed casually, turning in the doorway, "if I was you, this guy wouldn't make no phoney bonds or escapes, see?"

The sergeant's lips lifted in a silent snarl.

LEADING the way, the banker turned toward the rear of the building and entered the room which served as target range and practise ground for Saunders and his lieutenants. Rude but sufficient, it was little more than a covered firing line. The rear wall had been torn out, and in the yard, some twenty odd paces away, a heavy butt of bullet splintered boards backed with earth and then with oil tank steel plates held the targets.

Here it was that Saunders and his men conducted the constant, daily practise which a gunman must have to retain his murderous speed and skill.

A single electric bulb, hung from the cutaway wall halfway to the target, provided the sole illumination, as deceptive as it was revealing.

"Save one bottle," Oldham directed the banker. "Line the rest of 'em up against the butt there."

Melton did as directed. Out of the corner of his eye Oldham noted that the sergeant and two other men, probably more lieutenants of Saunders, were standing in the doorway, watching.

"Try a shot?" he asked Melton casually.

"Heavens, no," said that worthy fervently. "Why, man, I can't even see the bottles from here."

"Light is bad," admitted Oldham. "Well, let's see if I can hit one."

His hand moved evenly to the left side of his waist band, a long, blue Colt swung out and spat fire in one precise lick and simultaneously there was the crash of breaking glass—and the gun was returned to its holster.

"Not so good, not so bad," commented Breck mildly. "Third bottle."

Again his hand moved evenly to his belt, the long weapon swung and roared, glass tinkled and the pistol was returned to its holster.

"But man, you don't just shoot one shot and stick your gun right back in your pants that way when you're shooting at somebody, do you?" protested Melton, aghast.

"Why not?" asked Oldham. "Grandad taught me that. Got his training back in the old hoss pistol days when a man only had one shot. Used to say if a man couldn't collect what he was aimin' at first crack why he sure oughta give up pistol shootin' and th'ow rocks."

He smiled casually at the onlookers, noting impassively that the sergeant had vanished, while the ex-cowman storekeeper and a little group of followers had wandered quietly in as if attracted by the firing.

Without further comment he continued his practise, draw, fire, return, one, two, three, draw, fire, return, sometimes varying the procedure by firing two shots in place of the one, reloading on the fifth shot—always returning the gun immediately to its holster. As he finished reloading for the third time there was a stir in the close packed doorway behind and he smiled before turning slowly. Drumright Saunders had arrived. Great hat thrust belligerently back on his head, nostrils quivering and eyes like dead coals, the Law of Oilton stood facing the deputy.

"Using your range for a little practise," explained Oldham calmly. "Brought in a bootlegger, been destroying excess evidence. Smell it?"

He sniffed, explanatory fashion, at the scent of raw liquor in the air. Wheeling, he repeated his even, unhurried practise, draw, fire, return, the crash of glass as usual testifying to the accuracy of his aim.

"You ain't very fast," said Drumright coldly, stepping up beside him.

"No?" said Oldham cooly.

"Hell, no! You're slow."

"Yeh?"

Exasperatingly deliberate, Oldham repeated his even maneuver.

With a sneer Saunders stepped up to the firing line and extended his hands outstretched before him. Then with a movement so fast it was only a blur, he had filled his fists with roaring steel that spat solid, reverberating flame at the splintering glass on the target.

As abruptly he ceased firing, holding the two blue guns waist high, still trained to the front.

"That's how," he said, in a fierce low voice.

"There's a bottle you missed," commented Oldham dryly.

One, *crash*, three. Oldham's weapon was back in his belt while the scream of glass told the story. With a gasp the onlookers realized that the seemingly deliberate draw was shaded only insignificantly, if at all, by the flashing performance of the Oilton gunman.

"He puts his gun away," a hoarse yet audible whisper broke the silence. "My God, he's just a damn' machine! A man wouldn't have no chance—"

"It ain't the first shot that always counts," Oldham commented gently. "It's the first that hits."

Quietly he turned and pushed his way from the room, with Melton in his wake,

noting with impassive amusement as he went that the old ex-cowman already was playing his part, talking in a low, excited voice about the shooting.

"Crazy foolishness," muttered the banker as they marched away from the building.

"Prob'ly," agreed the officer gravely. "So was the wood hoss the Greeks fooled them fellers the Trojans with. These hard guys is usually yellow. It'll either work or it won't. Give it time."

BUT BY MORNING the showdown was ahead. Flaunting defiance in the face of the new law, "with the permission of the city officials," as the cards and posters said, Dad Callahan announced a Fig Leaf Dance for the evening.

"Back To Nature, Boys," the hasty placards read, "And Remember How Far It Is To Fig Leaves."

Vastly horrified, the old cowman hardware dealer haled Oldham out of bed to look at one of the defiant placards.

"Sounds kinda hot," commented Breck sleepily.

"Hot!" raged the old Texan. "Don't you *sabe?* The wimmin ain't gonna wear nothin'! With the express permission of the city laws, see? It's a straight slap and it's gotta be stopped."

"Well, we'll stop it," replied Breck mildly. "How'd you come out last night?"

The mustachioed old Texan forgot his high moral indignation and chuckled.

"Right sweet," he declared, grinning toothlessly. "You gotta new name this mawning. The whole damn' burg's calling you 'No Chance Oldham'. Meaning what you give, not what you got, understand?"

"You're sure consoling," retorted Breck. "Where'd this guy Saunders or Callahan, whichever 'twas, get these cards printed so quick, anyway?"

"Little print shop here, up the street," answered the old cowman. "Why?"

Oldham told him. With a grin the ancient warrior departed at high speed while Breck leisurely dressed, slid his freshly cleaned weapon and another under his coat and went out in search first of breakfast, then of the banker, Victor Melton.

BY NOON the first gun in the deputy's counterattack was unmasked. Posters, even more hurriedly printed, appeared in store windows, on electric light poles, on walls, tacked and pasted wherever a notice of the dance could be found. The new poster read, in smearing black capitals, still wet from the press:

> NOTICE: THIS CITY IS HENCEFORWARD A CLEAN, RESPECTABLE TOWN. UNDESIRABLES WILL LEAVE BEFORE SIX O'CLOCK TOMORROW MORNING.
>
> —BRECKENRIDGE OLDHAM,
> DEPUTY SHERIFF.

Wherever the posters appeared crowds swirled, and the news began to spread through the field. By midafternoon almost every man who could possibly leave the job was on the streets, idling, talking, waiting.

The sun set in a welter of angry, bloody little clouds, and as the night closed down a chopping wind began to break the red gas flares into gouts of black edged, uneasy light.

A column of giant empty trucks came roaring slowly down the main street, turned into a side avenue and halted, the drivers silently waiting. Quietly men were massing in the darkened bank, coming in a side door, fingering many and assorted weapons.

Dad Callahan threw open the doors of his huge, barnlike dance palace; his lights went on with a flash; the wild, throbbing beat of moaning jazz came gushing out over the floor, as yet deserted; and Oldham came walking down the street, a gathering company at his back, a swiftly cleared space marching before him as the crowd turned, gave way hurriedly and then foamed in his wake.

Up to the doors of the dancehall he came, and Dad Callahan, gray in vice, fat and slow but no coward, met him in the portals.

"You can't hold your dance, Callahan," said Oldham crisply.

"Why not?" blustered the old man. "I got the city's permission."

"I'm the Law here," snapped Oldham coldly. "I said you can't hold it."

"Here's somebody says I can," cried Dad angrily. "Jelly! Oh, O'Hara!"

A short, handsome man came out of the cloakroom door, twenty paces away, and with a frantic rush the crowd dived right and left out of the probable line of fire, leaving a cleared space behind the officer.

"Know me, guy?" the stranger asked in a shrill, metallic voice, carrying clearly in the sudden hush.

"Yes," said Oldham steadily. "You're Jelly O'Hara, wanted for murder, bank robbery and other things."

The gunman laughed, a high, brittle laughter.

"Right-o!" he cried. "Now get to hell outa here! Run! I'm gonna kill—"

With flashing, dazzling speed he went for his guns.

Steady, unhurried, with the precision of a machine, Oldham's hand moved to his belt.

O'Hara's guns were out, blazing—

Oldham's pistol swung in an arc of blue flame, spat once. The bandit suddenly froze silent in his tracks. One gun fell with a clatter. Very, very slowly he began to crumple, in and down, until at last he sank quite gently, like a little heap of empty clothing, dead on the floor.

Then the frightened onlookers caught the amazing detail, gasped and let their jaws fall. Oldham, following the shot, had immediately returned his weapon to its holster.

"My God, my God, my God!" old Dad Callahan was murmuring in gray faced befuddlement. "A machine! A damn' machine! No chance—"

The deputy turned evenly, hands hanging loose and empty, his eyes gray flames.

"Any other States to be heard from?" he asked.

There was no response.

"I wouldn't go on, if I was you, Callahan," he continued, after a pause. "A couple of you boys pick this guy up and take him to Doc Wells."

Without another word he turned and left the hall. People eddied and flowed in great tides as the news spread. Curiously the town began to grow quieter and quieter.

SOME ONE told Drumright Saunders. White with rage he came striding down the street, the throngs swirling after him.

"Go on with your dance," he roared at Callahan, his voice boiling in his throat. "I'm the Law here."

Delayed awaiting a makeshift stretcher, four oil workers were just carrying the body of the late bad man away. As they passed, Saunders halted them with a flick of his hand, lifted the cap from the dead face and bent over. Squarely between the wide open glassy eyes was a single black hole.

Biting his lip, he dropped the cap abruptly and waved them on.

Then he seemed to go mad.

"I'm the Law here!" he screamed. "Go on! Start your dance! Go on! Go on!"

The frightened orchestra burst into a wild barbaric strain. With a snap like a whip came another command, crisp through the clamor, stopped the music as the flick of a switch turns off a light.

"Cut that! No dance!"

Hands at his sides, Oldham was in the doorway.

With a slow, insolent stride he came over to where the two-gun Law of Oilton stood, petrified in his tracks.

"You're the Law, eh?" he said in a low, subtly insulting voice. "A rootin' tootin' two-gun killer, eh? Why, you yellow little rat! Pull your hardware, toughy—or pull your freight outa here. Go on!"

Like a man hypnotized Drumright stood and stared, his face a gray mask. Not daring to take his eyes from the insolent, lounging figure in front, yet he sensed the silent, speedy clearing of the space behind him by the packed crowd.

Behind Oldham, too, they had moved, all but one man, the grizzled ex-cowman who stood significantly squarely at the deputy's back, grinning over his shoulder at the cornered gunman.

With a toothless, silent chuckle the ancient frontiersman lifted a gnarled finger and tapped himself between the eyes.

"Go on, Two-gun," came Oldham's low, jabbing voice. "Take your pick and pull it."

The ex-cowman unconcernedly thrust a blackened pipe into his mouth. Catching Saunders' eye, he put his finger between his brows again, grinned widely, then stepped up closely behind Oldham's broad shoulders.

For a full minute the tableau held. Then, his eyes like hell fire, Oldham began to inch forward—and inch by inch Saunders began to give back!

"Choose!" It was like the hiss of a snake.

"You're a deputy sheriff," said Saunders weakly. "I ain't got no quarrel with you."

"No?" drawled Oldham. "Then get to hell outa here!"

He extended a hand, pointing, then started it moving slowly toward his belt.

"Git!"

The command came like a rifle shot. And without a word Saunders turned and fled, while the crowd stood and stared, out on its feet, in flabbergasted amaze.

"Some of the rest of you better do likewise," suggested Oldham lazily, turning on the bystanders. "You know who you are. Free ride on the trucks out there."

Easily, he wheeled and marched out, followed by the old cowman.

"You shouldn't 'a' took chances that way," he reproached the old warrior gently as they fell in step.

"Well, you left him a hole to run out, didn't you?" demanded the ancient, grinning.

AS THEY passed the darkened bank the ex-cattleman slid inside, and immediately little groups of low voiced, armed men began to move here and there about town. Within thirty minutes the first of the trucks, crammed to the fenders, moved out toward McAdams, the supply town on the railroad, over the county line.

The streets of Oilton seemed curiously quiet in the morning. The giant trucks as usual were beginning to roar through; the line gangs and day workers were going to the job. But over it all hung an indefinable air of peace.

Breck Oldham came out of an early opening restaurant, lighting his pipe. Carol Williams, the school teacher, satchel in hand, was passing by.

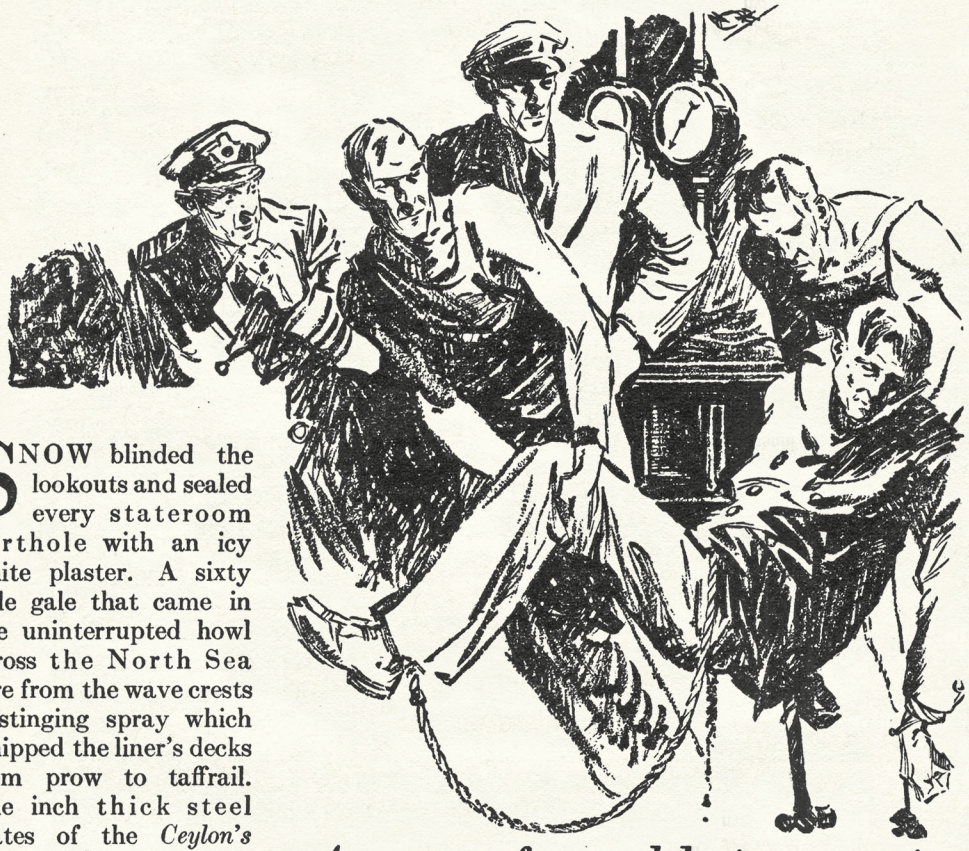
"Good mawning," said Oldham politely, removing his pipe from his mouth and lifting his hat.

"Good morning, Mister Officer," smiled the teacher demurely. "What have you been doing to our city? It seems so quiet this morning."

"Yes'm," agreed Oldham serenely. "It's growing into a right nice family town."

MACKENZIE'S WATCH

By RALPH R. PERRY



A story of an old-time engineer aboard a "floating palace"

SNOW blinded the lookouts and sealed every stateroom porthole with an icy white plaster. A sixty mile gale that came in one uninterrupted howl across the North Sea tore from the wave crests a stinging spray which whipped the liner's decks from prow to taffrail. The inch thick steel plates of the *Ceylon's* bow were sheathed in a thicker armor of gray sea ice; while unknown to the sailors snow blinded and numbed by cold, the gale and tide together were pushing the ship gradually, inexorably, from her course up the Skagerack on to the bleak coast of Denmark.

Yet the dominant sound within the liner was the hiss of steam from the radiators. It subdued the creaking from the storm wrenched hull, just as the regular throb and beat of the engines lulled and discounted to a passenger's ear the rumble of gale and sea outside. Despite the storm, warmth and light made the *Ceylon* seem like the first class hotel which dapper clerks in booking offices ashore had vaunted her to be, and it was in the mood of a hotel guest complaining to the manager that Mrs. Hammondsley cornered Captain Randolph in the passageway leading to the bridge.

"At dinner this evening your Mr. Mackenzie insulted me," she declared. "I refuse to sit at his table another meal—not one more. I demand an apology!"

She had no right to be where she was. No right to halt the captain when he was bundled in overcoat and oilskins, except that the passenger is always right. They are assured of the fact; they act accordingly.

"Mr. Mackenzie, our second engineer, do you mean?" Randolph answered.

The captain was a broad shouldered, fleshy little man between fifty and sixty. His cheeks were invariably freshly razored; silvery gray hair which had not become thin with age was brushed smoothly back from his forehead. The mark of his profession appeared in his far seeing blue eyes, wrinkled at the corners from much squinting into sun and fog, but his air was suave, rather than commanding. He was the type of executive to whom Mrs. Hammondsley was accustomed to go with her complaints. Conscious of his position and its importance, but anxious to please, like any other business head. Moreover, he was giving her undivided attention; his tone even had been in the faintest degree encouraging.

The pearls around Mrs. Hammondsley's neck gleamed as her wrath gathered volume. The middle aged wife of a very rich man, accustomed to rule him and her surroundings, a woman with prominent light blue eyes and two well defined sets of chins, wearing an imported evening gown, she too was conscious of her position and its importance. Service comes first, and courtesy is the keynote of service. The slight put upon her by a second engineer was a reflection upon the entire ship's company.

"I believe so. I have seen him in—ah—overalls," she answered tartly. The fact appeared to add fuel to her indignation. "Captain, I asked him if the sea had not lost its romance, and he called me a fool to my face!"

"Indeed?" said Randolph. Having had decades of experience with passengers of Mrs. Hammondsley's type, he doubted very much whether the second engineer had said anything quite so pointed, but for reasons of his own he welcomed the incident.

"I am sure Mr. Mackenzie will apologize," he went on, knowing that the six-foot raw boned Scotchman, whose temper matched the thatch of red hair which no comb could control or cap confine, would either refuse point blank or quit the *Ceylon* at the next port of call. "Yes, I am sure he meant no offense. He came to us from the freight service—the—er—tramp steamers, you know, where such language passes unnoticed, Mrs. Hammondsley. I would send for him immediately, except that it is almost midnight and he is going on watch. This snow, you know, keeps all us sailors busy."

The captain's gentle laugh dismissed the gale as a matter which might be annoying, but was of little consequence.

"An apology is all I desire, of course," snapped Mrs. Hammondsley. "Meanwhile if I might be transferred to your nephew's table—or yours—"

"Shall we talk of that later?" interrupted the captain, and in the shadow of his coat collar his smooth cheeks flushed. This was striking too close to his unspoken thought.

His nephew, the third engineer. If Mackenzie's temper should get the better of him, and he should throw up his job, the captain's nephew would get the red headed Scot's berth. A promotion that might not normally come young Porter's way for years. It had taken all the captain's influence to get his sister's son the job as third. The boy had only experience enough to qualify for a license. But a good lad. Trained in the passenger service; genial on deck and efficient below.

"But I will notify Mr. Mackenzie immediately," the captain decided. "In the morning I—"

HE STOPPED to catch Mrs. Hammondsley by the elbow and steady her. Even Randolph himself almost lost his feet in the sudden heave and lurch with which the *Ceylon* changed her course.

Above them a door slammed and a gust of snow and icy air swirled down the passageway, followed by a sailor from the bridge. Snow plastered the seaman's oilskins, but on his face the flush of excitement had banished the whiteness which comes from hours of exposure. He came for the captain at a stumbling run.

That something was most emphatically wrong, Randolph knew. Except in emergencies, liners do not change course without orders from the master; but Mrs. Hammondsley had gasped and shivered. Her shudder was the result more of cold than of alarm, yet the captain's first thought was to reassure her. Service comes first at sea, and passengers must not be frightened.

"Quartermaster! I want you to take a message to Mr. Mackenzie in the engine room," Randolph hailed peremptorily. "Tell him to report to me as soon as his watch is over. Mrs. Hammondsley has made a complaint."

Twice the sailor opened and shut his mouth as though the news he bore were about to burst through his lips.

"You'll excuse me?" Randolph requested. With a reassuring pat to Mrs. Hammondsley's fleshy elbow he stepped close to the sailor.

"Whisper it!" he growled under his breath. Catching the woman's eye he smiled and shrugged.

"We near grounded, sir," the sailor panted, running the words together. "Snow lifted, and the mate got a bearing on a lighthouse. The tide's set us within two miles of the beach and it must be running six knots, sir. Mate reports he's changed course and ordered full speed to beat out to sea."

"Is—is there any danger, Captain?" demanded Mrs. Hammondsley.

That breath of icy air made the *Ceylon* seem less like a hotel afloat, and though Randolph had been able to control his face while the news was whispered into his ear, he had overlooked the involuntary clenching of his fists. Two miles is not much margin, and with such a gale blowing a six-knot tide was not an exaggerated estimate. Still, the *Ceylon* could steam at fourteen knots.

For an instant the captain listened to the regular throb and beat of the engines. No, there was no danger now, thanks to that momentary interval in the blinding snow and the vigilance of the mate. Just a close call, such as happens at sea.

"Not a bit, madam," he answered. "Just the usual change of course as we turn toward the Baltic Sea. But you'll excuse me if I go to the bridge? The quartermaster will notify Mr. Mackenzie."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Hammondsley.

Yet her tone was somewhat doubtful. She did not like the abruptness with which both men hastened on their errands. With the change in course the ship pitched more violently, and in the deserted passageway the noises of sea and gale were magnified to her ears. For a moment she experienced panic, the helplessness amid strange dangers which seizes upon passengers during disasters at sea, which makes them scream and run, or die bravely because they know nothing to do save die well.

Panic for a moment, and a moment only. Once out of the passageway she heard the steam hissing comfortably from the radiators. Below the engines maintained their regular throb and beat. The chill in the air was gone, and Mrs. Hammondsley was a strong willed woman to whom had been promised satisfaction for vanity rudely offended.

With a sniff she walked away, comforting herself with a vision of an angry, embarrassed, red headed man stammering out a public apology. She would be gracious, but cold. Mr. Mackenzie must learn his place. She turned away, but not to her stateroom. Not realizing why, she sought the main saloon, already half filled with passengers who craved the moral support of their fellows, and who preferred to talk aimlessly to their friends rather than to lie alone in the darkness of their staterooms where there was nothing to distract their forebodings from the howl of the wind and the thunder of the waves against the *Ceylon*'s icy sides.

TWENTY MINUTES before it was time to take over his watch Mackenzie started for the engine room. To him also the idea of brooding in his room any longer was intolerable; he wished to rid his thoughts from the chagrin arising from his set-to with Mrs. Hammondsley by the realities of fire, responsibility and steel.

He was a direct man. The stern exactitude of engine room duty satisfied him. Steam pressure was a fact; if it got low you gave the firemen hell. A hot bearing was a fact. You oiled it. Breakdowns, even, were nothing but complicated facts, in the face of which you did what technical knowledge and experience had shown to be proper. All of which was a matter of duty, clear cut, understandable, and satisfying.

Yet it was also a fact that Mrs. Hammondsley had asked a fatuous question.

"Don't you think the sea has lost its romance," she said.

At dinner it was. The steward had just brought her a second helping of Nesselrode pudding. The pearls gleamed around her neck. The room was warm. Palm trees and deft service made the dining saloon seem like a hotel, but Mackenzie was listening to the gale. Wind and sea were rising. He'd have a hard watch. "With sails, you know, and sailors going up on the masts," Mrs. Hammondsley rambled on. A little uncertainly, because she didn't know just what it was sailors climbed.

Here was a technical question. Out of experience Mackenzie answered it. Romance, eh? Icy shrouds. Frozen canvas that tore a sailor's fingernails, slippery footropes, jerking yards—a cry drowned by the gale, an empty space in the line of struggling sailors, and a man short when the watch mustered on deck.

"I dinna see the romance," said Mackenzie. "No, ner yer sense in wantin' it!"

And she had turned crimson with anger. Told him he was rude. Mackenzie, who had meant no rudeness, let her talk herself out. Let her go to the captain! He didn't like this job or this ship. If he'd wanted to fash wi' passengers, he'd have shipped as steward.

He frowned, therefore, when the quartermaster stopped him at the door to the engine room. The sense that he failed somewhere vexed him, but he was in no mood for an apology. It was like the captain to press this trifle to the limit, and most exceedingly well Mackenzie knew why.

"Captain wants you to report in the cabin when your watch is over. Mrs. Hammondsley's made a complaint," said the sailor. He dropped his voice. "The old iceberg is on her ear right. I heard about it from a steward. The captain must have knuckled under," he confided.

"I willna apologize for tellin' truth," said Mackenzie. "Ye can tell yon steward that isna a' I'll be tellin' the Old Man, either. He can run his ship how, *an' wi' whom*, it pleases him, for a' me."

Wrathfully the engineer turned his back on the messenger and stepped into his own domain, where facts are facts without need of sugar coating and passengers do not bother.

His ear, tuned to every hiss and beat of the *Ceylon's* machinery, warned him of trouble instantly. He plunged down the ladder and strode across to the third engineer. The captain's nephew was standing at the throttle, his face whiter than commonly. A dapper little man with worried eyes, who could not conceal a sigh of relief at the sight of the big red headed Scot reporting for duty early.

"What's wrang?" Mackenzie challenged.

He knew, but he wanted to hear what young Porter would say. When trouble occurs near the end of a watch an engineer who is inefficient or revengeful sometimes does nothing about it. His relief gets the job of making the repair. To guard against this abuse, however, sea tradition gives the relieving engineer the privilege of refusing to take over the watch until everything is running properly.

"Just a leaking boiler tube," Porter muttered.

He had been stalling for an hour while

the leak grew worse constantly. Blame would be attached to the man in charge when the necessary repairs were made, blame enough to cost an engineer his job, and he had seized the chance to pass the buck to Mackenzie. But his watch had still fifteen minutes to run. He hadn't been able to get away with it, and he read the same knowledge in the derisive glint of the Scot's blue eyes.

"Aye, an' is it so?" Mackenzie jeered, and led the way into the fireroom. One glance into the damaged boiler, however, and he and the big man whirled on the third, his fists clenched.

"Leak ye ca' yon?" Mackenzie demanded. "Man, are ye ignorant—or daft?" In the light streaming from the fire his face was red as his hair. "'Tis a plate loosenin' in the crown sheet, man! We maun cut that boiler out before she boils us through the deck!"

"Can't slow down in this gale. It would alarm the passengers," young Porter justified himself, but he hung his head, refusing to meet Mackenzie's direct stare.

"I ken. Guid an' weel I ken!" said the bigger man slowly. "Third, I relieve ye. The ship's mine. An' as ye go out, will ye tell the chief engineer an' yer uncle the captain that Malcolm Mackenzie is slowing down—because a crown sheet is crackin', an' passengers are aye better alar-rumed than scalded wi' hot steam!"

BEHIND a gong clanged, and both engineers, hastening back, found the telegraph ordering full speed. Mackenzie eyed it, shrugged and moved up the throttle a notch. Then he stepped to the voice tube and called the bridge.

"Ye canna hae full speed lang," he shouted above the increased noise of the main engines. "We're drawin' the fire under a boiler. Three hours at the least it will be out of sairvice."

The mate on watch on the bridge talked a long time. His voice, shrill with excitement, whistled in the tube; and Mackenzie, listening, caught his upper lip in his teeth.

"Need full speed to keep off a lee shore. Damn' deck officers that get off their course an' ca' on the black gang to pull them out of their ain blunders," he informed young Porter over his shoulder.

The third tiptoed away. Mackenzie had relieved him; had taken the responsibility with open eyes. Let him handle it. There'd be a board of inquiry sit on this.

"Aye, ca' the skipper, an' ye will, but it's facts I'm gi'en ye," Mackenzie was saying. "Shut down we maun, if forty fathom o' gold braid orders no!"

The red headed engineer snapped the voice tube shut and returned to the fireroom. He ordered the fire beneath the boiler drawn. He closed the main steam stop and the feed check, which cut the boiler out of service, but paused, his lips still caught in his teeth, before he turned the bottom blowout that would empty the boiler of water and steam.

To turn that valve meant that the *Ceylon* would scrape the beach. There would be an hour to wait before the boiler would be cool enough for a man to work inside, fifteen minutes while Mackenzie, as the engineer on watch, made the repair; and then three hours before the cold water admitted to the boiler could be warmed into steam. Meanwhile Randolph must confess the ship was in danger. He would be compelled to send the passengers to lifeboat stations; perhaps before those four hours were past, the anchors would be his last resort against disaster and disgrace. Mrs. Hammondsley, out on the snow swept decks, would discover what romance there is in exposure and peril.

"'Tisna my fault, nor my doin'!" Mackenzie muttered.

Not his the miscalculation which had allowed the ship to drift off her course, but Randolph's; not his the negligence which permitted a tiny crack to become dangerous, but Porter's. His was the responsibility for the engines he loved, and from an engineer's standpoint the facts were simple as A B C. The boiler must be repaired. The proper way to repair it was to empty it first.

"The sea is aye dangerous," said

Mackenzie aloud. "'Tis liars with their ain purposes to sarve wha say otherwise, an' fools wha believe them. They hae no recht to ca' on the engine room for miracles when the sea shows their folly!"

The aftermath of that thought made the Scot's lips twitch. He was to apologize, was he? A turn of the valve under his hand, and there would be an end to petty backbiting aboard the *Ceylon*. When his watch was over Randolph and Mrs. Hammondsley would be thanking God for deliverance. Professional knowledge and personal spite bade Mackenzie proceed, yet he hesitated.

There was a quicker way to repair that boiler. Thirty minutes would accomplish it, but some one—no, the engineer on watch—must pay in scorched flesh for the hours saved. It was a way expressly forbidden by engineering regulations because it demanded that an engineer spend a quarter hour in hell, but it would save the three hours needed to get up steam again. It was snowing outside. Only the ship's officers would know how narrowly they had skirted disaster.

"It isna just!" said Mackenzie. The Scotch burr was thick on his tongue. "The anchors wad hold, belike—but passenger and captain both, they ca' on the black gang for steam as though we were no human too, wi' mishaps of our ain."

He straightened to his full height of six feet, red headed and grim, just as the captain and chief engineer entered the fireroom together.

"Surely it can't be serious. My nephew was on watch; he's a good lad," Randolph was saying. "This Mackenzie is taking this way of scaring us. Doesn't realize passengers are children. If they're alarmed—" The captain swallowed a lump in his throat. "Can't we have ten knots, Chief?" he pleaded. "To drop an anchor will cost me my berth. Company'll never forgive me if it's known our passengers were in danger. It'll reflect on every ship under our house flag."

The chief grunted and took a long look into the boiler. Slowly he shook his grizzled head, and motioned Mackenzie to open the blowout.

"Impossible," he denied curtly. "When'd it happen, Mac? Never got that bad all at once."

"When I came on watch," said the red headed Scot.

The look of relief which crossed Randolph's face amused him; so did the abrupt change in the captain's expression when the Chief punctured the lie by jerking a thumb at the fireroom clock.

"Not eight bells yet," he grunted. "But I'm glad you're on watch, Mac. We need an engineer. No use waiting, Captain. Only one thing to do. We'll give you steam the first minute we can. About four hours, probably."

"A moment!" said Mackenzie. He reached out and caught the captain's shoulder as Randolph turned away, and stood towering grimly over the little man. "Ye wished to see me—when my watch was over?" the engineer demanded.

His tone was sardonic, too much so in that moment of stress for the captain's overstrained nerves.

"I did!" Randolph snapped viciously. "You insulted a passenger. They're our first consideration, and I'll have you know you'll apologize publicly or quit this ship at the next port of call!"

The engineer's big hand fastened on the skipper's shoulder, shaking him slightly.

"Our first conseederation, aye. But not as ye mean, little man!" the Scot retorted thickly. "Go on deck an' act yer lies. Ye'll ken what I'm drivin' at in thirty meenutes, an' man, 'tisna for ye I'm doin' it! 'Tis for the black gang—an' to apologize in my ain way!"

Mackenzie gave the skipper a push that turned him about and thrust him halfway to the fire room door. "Chief," the engineer ended, "there'll be nae blowouts opened while I'm on watch. I'm goin' to crawl through the fire door an' caulk yon crack wi' steam still in the boiler."

"The heat—" the Chief began in protest.

"Ow aye. It'll be hot," said Mackenzie.

THE RED HOT coals from the drawn fire still glowed on the deck. Not ten minutes before the bars above which Mackenzie must lie had been heated to redness. Steam hissed through the crack he proposed to close with hand hammer and caulking iron; behind the plate on which he must work rumbled two hundred pounds pressure of superheated steam.

They scraped the coals aside with a shovel. They cooled the fire pit as much as they could, thrust planks through the fire door, turning their faces sidewise even yet against the heat that swept from the interior, while Mackenzie donned heavier clothes and fastened hammer and caulking iron to his wrists with cords.

"When the hammering stops ye ken what should be done," he said to the chief engineer.

That gray haired man nodded. He knelt at Mackenzie's feet to tie a rope around both ankles. Two firemen picked up the Scot in their arms and eased him into the boiler. Instantly his hammer began clanging—swift strokes, but measured, every one turning down a bit of the plate. The need of haste was too great to waste a blow. Flesh and blood can not endure such heat for many moments. The hammering slackened, stopped. Mackenzie had fainted.

Promptly the chief pulled him out on to the floor of the fireroom. They fanned him, flung water into the face the steam had scalded; after a moment he opened his eyes.

"Who's—who's next?" muttered Randolph.

Even the fire room was so hot the captain had thrown off overcoat and oilskins; he stood leaning over the group which worked over Mackenzie—an outsider, a spectator, a deck officer, whom the black gang would have wished away.

His words must have reached Mackenzie just as the engineer recovered consciousness.

"Is it nae—my watch?" the Scot muttered. The chief held a cup of oatmeal water to his lips; he drank deeply, and nodded.

"Half done," he said as they lifted him up and slid him back into the furnace.

Once more the hammering began. More slowly this time; sooner it slackened and stopped.

Out into the open again. Fanning, longer continued; water to forehead and wrists; at last the slow opening of his eyes, and another pull at the cup.

"Romance—be—damned!" Mackenzie muttered when they lifted him for the third time.

As he resumed work the chief shrugged and turned to the captain.

"Heat's getting him," he said briefly. "Delirious already, I guess. Hear what he said? *I* wouldn't do that job, sir, not if you were on forty lee shores!"

"Nor I," said Randolph.

He realized the black gang didn't want him around. The sight of the burns on Mackenzie's face sickened him. He tiptoed from the fire room, with the slowing *clang-clang* of the caulking hammer ringing in his ears. He was at the door when the hammering stopped—abruptly, after a blow that echoed.

"He done it!" shouted the chief, and jerked Mackenzie feet first into the open, where the engineer collapsed in a sprawling heap.

An oiler leaped to apply restoratives, but the Chief flung himself on the main steam stop and feed valve. The others dragged Mackenzie aside; a fireman, working frantically, with teeth bared, flung coal under the boiler. A light flared, flames curled through the fire door Mackenzie had quitted. It seemed to Randolph, as he shut the door behind him and started up the engine room ladder toward the deck, that there was already a stronger, more vigorous beat in the pulsating throb of the main engines.

The captain walked slowly. His throat was dry; a lump there choked him. The shortest way to the bridge led through the main saloon, and Mrs. Hammondsley hastened toward him as he crossed it. She had thrown a fur coat over her evening gown, for the room had become cold. Her prominent blue eyes

protruded anxiously, her voice shook.

"Captain—the engines—danger?" she gasped.

Her hands were on the lapels of his coat; behind her the passengers gathered swiftly until Randolph was enclosed in a ring of silent men and women. He could hear them breathe, feel their eyes.

Gently he disengaged Mrs. Hammondsley's hands.

"Just a minor mishap to the heating system. I am sorry you should be—inconvenienced," he said suavely, though his voice shook. "Danger?" he laughed, looking around that silent circle, yet without meeting the eyes of any. "Mrs. Hammondsley, I'm surprised at you. The engineer on watch—Mr. Mackenzie—has remedied the difficulty already. Why listen!"

"I hear the storm," Mrs. Hammondsley answered.

"It's the steam I'm asking you to listen to!" retorted the captain shortly. "Can't you hear it hiss in the radiators?"

Shrilly above the rumble of gale and sea the radiators had resumed their dominating note. A man opened his coat; a second took his wife by the arm and started toward his stateroom.

"Just a temporary inconvenience," said the captain.

He had listened with the others. He had heard the strong, measured thump of the *Ceylon's* main engines, beating out fourteen knots, moving her against wind and tide away from the bleak coast of Denmark lurking to leeward behind the veil of snow.

"Danger? Nonsense!" said Randolph. "A modern liner is a floating hotel. But even hotels, you know, can have trouble with the heat. You'll excuse me? It's late, and I was on my way to bed."

Without haste he pushed his way through the crowd which surrounded him, and as he passed he left behind him men and women a little ashamed of the nervousness they had felt only a minute before.

Danger? Nonsense! The captain had said so himself.

DOWN in the engine room Mackenzie sat up, took a long pull of oatmeal water and heaved himself painfully to his feet.

"I'll take the rest of your watch, Mac. You'd best turn in," called the Chief.

"I'm nae turnin' in—yet," the other grunted. "I am no like tae sleep, an' if my watch is over there is aye yet a hard job to do."

The Chief's eyes widened, but Mackenzie's face forbade questioning. He walked from the fire room, wincing a little when the clothing touched his burns, went to his room and put on his gold-bound uniform, a grim smile playing around his scorched lips.

When he was dressed he started for the bridge. He also passed through the main saloon because it was the shortest way. He encountered Mrs. Hammondsley in the door. She started at the sight of his face.

"Why—you're hurt!" she cried out.

"Dinna fash yersel'. 'Tisna more than skin deep," said Mackenzie, as one might soothe a child. "Mrs. Hammondsley, I hae been thinkin' in my watch, an' I wad ask ye to forgive a Scot's rough tongue. Ye were right. The sea is changed, an' I cry yer pardon for contradictin' ye."

Mrs. Hammondsley could not look away from his face. It was red and puffy with steam burns, but more than that, in Mackenzie's direct blue eyes was a serene strength she did not understand. She had meant to treat him coldly; she felt sympathetic and abashed. Impulsively she held out her hand.

"I'm sure you didn't mean it as it sounded," she said. "And will you pardon my quick temper? I suppose I didn't really know what I was talking about, after all. You must tell me about the sea—"

The red headed engineer nodded and passed on. He was glad that duty was done. It had not been so hard as he expected, and with a lighter step he proceeded to the bridge where he found Randolph humped over a chart.

"Aweel, my watch has endit—if ye wish

to speak wi' me," he said quietly. "I hae made my apology to the lady."

"That be damned!" snapped Randolph. "I—er—well—" the captain rose and commenced a second time. "I'm going to make a full report of this to the officials," he said, "telling just what you did and what it meant to this ship and the company, and recommending you for promotion at the next vacancy. That's official, Mackenzie. There's—er—there's a matter between us. Personal. I guess you know what I was trying to do?"

"Aye."

"Then why in the devil did you crawl into that boiler?" Randolph demanded. "Er—let me say first, I intend to talk to my nephew like an uncle. A Dutch one. I'm going to send him to get more experience in smaller ships. He needs it, but I still want to know *why*. You're a fighting man, and I'd have expected you to seize the chance that accident gave you."

"It wad hae been unco' satisfaction," said Mackenzie softly. "But there was the lady, too, ye ken. Sore was I tempted to gi' her a lesson.

"Romance she talked of, and going aloft. Standin' wi' my hand on the blowout, it came to me that the best seamen—deck seamen—had ever done was on the clipper ships she was sighin' for, wi' a' their discomfort an' danger. 'Tis the engineers an' the black gang who hae changed the sea till ships can be run like a hotel. They can ca' the sea safe, but the sea is never safe except as we make it so. I am an engineer, an' I couldna stand aside—in my ain watch—an' see the black gang fail. We hae changed the sea so complete that scatterbrained women an' political skippers can take advantage of us, an' I am too proud to hold my hand out of spite, or to say aught afterwards."

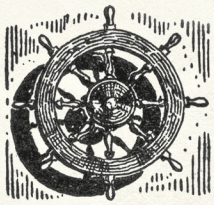
"No, we can't let the passengers learn," said Randolph.

He winced at that word "political," but for all that he reached into his pocket and slid a gold watch across the chart table toward the engineer.

"There's still a personal matter between us, Mac," he said. "That watch was given me by grateful passengers for saving lives after an S. O. S. I remember we steamed twenty-four hours at two knots above our highest rated speed—else I wouldn't have gotten to the scene in time. Suppose I gave you a watch like it? Inscribed, 'From Captain Randolph, to the engineer who saved his ship for him.' Would is square matters?"

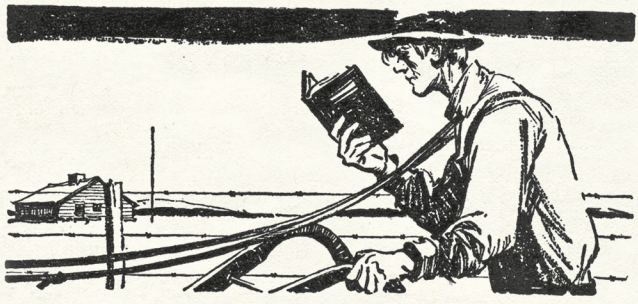
The red headed Scot grinned.

"I'd like it fine," he responded. "Because, ye ken, it would be one time that a deck officer admitted the truth!"



When a young Swede farmer goes a-courtin' with an etiquette book

WHAT'S THE USE?



A humorous story by HARRY G. HUSE

"NOW YOU take this here dandruff on the shoulders—"

"Dandruff, nothin'! Your eyesight's failin'. Them's wheat husks Red's curryin' out. Ain't no dandruff goin' to git foothold in a head of hair sired by a prairie fire out'n a brickyard!"

"Take, as I was remarkin'," continued "Dry-Land" Dawson, imperturbably, "when interrupted by empty remarks and the coarse laughter to be expected in rude, uncultured circles—take dandruff—"

The old homesteader closed his dog eared magazine and gestured widely about the lounging group of harvest hands. His eyes rested for a moment on the burly figure, fidgeting in the lantern-light before a mirror hung on the side of a header barge. They travelled nervously to the window of the cook-car. The plump, bustling figure of Mrs. Penick, the new cook, had disappeared; and from somewhere back in the interior arose the clash of heavy crockery in a dishpan.

"Dandruff," he repeated, shifting his gaze to the faces of his listeners, "in the abstract, merely. Engrossed in literachoor, I have been disregardin' our sorrel topped spike pitcher's prettyin' up to go set with a dry-farmer's daughter. Consortin' with the world's brighter intellects, I have paid little or no mind to his labors with comb and nail file. Reflectin' upon the weaknesses of male human nature, I ignore as fur as possible the perfume with which he is anointin' his handkerchief and refrain from suggestin' an extra dash on the right or left shoulder, or both, as an indication of self-confidence or, lackin' that, hopeful aspiration. Not bein' asked, I withhold my opinion of grain sack pants, pointed sideburns and square toed shoes, with a lot of holes punched in 'em—"

"Aw, what you pickin' on Red fur anyway? You was young yourself once, wasn't you?"

Dry-Land Dawson fixed his questioner, a header barge driver from the Goosebill,

with a pair of faded blue eyes, and ran a deprecating hand down over the rasping stubble of his lean jaw.

"Young, indeed, my friend, and accordin' to some, handsome. Handsome in my own right, they tell me, and the cabinet photographs of the period bear out, without recourse to orangewood sticks, face powder, breath gargles or hair slickum! Carefree and debonair, as the feller says, with a way of gittin' down off a lathered horse and swaggerin' into a parlor that set many a fair heart—but I become rem'niscent and personal at a time when I am moved to remark on somethin' basic and fundamental in what I hear a tony feller on the radio call the current American scene. Take, as I was remarkin', musical saws, personal magnetism courses, Hawaiian guitars and halitosis."

"You was talkin'," suggested "Fife," the water wagon flunky, "of dandruff."

"I merely mentioned dandruff. I am discussin' human nature. It says here in the magazine that the young feller shown in the picture is lonely and ain't got no lady friends, 'cause every time he combs or otherwise agitates his hair he looks like he's spent the day shovellin' bran or, in aggravated cases, shavin's. Cultivate charm with a clean scalp, it tells him."

"There's somethin' to that. I knew a man once with tetter, over north of the Goosebill—" began the header barge driver.

"And here on the next page," continued Dry-Land, "is another feller that, socially speakin', was muscle bound, tongue tied and club footed, until he learned to play 'Al-o-ha' in ten easy lessons for ten dollars, with a grass skirt, a surfboard and a picture of Gilda Gray throwed in for good measure."

"We got that record to home," asserted the man from the Goosebill, "on the phonograph. It's played by the genyou-ine—"

"And when we turn over a few pages, what further do we find?"

Dry-Land held up the opened magazine in a manner more oratorical than exhibitory.

"The picture of a well set up man that had to go off in a corner at the party and sit by himself 'cause some one asked him if he didn't think the hostess had *savoir faire*, and he didn't know whether it meant fallen arches or some sort of skin eruption."

"I seen them two words and wondered what they meant myself," said the header barge driver.

"All you have to do to find out is sign and mail the coupon," ventured Red, the spike pitcher.

He had finished his complicated toilet too early and now stood about nervously, peering from time to time at his flawed, shadowy image in the battered mirror.

"It says so down at the bottom—what it means, and how you can learn the other swell foreign expressions used so much today in polite society."

"You been readin' it," accused Dry-Land, "and settin' stock in it. That's what I'm drivin' at. Sign the coupons, they say, and make yourself irresistible to women by learnin' how to talk French, or how to keep somethin' called cuticle off your finger nails, or how to eat egg without it showin' on your vest and the table cloth afterwards, or how to make good out-standin' ears lay back ag'in the head like somebody in high society circles thinks they ought to.

"Sign coupons and send no money until later, to git rid of all your manly characteristics and pe-rogatives—from sayin' 'I ain't' and 'he done' and 'wasn't you', down to totin' 'round a distinguished nose that's been busted and flattened out in a half dozen creditable fist fights.

"Time was when a man could pick up a newspaper or magazine 'thout bein' told to watch himself for anythin' but loss of energy, spots before the eyes, dizzy spells and the other signs of failin' manhood, that was cured by doctors with long, honest lookin' whiskers. Now he's told to worry 'bout his pores, his participles and his pronunciation. And

what's the use? Take the case of Etyquette Swenson!"

"You must'a' been readin' quite a few of these advertisements yourself," put in Fife, dryly.

"But a man owes it to himself to cultivate his natural charm," interrupted Red, defensively. "It says so in the magazines," he added, somewhat weakly.

"Charm, hell!" Dry-Land emitted a contemptuous snort. "A man owes it to himself to be natural and leave charm to the women. Ever hear of a horse worryin' 'bout the cockleburrs in his tail? Ever know of a horse that didn't finally git 'em picked out for him? I call to mind, as I said, the case of Etyquette Swenson."

"I don't see how you got the right to talk 'about gittin' cockleburrs picked out," grumbled an harassed looking man named Culp who was known to be unhappily married, "an old batch like you that ain't got no one even to do his washin' and cookin'. Or tell him to wipe his feet 'fore he comes in the kitchen," he concluded, on a note of envy.

"SPEAKIN' of Swedes, we had a coupla fellers named Larsen—brothers they was—over east of the Goosebill," began the header barge driver.

"Etyquette Swenson," said Dry-Land, firmly, "that's what he come to be called, though that's gittin' ahead of the story. Swen S. Swenson, he showed up on the land office records, only it seemed like it was spelled and pronounced with a 'V' where it should have been a 'W'. He come out from Wisconsin, where he'd been workin' in the woods, and took up the homstead joinin' me over to Bird Coulee. Big yellow and pink hard-workin' Swede, quiet and bashfullike, that'd been on his homestead three years and proved up and got half his land broke out and in crop before any one paid much attention to him.

"Seems like he ain't never had much to do with women, workin' up in the woods that way sence he was big enough to swing an ax. He don't hardly know anythin' 'bout 'em, unless it's what a man will pick up from lookin' at the pictures in the various sections of the mail-order catalog, winter evenin's, and that sort of information, as the feller says, is intimate but superficial.

"He don't know nothin' 'bout 'em, as I say, and he ain't had time yit to find out. He's worked hard sence he was a boy and stayed off the booze and got himself together a stake so's he could come out here and take up a claim and go to dry-farmin'.

"He ain't wasted no time after he got here, like a lot of these dry-landers done. He just dug a well and built himself a twelve by sixteen shack and a stable and went to breakin' sod. He uses two shifts of horses and gits in sixteen hours a day, from the time he can make out the furrers in the mornin' till he loses sight of them at night. Naturally, he ain't had no chance to git culture up in the woods in Wisconsin, and time he gits his chores done and his meals cooked he ain't got none now.

"Wintertimes, when most folks sets 'round the stove engaged in social and literary pursuits, he's either gone over to Square Butte and hired out at winter sheep herdin' or dug coal in the mines over to Belt. He ain't hardly had time to shave, let alone go in for the more advanced forms of self-improvement. The only thing I ever hear him mention 'bout clothes was somethin' he used to say in that Swede sing-song of his 'bout two overalls pants and two overalls jackets makes damn' good thing for the winter."

"He wasn't so fur wrong there," cut in the man from the Goosebill. "You give me a good heavy suit of fleece lined underwear and a coupla pairs of overalls—"

"Seems like the only thing Swenson's interested in," went on Dry-Land, "besides work, is watchin' the young 'uns playin' round in the schoolyard at recess time. We ain't got much of a school there at first. Our teachers is home talent, homesteaders' wives that slips in a term or two of teachin' between babies.

Swenson's shack is a good half mile away from the schoolhouse, but his east forty joins it.

"When he's plowin' over there, he's in the habit of stoppin' to blow his horses when the young 'uns are out playin'. 'Pudge' Miller's wife, when she was teachin', used to see him standin' there, and try to talk friendly with him. He seemed pleased, but didn't manage to say much—just shied off, kinda bashful-like.

"Well, time we git 'round to importin' our school ma'ams, Swenson's gettin' on better'n any one else in the country, and folks have commenced to pay him some notice. He ain't slacked down work none; but he's got to where he could if he's a mind to. He's had three, four big crops of wheat which he's sold at top prices and, as I say, he's better off'n any one around. Only you wouldn't think so, to see him workin' Sundays the same as weekdays and never wearin' nothin' but overalls. I hear the women folks talkin' 'mong theirselves how some smart girl could do a whole lot with him.

"Our first teacher from the East presents us with one of these here housin' problems. Everybody's still livin' in shacks, and it don't seem like there's room anywheres for her to board round. So we set to work before she comes and build a teacherage—a lean-to 'longside the schoolhouse, and put a stove in it and furnished it up nice as a place for her to stay. That makes her a neighbor of Swenson's and that's how it all started.

"She fairly easy to look at, this Miss Purdy, the new schoolteacher. Easier to look at than to talk to, anyway. She's 'bout average height, with dark hair and dark eyes.

"Like all the other girls that come out here from the East to teach school, she's got the idea from readin' these stories 'bout this bein' a country where all the single men are members of old, high toned families back in Virginia, that have run away from home to conquer the demon drink, which seized upon them in their youthful years, or to forgit the memory of some unworthy woman, bringin' with them the standards of conduct, elegance and manners that prevailed back in the old ancestral home with its long legged front porch and a bunch of fuzzy-headed old servants duckin' and sayin'—

"'Yes, sah, Marse Tom, here I is, Marse Tom; what is your pleasure?'

"Naturally it's some shock when she finds out that the ancestral home from which the young men escaped is more likely to be a Minnesota dairy farm, where their idea of refinement is to install a litter carrier in the cow-barn and do away with the old fashioned wheelbarrow and pitchfork—or maybe, ag'in, a miner's shanty with outside plumbin' down to Butte or Anaconda.

"Miss Purdy's probably disappointed, but she keeps right on fixin' herself up nice and pretty, and is noticed to ask some right pointed questions regardin' which ones of the young fellers owns their homestead clear and which ones is mortgaged.

"Well, Swenson he gits a sight of the teacher the first day school opens, and it seems like it hits him right between the eyes.

"She's out in the yard at recess, playin' with her new scholars and he's seedin' wheat on that east forty. He gits a look at her through the dust he's raisin' and half pulls up to let his horses rest, when one of these little dry-weather whirlwinds comes a-twistin' along, grabs most of the dust that's trailin' along back of the drill and whirls it right down through the school yard.

"It sets her and the young 'uns to rubbin' their eyes and sneezin' and brushin' dirt and wheat straw outa their hair. And though Swenson ain't had nothin' to do with the whirlwind, he prods up his horses and moves on, blamin' himself for his awkwardness.

"To show you how bad he's hit, it oughta took him only two, three days to seed that piece of ground, the way he ordinarily works. But he's monkeyin' round there for 'most a coupla weeks,

harrowin' and packin' and brush draggin' and I disremember what else. The snow ketches him long before he's finished.

"Outwardly Swenson don't make no move at all toward gittin' acquainted with the teacher. But inside him a lot of things is happenin'. She's out in the yard 'most every day at recess time, until the weather gits too cold; and though after that first day, she don't seem to look at him none and he don't dast look straight at her, he's watchin' outa the corner of his eye and not missin' anythin'.

"EVENIN'S he'll sit there in his shack and look across to where he can see her light, burnin' yellow in the darkness. Later on he gits into the habit of droppin' in over at the Sodderses or the Helmses, that got young 'uns in school, or maybe over to my place, makin' out like he's come to borrow a clevis or a coupla harness rivets, and bringin' the conversation round to the teacher every chance he gits.

"He don't have no trouble gittin' them to talk 'bout her. A new teacher, regardless of age or general appearance, stirs up more fuss than a hailstorm at harvest time. When she happens to be fairly young and good lookin', once the conversation among the women turns in her direction you can't git a word in edgeways, either in home circles or along the party line.

"What he hears does and doesn't give him much comfort. It don't seem like any of the young fellers is makin' any headway with her. She's high toned and not throwin' herself away on the first feller that comes along and plays sweet on her.

"Well, it has been one of my contentions sence abandonin' the illusions of youth and bringin' mature thought to bear on the matter, that the average man can fall in love with a woman better if he don't know her than if he does. Swenson sure proves I'm right. He gits himself worked up to fever heat, just from that first sight of her, and watchin' her when he's seedin' that east forty, and lookin' over at the light in the teacherage, and thinkin' 'bout one time when he's drivin' by in the road and sees her stoopin' over one of the young 'uns that's hurt himself at recess time.

"He thinks of her in that dreamy sort of way that a feller will, forgittin' that a woman is flesh and blood, the same as the rest of us, only mebbe more so, and he's right happy, dreamin' that somethin' will come along to bring them together in a nice romantic way. He pictures all sorts of situations where she's in danger or trouble and he comes along and helps her out and she swoons lovin'ly in his manly arms.

"'It's when he thinks 'bout the things they tell him over to the Sodderses and the Helmses that he ain't happy. These other fellers that's sparkin' Miss Purdy has always seemed to him like the last word in lady killers. He's see them dashin' by in their underslung Fords and kiddin' the girl in back of the soda fountain in town, nice and easy, and wearin' collars and neckties, and it seems to him like a hard job to equal them, let alone rise to the higher plane the teacher has been accustomed to back East, back in Peru, Nebraska.

"Sittin' there in his shack evenings, he'll add up all the things that's wrong with him, the same way the magazine advertisements do. He ain't got no clothes and he ain't got no manners nor much education. He can't even shake hands easy. He's learned his eatin' in lumber camps, where refinement sets back while the appetite has its way, and batchin' alone there in his shack ain't taught him none of what the advertisements call the little niceties of table conduct. Seems to him like he's hopelessly unworthy. But that don't keep him from hopin'.

"Well, he don't close up his place and go away to work that winter. He stays home where he can be near Miss Purdy. And he sets out in that steady, hard workin' way of his to make himself fit to associate with her.

"Mind you all, this time he ain't so

much as met her or told any of the folks that knows her he'd like to. Far as he can tell, she don't even know that he's a-livin'. Of course, it's suspected by the women and freely spoke of, that Swenson's took with Miss Purdy the same as the others. From what happens later, it's certain the teacher has noticed and been put out by the fact that he's the only unmarried man that hasn't run after her, 'specially after that look he give her before the whirlwind blew dust in her eyes—"

DRY-LAND fell silent for a moment. The rattling inside the cook car had ceased and the figure of Mrs. Penick passed across the square of yellow light that marked the window. It moved back again, laden with dishes, and the clash of crockery recommenced. Dry-Land cleared his throat and resumed his story.

"Needless to say, there can be a great deal of significance in a glance."

"Yeh," put in Fife, nodding negligently in the direction of the cook car, "that's what I thought when I seen you lookin' at the widow there when you was eatin' supper."

"Merely admiration for a fine, capable woman," said Dry-Land, hastily. "Where did I leave off."

"You was talkin'," said the man from the Goosebill, "about a Swede named Swenson. It reminds me of—"

"I was talkin' and still am," said Dry-Land. "The first thing Swenson tackles is his clothes. He ain't wore nothin' but overalls for so long, he don't know what the best dressers are wearin'.

"He's too bashful to go into the clothin' store in town—afraid it will start everybody talkin' 'bout him. Anyway it wouldn't have done him no good, 'cause he stands 'bout six foot two in his stockin' feet and measures a good four feet round the chest. It's certain Honest Abe Levinsky in to town ain't got nothin' to fit him and doubtful if he could even make him think he had. So Swenson gits out his mail order catalog and picks out what is called a tasty style for natty dressers.

"He has quite a time pickin' out the pattern, 'cause all he's got is a description. Not bein' strong on imagination or knowin' much about the matter he has a hard time figgerin' out which will look better—a light brown broadcloth with a red pin stripe or a black and white shepherd plaid.

"But his troubles is only commenced when he's finally got his pattern picked out and started to do his measurin'. There's full instructions, with pictures, in the catalog, but he ain't got the tape-measure he's supposed to have to start with. He figgers out he can use binder twine, tyin' knots in it for the different measurements, and then figgerin' out the distance between the knots with an old carpenter's square he's had sence he built his shack.

"It works all right mostly, except for his not gittin' the knots tied in exactly the right place and there ben' one or two measurements that a man ain't hardly able to take all by himself, like across the back and down the inseam. But he does the best he can with them.

"While he's lookin' through the catalog, it seems like he comes across a special colored page advertisin' what they call a nifty silk shirt, special for discriminatin' dressers. There's a choice of three colors offered—a blue and a green and a purple. Swenson picks the purple as bein' the richer and more impressive color and puts it down on his order.

"Time the stuff gits back to him he's commenced to worry 'bout the suit maybe bein' too stylish for a dry-lander. It is pretty stylish when he comes to open up the package. He picked the brown pattern with the red stripe. It's the brightest brown and the reddest red you ever see, and it's got shiny pearl buttons and a make believe belt across the back that hits him pretty high on account of one of the knots in the binder twine slippin'. It seems, too, like when he bent over to take the inseam measure he

throwed himself outa plumb or somethin' and got the pants a coupla inches too short.

"The suit ain't thoroughly satisfactory, as I say, but the silk shirt comes up to all expectations. It's very silky lookin' and a pretty shade of purple. Just before the clothes come, Swenson got himself a big, gilt framed mirror by orderin' a lot of soap and extracts and spices and coffee and gettin' the mirror throwed in free through Mrs. Sodders who's got an agency for a firm in Chicago. So he's able to dress up and see how he looks.

"He has a little trouble gittin' acquainted with himself in his new outfit, but time he's dressed up in it six or seven nights hand runnin' and stood for a half hour or so in front of the mirror, twistin' and turnin' so's he can see as much of himself as possible at one time, he gits almost used to it.

"Seems like he ought to be ready now to take steps toward meetin' the teacher, but he's worried 'bout his manners; he can't order them ready-made outa the mail-order catalog. But one evenin' he picks up a magazine over to the Helmses that has an advertisement promisin' to teach a man or woman how to behave in polite society.

"This advertisement asks a lot of questions about whether or not a man ought to walk between two ladies if he has two on his hands at the same time, and when he ought to wear gloves, and occasions for tippin' the hat, and what to put on your callin' cards and weddin' invitations. If you don't know the answers, it intimates you ain't fit to associate with other human bein's.

"Swenson don't have time to study the thing much, on account of the other people watchin' him, so he makes like he'd like to read some of the stories and carries the magazine home with him. Naturally when he comes to study over the questions, he finds out he don't know the answers to any of them. But when he reads down a little further it tells him all he's got to do to learn the answers and all the other things a man needs to know to go round with the very swellest people is send five dollars for some high society lady's book on etyquette.

"Well, he sends for the book and feels right happy figgerin' what its goin' to do for him. Now and then while he's waitin' for it to come he has some misgivin's 'bout it's bein' able to make a polished gentleman outa a man that don't know no more 'bout manners than which side to milk a cow from.

"He's bothered too by all the courtin' of the teacher, which is goin' on right under his nose. Miss Purdy don't let none of her admirers call to see her in the evenin's when she's alone there at the teacherage. But there's always some one hangin' round at noon and recess time and Saturdays and Sundays, and now and then she goes places with one or another of them.

"He'll feel real low until he reads the advertisement over ag'in and is assured that after he's studied the book he'll be able to go into high society in New York or Boston or Detroit, Michigan, or any of them tony places.

"When the book finally comes he finds he's got his money's worth as fur as size is concerned. It's most as thick as a mail order catalog and not near so easy readin' on account of there not bein' pictures. Swenson starts right in at the beginnin', but ain't able to go very fast on account of not bein' used to readin' much and havin' to spell out a lot of the words and wonder what they mean.

"They's a lot more to learn than he thought they was goin' to be, and some of it he can't hardly understand, like where it talks 'bout tippin' the servants after havin' spent the week end at the country home of an acquaintance. Near as he can figger out, that means that if he's invited over to the next ranch to spend the Sunday and have dinner he ought to take the hired man off to one side before he says goodby and slip him two bits or a half dollar. It seems to him like if there's money to change hands it ought to go to the rancher that paid the grocery bill, or maybe to his wife that done the work in the kitchen.

"Well, he finally works his way right through the book, readin' so many pages every day, and tryin' to remember everything he reads, so's he'll have it handy when he needs it. We had a hard winter that year, as I 'member it, and couldn't git outdoors much, so he has plenty of time between doin' his chores and cookin' his meals. He starts tryin' to behave at table like it says in the book, and then he starts carryin' on an imaginary conversation, first with the lady on the right and then with the one on the left. From that he gits the idea of actin' out the other things in the book.

"He'll put on his new clothes and git in front of the mirror and make introductions and acknowledge 'em and tip his hat to passin' acquaintances and stop to chat with a lady friend, encountered in the course of an afternoon stroll upon the Avenue.

"Some of the things he acts out don't seem hardly practical, like makin' introductions to the President of the United States and other high Government officials, as well as visitin' members of royalty. I 'member I dropped in on him one evenin' and found him visitin' boxes between acts at the opera.

"WELL, it gits 'long into March, and Swenson's got clear through the book once, right down to bride's bouquets and the proper notes of thanks for weddin' presents. He's reviewin' the subject of introductions and their acknowledgement and the art of proceedin' immediately to easy, interestin' conversation.

"Accordin' to the books, a lot depends on how a man conducts himself, in the first few minutes of acquaintance. He's practiced a bow and learned not to shake hands unless the lady offers to first, and how to say 'How do you do' and let it go at that instead of employin' the expressions current in these parts like 'Proud to form your acquaintance, m'am' and the more free and easy 'Pleased to meet you'."

"Hmph!" said Fife. "Sounds like you musta been lookin' over his shoulder and readin' right along with him. You sure it was Swenson sent for the book?"

"The book was Swenson's," replied Dry-Land stiffly. "I borrered it later and glanced through it, bein' interested in all classes of literachoor sence boyhood. Among other things I remember was a paragraph on the rudeness of interruptin' other people's conversation."

Fife subsided, and Dry-Land had cleared his throat and resumed his story before the man from the Goosebill had done more than to open his mouth.

"Swenson's polishin' off the last rough edges and gittin' ready to have himself introduced to the teacher. There's to be a party up to the schoolhouse, a sociable like, with dancin' and refreshments. He's got his courage screwed up to where he's decided to dress up and go and put all the manners he's been studyin' to the test.

"He's got his suit kinda outa shape from wearin' it evenin's and doin' all the bowin' in it in front of the mirror, so he takes it in to town and leaves it with the tailor to be pressed. The purple shirt too has got kinda wrinkled and dirty, but he figgers he can wash it and iron it himself.

"You'd think he ought to be happy now that finally he's goin' to meet Miss Purdy.

"But he's all nervous now like a boy that's got a piece he's got to git up and speak in school. Then, too, he's worried 'bout maybe he's waited too long. There's been a new suitor showed up, that's put the others in the discard and seems to be makin' some headway.

"It seems like when they had the exercises Christmas time up to the school house the county clerk come out so's he could meet and shake hands with some of the people he wanted to vote for him. His name's Ed Winter and he has quite a reputation in town for bein' a great hand with the ladies. He sends away to Kansas City or Saint Paul or Omaha somewhere and has his clothes made to order and he's a leader in the town's social set.

"Winter's stopped in at the schoolhouse Christmas time, as I say, to shake hands and say hello to his constituents,

and he meets the teacher and forgits the constituents.

"After that he makes excuses for comin' out from town to talk about the school requirements and the educational needs of this district, and it ain't long until he's been out to call on her of a Sunday afternoon and has invited her to go in town with him to a entertainment in the opera house by a travelin' company of Swiss bell-ringers.

"He ain't in the same class with these other young fellers round the neighborhood. He don't go rattlin' round in no underslung Ford. He's got himself a coop with curtains at the windows, and he has it kept washed and shined up. He's got a little mustache and a lot of manners and them easy ways that women like. It's the opinion of the community, that is of the women folks, that if he had a little property instead of havin' to live off his salary and maybe git kicked out at the next election he'd be a right good catch.

"Well, a coupla evenin's before the party up to the schoolhouse, Winter's drivin' by along about nine o'clock and runs outa gas right in front of Swenson's place. He sees the light in Swenson's window and comes across the yard to see if he can borrer enough gas to git to town.

"When he gits pretty close to Swenson's shack, he hears a voice inside and he peeks through the window to see who's there before goin' inside.

"There ain't no one there but Swenson. He's havin' his final rehearsal before meeting' the teacher. He's standin' in front of the mirror, addressin' a series of remarks to a chair he's got set out in the middle of the floor. He's callin' the chair Miss Purdy, and he's talkin' to it free and easy in high toned language. He's got the book open on the table beside him and, now and ag'in when he slows up and seems at a loss for somethin' to say, he'll look at it and kinda prompt himself.

"Winter stands there for ten, fifteen minutes talkin' it all in and laughin' to himself. Then he goes up to the door and knocks.

"He hears a scurryin' round inside, while Swenson closes up the book and hides it, and then a crash like somethin' fell to the floor and busted. Presently Swenson comes to the door and Winter's sees that the mirror's been accidentally knocked down off its nail and is broke all to pieces.

"Winter can't hardly keep from laughin' while he's askin' for the gas, and after he's got it he laughs the rest of the way in town. He stops in at the pool hall to tell all the boys. Next day, that's the day before the party, he's out in this part of the country ag'in and he stops in to tell the joke to the teacher.

"I hear afterward that the teacher don't laugh much, and that even at the time Winter feels like maybe he's made a mistake tellin' her. Seems like she sorta stood up for Swenson and said somethin' sharp 'bout bad taste in a public official speakin' slightin'ly of one of the most substantial members of the community.

"WELL, NEXT mornin' Swenson, who's a little worried 'bout bad luck on account of the mirror, gits up and does his washin' and hangs his things out on the line to dry. It's pretty windy and he's had things blowed away before, so he anchors the purple shirt good and tight, he thinks, with a coupla clothespins. Round noon he goes in town to git the fancy suit from the shop, where it's been pressed.

"When he reaches the river and is just drivin' up on the bridge, he hears a whistle blowin' three times over in town, and then bells clangin' and a lot of shoutin' and excitement down at the end of Main Street where the tailor shop is. Then he sees some smoke and flame and knows that there's a fire.

"Time he reaches Main Street, the fire department is comin' back and he learns the tailor has been cleanin' some clothes with gasoline and has had an explosion and burnt the inside right outa his shop. The tailor, he's got out

without bein' burned bad, but everythin' inside the shop's gone, includin' Swenson's brown suit with the red stripe.

"Well, that ruins Swenson's chances of goin' to the party. There ain't no chance of him findin' else in town to fit him. He tries in to Honest Abe Levinsky's, but Abe can't fit him and actually cries, so they say, when he has to watch Swenson walk outa the store empty handed.

"Swenson's feelin' now like the bottom has dropped outa things. But there's more comin' to him. He stops into the pool hall, where Tony Minatti's got his barber chair, to git a shave and haircut. When he comes in, all the fellers commences to laugh and some of the noisier ones speaks right out, mimickin' what Winter's told them the night before, sayin' 'I hope you find yourself in good health this evenin', Miss Purdy,' and 'It's been right nice weather we been havin' lately, ain't it Miss Purdy?"

"At first he don't git what they're drivin' at. But pretty soon he understands and can't git outa there fast enough.

"Time he gits home, he's feelin' so bad 'bout everythin', it don't seem that anythin' can make him feel worser. So when he finds the wind has blowed away the things he had out on the line to dry and has took the silk shirt in spite of the clothes pins and that the stuff ain't nowheres in sight, he can't git up enough spunk to go hunt 'em, but just goes ahead and does his chores.

"It's 'bout dusk time he gits his chores done, and his better judgment tells him the things that's blowed away is worth somethin' and he'd better go hunt 'em. He sets out toward his east fence, where he thinks the stuff will be hung up. He finds the underwear there, but nothin' of the purple silk shirt except a big, three cornered piece outa the tail where it's been snagged on the barb wire and held until it tore loose and blowed on ag'in. So he crawls through the wire and sets off for the next fence, which is the one around the schoolyard.

"It's 'most dark when he gits there. He hunts up and down along the fence, but don't find nothin'. There's a light in the window of the teacherage, which ain't more'n three, four rods away. This is the closest he's ever been to the teacher and his heart commences poundin'. He sees a shadow move back and forth across the square of light, as Miss Purdy moves around inside gittin' her supper.

"THEN, while he's lookin', he becomes aware of somethin' flappin' in the schoolyard not more than twenty feet away. He squints his eyes through the dusk and, near as he can make out, it's his shirt hung up on a wire there that Miss Purdy's rigged up to use as a clothes line.

"It takes him quite a while to git up his courage to crawl through the fence and move over to the shirt to git it. He can't make it out plain at all, but he can tell from the feel of it that it's silk and he starts pullin' it down.

"It don't come very easy. It seems like it's fastened to the line some way. He's tuggin' at it and don't hear the door of the teacherage open. First thing he knows, the teacher is there in the dark, right in front of him. Then suddenly he realizes that the thing holdin' the garment is a coupla clothespins 'cause they pulls loose and one of them hits him in the eye.

"And then, while all this is happenin', he finds out that the things he's holdin' in his hand ain't no shirt at all, but somethin' silk and pink belongin' to the schoolteacher."

"Haw, haw!" broke out the man from the Goosebill. "Somethin' silk and pink belongin' to the schoolteacher!"

"Somethin' belongin' to the schoolteacher," said Dry-Land, frowning at the interruption.

"Swenson standin' there in his dirtiest old overalls. Three days' growth of yellow beard on his face. One eye waterin' bad, where the clothespin has hit him. Standin' there facin' Miss Purdy, who he's been gittin' ready to meet in proper fashion for five months, holdin' out these things of hers he's been caught in the

act of takin' off her clothesline. Holdin' them out, like they was a rattlesnake and he was afraid they was goin' to bite him. Mouth half open. Red to the ears. All the etyquette lessons gone and forgotten. Anyway, the book ain't said nothin' 'bout the proper conduct for a man who's mistook a lady's lingery for his own shirt."

"I guess," said the man from the Goosebill, snickering, "that finished things for Mr. Swenson."

"Probably he was jest as well off, at that," growled the unhappy Culp. "She mighta had a bad disposition or been too neat a housekeeper."

"That's where you're both wrong," replied Dry-Land. "I been tellin' you all along that Swenson's the best off of any single man round there, with his three hundred and twenty acres of land clear, and money in the bank from them big crops he harvested. And I been tellin' you how the teacher come out here full of romance, which means lookin' for a husband, and how she's been slow and careful in makin' her choice."

"You mean she didn't jaw him for robbin' her clothesline?" queried Culp, incredulously.

"I mean," replied Dry-Land, "she just smiled sweetly at him and says in a nice voice like she was gentlin' a scared horse—

"'Were you looking for something, Mr. Swenson?'

"'Shirt,' replied Swenson, when he's finally able to talk. 'Shirt—flappin'—looked like shirt.'

"'Oh, yes,' she says, movin' up and takin' her property outa his hand, so easy he don't hardly know it, 'it must have been your pretty shirt I picked up out in the yard this afternoon. Did it have a piece torn out of it? If you'll come up to the house I'll get it for you. It was such a nice color, it seemed a shame to have it injured that way, so I set a piece in it. You like nice things to wear, don't you Mr. Swenson? I can tell from the quality of the shirt. You're coming over to our party tomorrow night, are you not, Mr. Swenson?'

"Well, first thing he knows, he's standin' there in the door of the teacherage and she's talkin' nice to him, and he ain't feelin' bashful at all. Pretty soon he's tellin' her all about the suit burnin' up and she's made him promise to come over to the party just the same, wearin' anythin' he's got, and she has joshed him 'bout not bein' a good neighbor, and has made him think it's all his fault that they hadn't met sooner. It ain't until he's back home that he realizes he ain't said any of the things outa the book that he's been practisin'."

Dry-Land fell silent.

"HOW DID it come out?" asked Red, impatiently.

"How do you s'pose it come out?" said Dry-Land, almost petulantly. "How does it always come out when a woman's got her mind made up about a man? Swenson goes to the party in a pair of nice clean overalls, wearin' the purple shirt with the piece set in the tail. Miss Purdy's nicer to him than to all the others and makes him feel to home, and she gits him to dance with her, though he don't know one foot from the other.

"Ed Winter's there, but he don't have a look-in. After the party, Swenson's callin' over to the teacherage two, three times a week regular and, come end of the term, him and Miss Purdy goes in town and is married. They lived on his place there for three, four years and had good crops. Last I heard, Swenson has leased his place and they was gone to California. His wife had him learnin' to play golf.

"So what's the use of a man tryin' to pick out his own cockleburrs. The women like to pick 'em out for him. They like to git him rough and shaggy and unspoiled, so they can take the credit for slickin' him up. Seems like the first thing that happens, when a man's took with a woman, is he starts to fix himself all up and make an impression on her. Seems like there ain't nothin' too foolish for him to do. Seems like he's got to slick all up and strut like a rooster. And what's the use?"

"Yeh," echoed the man from the Goosebill, "what's the use?"

"They ain't no use," said the gloomy Culp. "My old lady nags me jest the same, whether I'm in my Sunday clothes or my overalls."

"What I say," said Fife, "is what's the use of grown men settin' round talkin' 'bout such foolishness when it's time to turn in."

He arose and sought his bed of straw under the header-barge.

One by one the others followed him. Besides Dry-Land, only Red remained, standing nervously before the mirror. He turned and accosted the old homesteader in an embarrassed, confidential manner.

"Now look here, Mr. Dawson, it's time I was startin' over to see Mamie. You think maybe I oughta not dress up so much and maybe rough up my hair a little?"

"You better be gittin' along without wastin' any more time, son," replied Dry-Land, kindly. "The moon's comin' up."

LEFT to himself, Dry-Land contemplated the cook car. The noise of crockery had given way to the clash of skillets and pans. Mrs. Penick was reaching the end of her long day's work. Next she would set her bread. Then she might come out on the little stoop at the back of the car for a breath of air.

"A fine woman," said Dry-Land to himself, "strong and capable and a first rate cook."

He moved stealthily to the header-barge, removed the mirror and lantern and carried them around to the far side, where he was out of sight of the sleepers. He groped in the straw at his feet and drew out a battered suitcase, from which he took a kit of toilet articles. With infinite care he lathered and scraped his face, grunting as the razor rasped against the tough bristles. Finished, he wiped his face and anointed it with something out of a tube, the rank fragrance of which spread heavily out into the night air.

Digging once more into the suitcase, he extracted a jar of mustache lotion and a second jar of hair pomade. The application of the latter took the most time. The crown of his head was almost nude, and it was an operation of some nicety, in the dim light of the lantern, to cover the smooth surface evenly with a thin thatch of long hair combed up and over from one side.

As he stood admiring the effect in the mirror, there was a stir beneath the header-barge and Fife thrust his head out from his blankets.

"How about it, Dry-Land?" he asked, chuckling evilly. "You findin' a little dandruff?"

The head disappeared. Dry-Land shrugged off his discomfiture and knotted a vivid yellow silk handkerchief about his neck.

As he came out from behind the header barge, the rim of the moon thrust up from the prairie behind a fringe of spiky wheat. A little night wind sprang up and rustled faintly in the stubble.

He hesitated in the shadow, eying the cook car nervously. The moon lifted and picked out the familiar objects about him, the raw yellow straw-pile, the gaunt separator, the silent traction engine, the dingy cook car, investing them with a curious, radiant beauty.

The door of the cook car opened. Mrs. Penick came out on the platform and stood, relaxed, enjoying the caress of the cool night air on her flushed face and arms. Dry-Land stepped out of the shadow and moved gallantly toward her. At the foot of the steps he bent sharply at the waist with a bow that would have been the despair of the high society lady who wrote Swenson's book.

"A delightful evenin', ma'am, is it not," he said, "for them that has the *savoir faire* to appreciate it?"

The voice of Fife came dismally from his blankets.

"Oh, hell," he protested, "what's the use?"

Then, leaving the evening and the moon and the weakness of male human nature to Mrs. Penick and the old homesteader, he dropped off to sleep.

SOLDIER'S RETROSPECT

By Albert Jay Cook

Hey!
Was it us who woke up on the deck to see a sun that threw
A haze of pink upon the cliffs that floated into view;
Who hiked those selfsame hills of chalk and cussed the fervent rain,
An' swore the Master up above was flooding Brest again?
Was it us who crawled with pack an' gun, like soldierized sardines
Into the little cheval cars with goldfish, bill and beans?
Was it us, in youthful ignorance, who took so long to learn,
That guys to move in forty-eights, must wait the order "Turn"?

Hey!
Was it us who tramped those long white miles an' counted poplar trees
To ease the pack that broke our back above our trembling knees;
Who watched the spattered, plugging heels that slogged a file ahead
A-squirtin' streams of chalky mud upon our legs of lead?
Was it us who heard one sullen eve a long roar blast the skies,
An' lamped a million Northern Lights a-clash before our eyes?
Who limped beside the Swa-sant-cans that tumbled up at night
To turn the darkness made by God into Satanic light?

Hey!
Was it us who had a dream, within this dream of ours, that told
Of haggard, poison days and bitter nights of chilling cold;
Potato mashers, bombs, grenades, the whistling hornet steel,
And twisting, moaning stuff that made our buddies grope an' reel?
Was it us who thought that this would never cease, the awful game
Of rushing, bay'nets fixed, at hidden foes to meet the flame
Of shell that shook the world, and tried to keep us Yankees denned
Until the great white silence of the Armistice—the end?

Hey!
Was it us—I wonder if it was—who swung due West again,
And cussed the same old dismal chow, the same old misty rain;
Who yearned to feel a western breeze from out a western sky,
And wondered if the world again would sometime soon be dry?
Was it us who helped to swell the roar that leaped from lumpy throats,
To echo on the Breton shore and rock the harbored boats,
When from the East a bright new sun was smiling as it threw
A dreamy haze upon the cliffs that floated from our view?

How the Rajput hordes swooped down on the red pavilions of the Grand Mogul

A Complete Novelette

By HAROLD LAMB

CHAPTER I

A HORSE AND SERVANT FOR THE HAKIM

THUS said Daril the Arab, he who was known as Ibn Athir, the wisest of physicians, the far seeing and long wandering. Thus said he, who in his day and age beheld the conqueror of the world, and the battle of the elephant, and knelt before the Light of the Palace. Thus is his tale:

WHY SIT in one spot? The wise ride afield.

This thought of all thoughts came to me after Ramazan of the year one thousand and thirty and two.* Until then I had been content—I, Daril ibn Athir of the clan Nejd. I had been no more than the physician of my folk, and I had grown weary of the folk and of the land of Athir.

Something had come into my heart. Men, journeying up from the sea with the camphor and leather caravans, had lingered as guests in our tents. They told us of the sea that lay beyond our desert and of a rich land beyond the sea.

This land they called Hindustan, or the country of Ind, and the ruler of this empire they called the Mogul, swearing by the triple oath that the Mogul was the most fortunate of men. The wonders of his court their own eyes had beheld—the tents of cloth of gold, the treasure great beyond counting, the slaves more numerous than our sheep.

Aye, their words put the thought into my mind. And I resolved to journey to the land of Ind, to behold this chieftain, the most fortunate of men.

So, between the first stars and darkness, I left my folk. I gathered together a horseload of cloths and rice and fruit and some silver. Girding on the best of my swords, I set forth upon the road that leads to the sea.

WHO KNOWS, when he sets forth, what the end of the road will be? Upon the sea there are no paths, and the ships go hither and yon when the winds

*By the Christian calendar 1620. The story of Daril Ibn Athir was first written down by a Persian scholar, in the seventeenth century. The Arabs of that time were too proud of the sword to take up the pen. It will be noticed in Ibn Athir's narrative that he passes over his undeniable skill as a physician but dwells fondly on his success against a Rajput swordsman.

LIGHT *of the* PALACE

rise, at the will of God. Also, men are visited by the sickness of the sea that makes food an abomination in the belly.

During this sickness my silver was stolen—all but eleven pieces wrapped in my girdle. The wind blew us to a land that was not Ind, and for several moons I journeyed with merchants, serving as a swordsman to protect their goods, they giving me food of sorts but no horse.

It was after the noon prayer one day that we came out upon a road bordered with trees and to the outskirts of a temple ridden city. These temples were not like our *masjids*, being of stone worked into the semblance of figures of women, men and beasts like men—aye, and serpents carved out of stone.

The merchants went off to the bazaar, and I sought the horse market. Here I found turbaned folk, and some Persians in striped cloaks, whose animals were ill nourished, besides having saddle sores.

I waited, sitting upon the carpet with

other buyers, until I beheld an Arab who wore the green cloth permitted to one who has made the pilgrimage to the Ka'aba. Of him I asked a question.

"Indeed," he laughed, "this is a city upon the border of Ind."

"The praise to the All Compassionate!" I cried.

The name of this horse dealer was Al-Mokhtar and he was full of wisdom mingled with guile. He had in his string two or three splendid mares and he said that the people of this land did not refuse to ride mares. He had also some swift paced geldings and a riff-raff of baggage bearers.

The first day I said naught to Al-Mokhtar concerning the purchase of a horse, though I was determined to have one. I saw that the people of Ind went about on their own feet for the most part, or sat in carts, or—and they were the nobles—lay in litters upborne upon the shoulders of slaves, of whom there was no lack. Yet I would not take the road until I had a horse beneath me.

The second day Al-Mokhtar showed his string to a wealthy amir who took two of the mares at high prices, paying for them with a pearl or two and many promises. Meanwhile I had marked one of the trader's poorer beasts, a small roan, a little lame.

But he held his head well, and when the other horses ran he showed good paces. This roan I determined to buy if he could be had at my price.

WHEN Al-Mokhtar had completed the sale of the mares he came and sat down by me, sending a boy for sherbet and dates which he shared with me as a matter of course.

"Eh, Ibn Athir," he said, "this is a fortunate day."

"By the will of God!" I made response. "For in the cool of this evening I shall set out upon the road leading north."

"To what end?"

"To seek the court of the Mogul and behold his face."

"That is a long way, and I have heard that thieves beset the road. Verily, this is a land of thieves, both young and old."

He spoke bitterly as if remembrance stirred within him.

"By the beard of the true prophet, the nobles of each district demand a toll of strangers! The priests sit naked and hold forth their hands and if thou givest not to them they make outcry and a crowd comes with sticks. Moreover, Ibn Athir, the favorites of the Mogul go at will upon the roads, taking what best pleases them, of goods, weapons or horses."

"O Hadji," I laughed, "it seems to me to be a rich land, and the lords thereof goodly in bearing and garments."

"Thou wilt see what thou wilt see," he made response, shaking his head. "Verily I say to thee, this is a land to be ruled by an armed conqueror, or by a woman, or by—the word of God."

"Such an empire, to be ruled by a woman?"

"Aye, by one —" he paused, musing— "but it will happen as it hath been written in the book that changeth not. Thou canst speak the Persian and that is good. Only remember, if thy road leads to the court, that the two favorites of the Mogul are Mahabat Khan and the Light of the Palace."

"What is that to me?"

Al-Mokhtar smiled and waved his hand He was, as I have said, a man of discernment and guile. But now, at last, he came to that which was in his mind.

"The road is long, and thou wilt need a horse. I have a steed bred from—"

"I have seen the lot. Also, I have seen the horses of Kara Mustapha—"

"That son of a slave!"

"His prices are just."

"Just!" Al-Mokhtar spat. "That bladder of a swine! Now, bethink thee, O Hakim*, I have—" he paused to run his glance over the horses, guarded by one of his swordsmen— "I have a roan that must be sold for a tithe of his true worth. Spirit he hath, and fire, and a tender mouth. Because he is lame I must be rid of him, before setting forth. Yet the lameness, as thou canst see, Ibn Athir, is

a slight matter, to be healed by a little warmth and rubbing."

"*W'allah*, am I to doctor a horse or ride him?"

"But the price! I will sell him for a dozen rupees."

This was less than I had expected his first price to be. Yet I gathered the folds of my mantle about me, and began the salaam of leave taking.

"In truth, this is a land of thieves!"

"Nay, I am the loser, and my wish was to befriend thee."

"If so, make a fair price."

"Then I shall lose yet another two silver pieces, and make a price of ten."

In the end it was agreed between us that I should have the roan for eight rupees, also a bridle, lacking silver work, for two. As for the saddle, Al-Mokhtar had one that he had promised to deliver to a certain man in Lahore and, since he said Lahore lay upon my road, I pledged myself to take the saddle to its owner.

Nay, he trusted me because I passed my word, nor did he think a second time of it. The buying of a horse is a matter for bargaining, but a pledged word is otherwise.

THERE were indeed robbers upon the great road that leads north and ever north through Ind, and I had wiped blood from my sword blade before I drew my reins into the serai of the blue mosque that lies by the garden of the amirs, in Lahore.

Here was a tank of stagnant water hemmed in by cactus and lime trees, where they who journeyed upon the great road halted to wash the dust from their eyes and ears and sleep under the safeguard of the mosque.

And here I was halted by two officers of the Hindu noble who ruled the district, demanding road toll, even as Al-Mokhtar had said. The money, they said, was for driving the robbers away.

To them I made response that my sword had driven the thieves away and, besides, I had naught to give them. And this was truth.

But in this land all words are weighed in the scales of trickery and the two officers went away looking angry. I thought then of what Al-Mokhtar had forewarned and decided to watch for the next hours. I begged some rice seasoned with saffron from the keepers of the mosque and carried my portion to the edge of the tank where the roan had found a little dry grass to feed upon.

The tank was within stone's throw of the road, and the light had not vanished when some twenty riders came galloping past, raising a great dust. They were excellently well mounted, the leader bestriding a black Tartar stallion with a glistening coat.

I stood up, the better to see the stallion, and an officer reined abreast this chieftain—the same officer who had failed to gather toll from me. It was then too late to withdraw and I stared at the rider of the stallion, fingering the hilt of my simitar.

He was a slender man, wearing a small turban, with a long loose end of white silk. His beard was black, and I saw his teeth flash as he laughed, without checking his pace.

"*Ohai Hakim**," he called out to me. "Ho, Physician—may thy road be pleasant to thee!"

The other officer said something, and the rider of the stallion shook his head impatiently, spurring on with his troop. The glow of sunset was still over the acacias, and jewels sparkled in his turban and girdle and saddle cloth.

Beyond doubt the officer I had angered had sought out this warrior lord and made complaint, but he had not wished to call me to account for the matter of the toll. Perhaps this was because of the nearness of the mosque, or a matter of mood.

"Art thou in truth a physician?"

So said one who squatted on the coping of the tank, by my feet—a barefoot and ragged Hindu, with a thin, knowing face and over bright eyes.

"In truth."

"From beyond the sea?"

*Physician.

"Aye, far."

The boy considered, trailing his fingers in the water. "Eh, I have seen the hakim from Iran and the fat one from Frankistan but not one who wore a sword as thou. What seekest thou, O wise physician?"

"Such and such a man," I made response, "to whom I must give this saddle. For this is the city of Lahore."

It seemed to astonish the boy that the saddle should have been given to me as it was, he knowing naught of the customs of the Arabs.

"Art thou friend to Mahabat Khan?" he asked then.

"Nay, I am a stranger in this place."

"But he greeted thee, even now."

The boy swore that the rider of the stallion had been Mahabat Khan, though at the time I cared little, one way or the other.

"I saw thee," the youth persisted, "stand erect and lay hand to sword when his eye fell upon thee. That was a sign!"

NOW I had acted thus without forethought, and in any case it is better to rise and watch events than to hide. The Hindu did not understand. His people carry shield and sword and many daggers; still they like best to use their tongues and to intrigue. So I thought at that time, before I had met with the clans of the north and the riders of Mahabat Khan.

"Who is this khan?" I asked impatiently.

The brown eyes of the Hindu became knowing, as a dog's that has stumbled upon a marmot's hole.

"*Ai—ail*" he laughed. "Shall I not know a sign when I see one? Nay, who art thou, Lord of Arabistan?" But when he looked into my face he became thoughtful. "*He* is a good man to have for a friend."

And he began to poke at the water with one finger. I think he suspected me of being a spy of this khan—this boy of twelve or fourteen years who begged his food by tricks of juggling. I had seen him, not an hour ago, performing with a single stout bamboo of the length of two men. He had set one end of the bamboo upon the earth and had climbed upon it unaided, shouting at those who were too intent on cooking food to spare a thought or a copper coin for this Jami, as he called himself.

For his pains, Jami had naught but the remnant of my rice that he had borne off on a leaf, to eat in a corner. Since then he had come to sit and stare at me.

"I am thy friend," he said then. "Thy friend, Daril ibn Athir."

At this I smiled, for the youths of my land stand more in dread of the men.

"Nay," he said again, quickly. "I know thou hast not a copper in thy wallet. But tell me, O lord of hakims, is it true thou hast skill to cure the sick? The two others were great liars. Is it thy custom to cure with prayers written on paper, or a purge, or by letting blood, or spells?"

"Not by writing on paper or spells."

"If a man be dying, canst restore him to health?"

"The hour of a man's death is written."

Jami considered this and looked at the lanterns that were moving about the tank. One more question he asked—would I sleep in the serai?—and then darted off into the shadows. But he left his pole by my saddle and cloth, and when I had rubbed down the roan pony and had made the evening prayer, the pole was still there. I went to sleep with my head touching the saddle because, though the road might be clear of thieves, that serai was a nest of poverty ridden men.

As with us during Ramazan, there was little quiet in the night. I smelled camels passing along the highroad and saw that armed riders bearing torches escorted the camel loads. Carts drawn by bullocks creaked past the tank, and men, women and children too miserable to own a beast of burden filed by, bearing bundles on heads and shoulders. The air was foul with dust and gnats.

Whenever an amir, a nobleman, passed by, the beggars of the roadside would cry

out in chorus. And perhaps the rider would reach into his girdle and fling them a coin. But the naked and dirty priests who sat by the highroad did not cry out.

Women passed like djinn wraiths among the tethered animals. And in the third and fourth hours of the night the air did not grow cool as in the desert, the *sahrâ*. Always I heard the low voices of men, speaking many tongues. Bare feet pattered near my head, and when I rose to an elbow, Jami squatted down, pulling at my sleeve.

"Awake, my lord! Come with me."

W'allah! The boy had returned to tell me of a sick man whose skin was purple and who was cursing all physicians. Jami had persuaded the family of the sick man to send for me. He swore that this stranger had especially cursed the Hindu priest who came to require money before offering up a prayer to various gods.

"Fool!" I chided him. "If the man gets well the others who have tended him will grasp the credit, and if he dies they will blame me."

"Thou are a bold man, Ibn Athir," he cried, "and, besides, the Rajput hath too strong a voice to be sinking toward the gates of Yama."

IN THE end I went with Jami, for—if the boy were to be believed—I had been summoned. I saddled the roan, not mindful to find horse and saddle gone from the serai when I returned. This seemed not to trouble Jami, who left his pole and ran, clinging to my stirrup.

He guided me from the highroad into an alley that led to wide gardens and an open gate filled with servants and horses and uproar.

"'Way for the benevolent Arab hakim!" Jami shouted above the tumult, thrusting at the Hindus. "At first he would not come. Send word! Stand back."

It was a small house, the lattices closed. Within, many people stared at me and crowded back to let me pass. In a room no larger than a single tent, twenty men were sitting, while two barefoot slaves stirred the heavy air with palm branches. On a matting lay a man of spare and muscular build, with a curling beard.

He was wrapped up in quilt upon quilt, and the skin of his head, as Jami had said, was nearly purple. I smelled opium, and the fumes of burning hemp.

The skin of his corded arm, when I touched it, was hot and dry. Of Jami I asked the tale of his illness, and the boy stood forth, speaking importantly to one and another of the watchers.

"O Hakim," quoth he, "since four days the Rao hath not mounted his horse. His head pained him, and on the second day he could not eat. By command of the other hakim, who is a piece of the liver of a dog, and a liar, being a Persian, he was wrapped up thus to bring forth the sweat. Look serious and shake thy head."

The sick man tossed impatiently under my touch, and it was clearly fever in him, perhaps from bad food. The quilts had only increased his trouble. Indeed, the matter was simple.

"Bring water," I bade the folk in the room, "heated in large jars."

"*Ohai!*" echoed Jami. "Bring water, or the Rao dies! Make haste, for this is the hakim known to our master, Mahabat Khan."

If the other physician had been a liar, Jami was no less! There was dispute when the steaming water appeared, but I bade them strip and bathe the man they called the Rao, and when they had done so, I gave him a draft to quiet him from the packets that still remained in my girdle.

"Far better to bleed him," the young juggler whispered. "Then the cure will be a greater cure. What was in the drink?"

A few herbs and rhubarb, no more. Still, I saw no need of telling Jami this, and no doubt he made a tale of the dose, for the watchers looked troubled and when I bade them rise and leave the sick man, they demanded that I stay in the house until the following day should reveal the efficacy of the draft.

CHAPTER II

CHIEFTAINS' FEES

VERILY, if the Rao, whose name was Man Singh, had died, misfortune would have come upon my head. For, while I abode under his roof, during the next two days the Persian and the European physician came to attend him. When they learned of my presence the European went away without saying anything; but the Persian swore by Ali and all the Companions that I had done ill to give the sick man the hot bath, and that the Rao assuredly would die.

But the Rao, who was nearly free of fever, gave command to his servants to beat the Persian on the buttocks and shoulders and send him forth without payment.

In fever or in health Man Singh had a short temper and a shorter purse. The food in his house was no more than fruit and boiled millet flour; yet the sword that hung by his matting was inlaid with gold upon the hilt, with sapphires and turquoise upon the hand guard. Truly, like many of the nobles of Ind—and of my land—his wealth was all in his horseflesh and weapons. He did not lack for pride. When I came to bid him farewell upon the third day he praised me, and no word concerning payment was spoken.

I had returned to the serai with my roan, when Jami, who had been off on business of his own the last days, appeared with two servants of the Rao I had healed.

The servants brought silver from their lord, in an embroidered silk purse. When I poured the coins from the purse into one hand I counted them and found them eight silver rupees—little enough for the service I had rendered.

And this insolent Jami could not contain himself at the sight, crying shame upon the two men for the niggardliness of their lord, and whispering to me to toss them back the silver, since it was not sufficient.

For a moment I pondered. I had no dislike of Man Singh, yet I was in sore need of money, being alone in a land of thieves, priests and exacting lords.

"Peace!" I reproved Jami. "It is sufficient." Then to the servants of the Rajput I added, "Indeed it is evident from this that thy master is not yet recovered. If the Rao were not feverish in his mind, he would have sent a greater reward. And I, who have attended greater lords, will accept no reward until the cure is complete."

So I dropped the coins into the purse and tossed it to them, while they stared, between anger and astonishment. Jami, for once, held his peace and squatted by me when they had gone.

"*Ail*" he said. "There is wisdom in thee, Daril ibn Athir." After a while he added shrewdly, "Still, I do not think the Rao will send any more silver."

Jami had known that I would give him a coin, or perhaps two. He had been waiting for reward. Yet he had been wise enough to keep away from my side in the house of Man Singh, lest I lose honor by the association of a beggar, and he had been willing to sacrifice his little gain because he thought me underpaid. After a while he could contain his impatience no longer, but must scamper away to learn what was happening at the Rajput's house.

LO, IT happened as I had foreseen. Before evening prayer, two other servants of the Rao entered the serai and brought me a good Tartar horse with a saddle horn ornamented with ivory, and also a robe of honor of brocade embroidered with silk.

I thanked them, and barely were they departed before Jami crept out from behind the cactus and stared at the fine robe with shining eyes.

"Well done, Daril ibn Athir!" he cried. "Oh, what an hour I have spent. Mahabat Khan himself was at the house of the Rao, and the khan laughed until his thighs cracked over the answer thou gavest the men of Man Singh. Eh, the Rao is a favorite officer of the khan, and this horse and robe are from the hand of

Mahabat Khan himself who wished to reward thee for healing his follower."

Now the servants had said naught of this, and I thought that they had not been willing to admit that their master was too poor to send such gifts.

"Now, imp of devildom," I asked sternly, "wilt tell me who this khan is?"

Jami had lost all suspicion of me. Indeed, he had attached himself to me, as a stray dog follows a newcomer in the street.

"Mahabat Khan," he said at once, "is the finest sword from Malabar to the hills. He hath led the imperial standards to victory in all the provinces. Now he returns from whipping the Bengalis."

In the words of older men—for he was swift to pick up a phrase, and know the nature of the speaker—Jami explained that Mahabat Khan was of Pathan descent, and was well liked by the Rajput chieftains, who commanded the best of the Mogul's cavalry. And Jami dreamed of the day when he should possess a sword and ride in the following of his hero.

"Go thou," he urged me, "to the camp of the khan and greet him, and thank him for the horse. He will remember thee and may take thee into his service."

I smiled, because Jami, too, would then be in the camp of this warrior of Ind. But it seemed to me unwise to seek favor by making public the poverty of Man Singh. Besides, I wished to go to the court of the king.

When I told Jami this, he wriggled his fingers with excitement.

"To the padishah?"

"God willing."

Now this Jami was the most impertinent of mortals; even when he begged, he mocked men. But when I said this, he clutched his shoulders and shivered, looking around as if he meant to run away. For the time that milk takes to boil, he did not speak.

"Evil will surely come of that," he said at last. "Still, I will not leave thee, my hakim. We will go together to the Mogul."

And his sharp little eyes, lined and furtive, glowed in the dusk like the eyes of a cat. *W'allah!* At the time I thought he was angry at turning his back on the camp of Mahabat Khan. In the days that followed I learned otherwise. The wisdom of the bazaar children is not altogether good; but their friendship is a thing not to be despised.

CHAPTER III

TWO SIMITARS

THOUGH a man choose his own path from the serai of a morning, how may he know what road the night will bring?

We were of good heart—Jami and I—that hot noon. We were near the end of that long highway leading north into the hills. It ran by a river and the plumed grass and bamboo of the bank screened us from the sun.

Before leaving the dust of Lahore I had given the roan's saddle to its owner—six days since—and now I rode the Tartar steed, having placed a light pack on the pony. Jami trudged at my bridle, his pole on his shoulder.

He was watching the kingfishers dart through the long leaves of the bamboo and out over the water, when he sighted a throng in the highway. Cartmen and wandering soldiers, village women and dogs were gathered around a single rider.

"*Ohai,*" laughed Jami. "This is surely a punishment."

The rider was seated without a saddle, face to tail on a pony that was fit crows' meat. His wrists were tied behind his back and his ankles tied under the bony belly of the horse. Blood dripped from his feet into the dust, and flies swarmed about his bare head.

A woman held up a bowl of water, and he sucked it in through his lips without a word. The horse was plodding toward us, and we could not see the man's face, but Jami pointed out the *tamgha*, the brand on the animal's flank, saying that it was the mark of the Mogul, and this stranger must be an offender condemned

to ride thus along the highway, it being forbidden to cut him loose until he died or met friends who dared the displeasure of the padishah.

Bidding Jami hold my horse, I dismounted, to see why the victim's feet were bleeding. I brushed away the flies and felt beneath one, and knew that it had been flayed upon the sole until the flesh was raw.

At once I drew my knife and cut the cords that held fast his wrists, paying no attention to the warning shouts of the onlookers.

"*Kabardar!*" cried Jami, pulling at my sleeve. "Take care, O my master! This is forbidden, and we are within a day of the Mogul's camp."

"Is it forbidden a physician to attend one who is suffering?" I asked.

"But it will be known, and thou wilt taste shame at the court."

I cut the cords around the man's ankles and lifted him down, being aided by a pair of soldiers—so I thought that all men were not content with the punishment. Placing the victim in the shade, I cleansed the flesh of his feet as well as I might, and put ointment on before binding up the wounds. Then I bathed the man's head. Jami had become voiceless. He had seen what I had known from the first glance, that this was the Rao called Man Singh.

By God's will there was no fever in him, though the veins stood out in his forehead and his seared eyes blazed like coals. The flesh had fallen in upon his bones, and it was no wonder Jami had not known him at first.

I had seen him last at Lahore, calling for his horse and his followers, to ride after the khan. Now he was alone, more dead than alive, and shunned by every one on the highway.

"What now?" whispered Jami.

The voices around me had died away, but the soldiers still watched idly while they ate their rice in the shade.

"Hast thou strength to sit in the saddle?" I asked Man Singh, and his lips drew back from his white teeth in the snarl of a wounded leopard.

"As long and as far as need be," he growled, "so it be to Mahabat Khan."

Jami pricked up his ears and ran to ask the soldiers where the camp of the khan might be, then scampered back to plead for haste. What was I to do? To leave the Rao lying by the roadside were unkind, since I bestrode the horse that was his gift and had shared his salt. And I doubted whether he could sit in the saddle without help. Jami swore by his gods that the tent of the khan was no more than an hour's ride. I lifted Man Singh into the saddle of the Tartar horse, shifting the load of the pony to make room for myself. When his eye fell upon the animal with the king's brand, he shivered again and again.

Gripping the rein with numbed fingers, swaying from side to side, he followed us. And Jami, running by my stirrup, whispered the reason of this happening.

Where he had his knowledge only the beggars of the highway could say, but he said that Mahabat Khan in some way had displeased Nur-Mahal, the favorite wife of Jahangir, the king. The khan had been ordered back from Bengal. Reaching Lahore, he had sent his cousin, Man Singh, to plead for the favor of the king, that he had so long enjoyed.

Evidently Man Singh had risen from his sick bed to go to the court. And beyond any doubt he had been bastinadoed and bound to the back of a horse. Since the horse bore the Mogul's brand, this must have been done by command of the Mogul, but why and for what reason Jami knew not. And even Jami dared not ask Man Singh the reason of his disgrace.

IT WAS three hours later and the sun was setting when we rode into an encampment in a broad meadow. Pavilions and round tents stood in orderly fashion between lines of picketed horses, and at the gate of each section of the camp standards fluttered.

Mounted warriors, coming in from hunting, or games, beheld us with astonishment and many reined after us—

excellent riders, wearing small, knotted turbans with long ends, and clad from thighs to wrists in silvered mail. They took the rein of Man Singh's mount and held him by the arms, but he said no word.

"They are Rajputs," Jami whispered to me, "of his command."

In the center of the camp we halted at the tent with the main standard before it, and here Mahabat Khan sat on a red cloth, eating fruit and talking with chieftains. Jami hid himself behind my horse when the khan looked up and saw the Rao.

He looked for a long moment, Man Singh speaking no word. Other chieftains who had hastened up, gazed at the twain, waiting for what would follow.

Then Mahabat Khan sprang up, his lean face darkening with a rush of blood. He strode to his cousin, who was trying vainly to dismount. Taking him bodily in his arms, Mahabat Khan bore him to his own place and lowered him gently to the ground, kneeling to do so, and then stood with folded arms before the injured man.

"I can not stand," said Man Singh, and touched the bloody bandages upon his feet.

"I do not ask it," responded Mahabat Khan quickly. "Only tell me which of Jahangir's amirs hath dealt with thee thus, and by the three fold oath I swear—"

Man Singh threw up his hand.

"Do not swear. It was done by command of Jahangir the Mogul—the bastinado, and—" he gripped his beard with writhing fingers—"the binding upon a horse's rump."

The officers about them fell silent, so intent on every word that no one thought of us. Mahabat Khan held his head higher and breathed deep through his nostrils.

"By command of Jahangir! If another had said that—"

"By now it is known between the rivers."

Mahabat Khan nodded grimly. By his lean cheeks, and the corded muscles of his restless hands, by the way he met the glances of the other officers, swiftly and squarely, I judged him a man who loved deeds better than talk, who was prone to rashness rather than caution. Yet, after his first burst of anger at the shame inflicted upon his kinsman, he seemed bewildered as if a sure footed horse had sunk beneath him.

"I should have gone!" he muttered. "The shame is not thine, but mine."

"If thou hadst gone when the summons came," cried Man Singh, heedless of anything but his agony of mind, "we would have lacked a leader ere now. There is one at Jahangir's side who seeks thy death."

"Who would dare?"

"Who persuaded him to shame thy messenger?"

The two exchanged a long glance, and one of the Rajputs, turning toward me, cried out suddenly—

"He has heard!"

Grasping the hilt of his curved sword, he strode toward me, motioning back others who were crying eagerly:

"Strike! Strike!"

"Nay," quoth the slender swordsman, "this shall be my affair. I will clip his ears for him, and leave his tongue to the slaves. Then may he prowl and listen, but he will not speak."

THEY were in a black mood, having beheld the shame of Man Singh, their blood brother. They thought me perhaps a spy, perhaps a seller of secrets, and for once Jami's tongue could not aid me. The khan and the Rao had observed nothing, nor was I inclined to raise the cry of mercy. I grasped my simitar sheath and pulled the blade clear.

"My lord," I said to him in Persian—though I understood the Hindustani, I could not speak it readily—"look to thine own jewels."

In the lobes of his ears he wore two pearls. Some of his companions who had caught the jest laughed aloud and this angered him the more. He was a slender

warrior, richly dressed, with the small mouth and full eyes of a woman, his skin as soft as a child's. Yet there were pale scars upon his cheekbone and chin, and he moved with the swiftness of a mettled horse.

Being angry, he smiled, advancing to within arm's reach of me.

"So," he cried, "the slaves must bury thee."

And suddenly he saluted with the sword and struck—once—twice—at my side. I circled to the right, warding his blows and making test of his strength. He was light of bone, even more than I, an Arab of the *sahrâ;* but the edge of his blade bore down heavily upon mine.

In that first moment I knew that my danger lay in his quickness of wrist, and I knew also that his blade was like most of the weapons of Ind—thin iron, edged and tipped with steel. Good for parrying, and well shaped for a thrust, but inferior to mine that could be gripped by hilt and point and bent double, being tempered steel of Damascus.

He too must have felt this difference. He stepped in closer and thrust again and again for the throat, while his companions shouted and the two blades moved in flashing light.

Eh, it is good to feel edge grind along edge, and to hear the whistle of the thin blades in the air. We of the *sahrâ* may carry spear and bow, yet our love is for the naked steel that leaps in the hand!

My blood was warming, and I yielded ground no longer. My adversary shouted and bent low, striving to force my weapon up, and to thrust under the ribs. He was fearless—aye, he left unguarded his own head—and as swift as a striking snake.

"*Hai!*" the watchers cried out.

He had cut through a fold of my mantle, under the arm, but I knew that I was his master, having the longer arm and the better blade. This angered him the more. In the beginning, he had meant to wound me, or force my weapon from my hand; now he meant to kill if he could, pressing in upon me, and dealing blow after blow.

Then some one cried out near at hand, and the Rajput sprang back, breathing heavily, never taking his eyes from mine.

Between us stepped the speaker, Mahabat Khan, in his gold inlaid mail and damask mantle. In truth, he seemed angry.

"Sheath your swords," he said, and we obeyed. "Have I given permission, Partap Singh," he asked the Rajput, "to bare weapons in my presence?"

"Nay. This man heard what was not meant for his ears. I would have clipped them."

Mahabat Khan did not raise his voice or glance at me.

"This man is an Arab hakim, who tended the Rao, my cousin, in his sickness and came hither, having met him upon the road, cutting loose his bonds and giving him a good horse to ride."

I thought then that Man Singh had looked up when the sword blades rang together, and had taken my part with Mahabat Khan. He could have done little less. And the noble who was called Partap Singh did a strange thing. He gripped his sheathed sword and held it forth to Mahabat Khan, the hilt forward.

"I did not know," he said. "If the offense is great, do thou clear my honor with this blade."

He had asked the khan to slay him, but Mahabat Khan smiled a little in his beard and spoke gravely.

"Nay, Partap Singh, thy sword hath served me too faithfully, to turn it against thee. I myself will deal with this guest."

AND AFTER the evening meal he sent for me, where I was eating with his Moslem followers and Jami. I was led to the tent of the standard again, and made the salaam of greeting upon entering.

Mahabat Khan sat alone on a rich carpet, leaning not against a cushion but a saddle. He motioned for me to sit before him, and this I did, while he kept silence. He seemed to be older than his years, for his brow was furrowed and his lips were harsh.

"O my guest," he said—and I took

notice of the word—"I first saw thee near the blue mosque, and later I heard thy bold answer to my cousin, who is no man to trifle with. Lo, by chance thou hast met with him on the highway. And now thou hast crossed swords with that fire eater, Partap Singh of Malwa. Who art thou?"

He asked this question swiftly, biting off the words, nor did his eyes leave mine as I told him the story of my wanderings from the *sahrâ* to the great sea, and finally to Ind.

"For a hakim, thou are rarely skilled at sword work."

"In my land there are foes to be met."

His face clouded, as if my words had called up a dark spirit within his mind.

"For the service rendered to my kinsman, I ask thee to accept a gift, Ibn Athir," he said, and called to one without the tent.

A Moslem soldier appeared and saluted him, bearing to me a small box or casket of sandal.

"It is not silver money," Mahabat Khan remarked, smiling, and I knew he was thinking of the purse I had given back to the servants of the Rao.

"*Yah khawand*," I said, "O lord of many clans, may thy pardon be granted me. How is it possible for me to accept a gift for aiding a man upon the road?"

"Open the box."

This I did, and astonishment came upon me. For, upon the satin lining lay four yellow pearls of size and luster, each the worth of a fine horse.

"A princely gift!"

I closed the lid of the casket, leaving it still in the hand of the soldier.

"Bethink thee."

Mahabat Khan looked at me intently.

"Thou hast bound up the hurts of my cousin and risked the displeasure of the padishah. Accept then the gift. Is it not sufficient?"

Now it was in my mind that Mahabat Khan was testing me, though how and to what end I knew not. So I spoke warily, yet openly. To tell the truth to talkative or inquisitive men is a waste of breath; but to some men it is not good to lie, and Mahabat Khan was such.

"Nay," I smiled, "the patient is not yet healed of his hurts. When he can walk again it will be time to think of payment."

"But thou seekest the camp of Jahangir."

I thought of Jami's idle tongue. After all, the boy was a Hindu.

"God willing, that was my purpose."

"And now?"

For a moment I did not speak. I had been sitting with the leader of the army of Ind for thrice the time water takes to boil, and he was certain that I had heard his cousin say that his death was desired at the court of Jahangir. Nay, I had seen his officers draw sword to slay me. I hoped for no more than that he would give command to bind me and keep me captive, so that I would not carry word of what I had seen in his camp to his enemies.

"I have heard what I have heard, O my Khan," I said openly. "So, tell me thy purpose, that I may know what is in store for me. Verily, I am no spy; nor have I ever beheld the court of Ind."

At this he leaned back and combed his beard for a space. Once he parted his lips to speak and looked at me in silence.

"That Persian hakim, the one the Rao-sahib had beaten, was a spy," he mused. "A creature who served Nur-Mahal. She, the favorite of the *padishah*, is Persian born. I do not think thou wilt see that hakim again, Ibn Athir."

His eyes gleamed and his long chin outthrust.

"Ho; go thou to the camp of the padishah! Bear a message from me. Is thy memory good?"

"At need."

"This is the message, not to be written down. Give it to no one but the person I describe to you. Thus:

"Mahabat Khan sends fealty. Are his deeds forgotten? Think, if the hawk that strikes down its quarry be not a better servant than the crow that feasts off others' game."

A STRANGE message—an appeal fired with a warning. Its meaning was hidden from me, but it was a message that would go to one well known and of high rank. Moreover, it could profit little his enemies, if they heard it. They, I think, were the crows; and surely this warrior of Ind had the semblance of a hawk in his thin lips and down curving beak of a nose and heavy brows. He made me repeat it thrice, until I had each word fixed in mind.

"To whom is the message?" I asked, wondering.

"To the padishah, Jahangir himself."

"*W'allah!* How am I to gain his ear, unknown to others?"

"In three ways. First, thou are a wanderer, and Jahangir loveth best the men of other lands. No man of mine would be suffered to live to speak to him. Second, thou art a physician, and may thereby approach and converse with my imperial master. Third, take the four pearls. Make a gift to Asaf Khan, the chief minister, and all doors will be open to thee."

So said Mahabat Khan, impatiently. And he advised me to give one pearl at first, promising the others upon fulfillment of the bargain.

"For Asaf Khan is a Persian, blood brother to Nur Mahal, and a man with a price. Once his price is paid he may betray thee, for a greater gain."

Another thing came into his mind. Indeed, he thought of all things.

"Some will cry out against thee, Ibn Athir, for freeing Man Singh from shame. Thy safeguard here is twofold. Others—my enemies—will know thou hast been within my lines, and will cherish thee, to question thee. And Jahangir likewise."

"To him, what shall I answer, if he question me?"

Mahabat Khan smiled bitterly.

"I lay no conditions upon that. Say what pleaseth thee."

Thereupon he summoned the follower who had in charge the casket of pearls, and these he put into a soft leather bag, bidding me wear it under my tunic.

"In the camp of my master," he said moodily, "thou wilt find, Ibn Athir, many to plunder thee and few to befriend thee. Let thine eyes be keen of nights, and—fail not to deliver the message."

He made a sign of dismissal. A quiet man, not easily to be understood. A man oppressed by calamity, yet true to his salt, as I thought. One last glimpse of him I had, when we rode from the Rajput camp the next day.

Mahabat Khan, sitting a splendid charger, was inspecting his cavalry, riding down the ranks of five thousand, armed with sabers, each man wearing the garments and bestriding the horse of a chieftain. When he appeared on the *maidan*, a shout went up from the five thousand, a shout echoed by the servants and horse boys under the trees, such a shout as greets the leader of many clans and the victor of hard fought fields.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOGUL'S DOOR

AS WE rode north toward the river Bihat—for Jami had got himself some stouter garments and had left his juggler's pole behind and had begged to ride the roan pony—I pondered the meaning of the message I bore.

Why was the message sent? I knew not. How would the lord of all Ind receive it? I knew not.

Perhaps Mahabat Khan had wished to be rid of me and had chosen this way. Yet I did not think he was a man to let others do what his own hand might do.

Two things were clear—that Mahabat Khan had lost the favor of Jahangir, since his emissary the Rao had been put to public scorn; and his enemies at court were watching, that no man of his should reach the presence of the Mogul.

I noticed that Jami seemed joyful. His eyes were opened wide and he had a quirk and jest for every veiled woman that passed under the hood of a bullock cart. True, he liked to ride, and the lack of a saddle bothered him not at all, kick-

ing at the roan's lean ribs and pulling up the pony's head. But there was more in his soul than that, as I came to see in time.

And the women before our eyes became more and more—veiled and yet shrill of tongue. They washed garments in the streams and loitered under the canopies of shops. For we were descending into the bed of a broad valley where between steep clay banks a river ran, swift and turbid. Truly such a river rises in the hills where snow lingers. And this indeed was the Bihat that races down from the northern mountains. I beheld the purple line of them above the haze of the valley.

We drew rein then, to exclaim, each in his fashion. Beneath us lay the *lashgar*, the great camp of the Mogul.

I have seen the camp of the true believers at the Stoning of the Devil, within the Mecca hills, and I have seen the hunting camp of the sultan of the Turks. But the *lashgar* of Jahangir was greater than either.

In the haze of the hot valley, scattered through the scrub, it covered the earth as far as the eye could reach to the left, and to the right. Near us were the cotton shelters of the shameless women, the booths of fruit and sweetmeat sellers, and line upon line of horses; beyond them camels.

Far beyond, on the crest of a knoll, gleamed the gold and black iron of the artillery, and within the guns the tents were ranged in more orderly fashion, evidently housing warriors. Here again horses grazed and a hundred standards fluttered through the dust billows. Near the river, far, far shone pavilions of red silk.

"That is the place of the king of kings!" cried Jami.

"He has not yet crossed the river," I made response.

WE DID not go at once to the red pavilions, because four Hindu horsemen came up the road and accosted us. The legs and bellies of their mounts were stained yellow with saffron, and they smelled, besides, of musk and ambergris. To me they gave courteous greeting, asking no questions, and turning back to escort me within the *lashgar*.

We had passed beyond the guns, which were placed in a kind of square, muzzles outward, and were among the elephants, when one of the horsemen said:

"Of all the pillars of empire, the thrice worthy vizier, Asaf Khan will be most fain to greet the hakim, Ibn Athir."

Now I had not said that I was a physician, nor had Jami opened his lips. I bore neither sign nor token, that they should know me for a hakim. So was it clear that these four had been on the watch for my coming.

To them I said—

"Indeed, I seek the lord of lords, the earth shaking Asaf Khan."

They led me around the elephants and through a cotton screen erected on bamboos that enclosed the space of a large village. Here dwelt the vizier, with his servants and slaves and watch dogs and his armed followers, of whom I saw several hundred loitering about. Once within the *khanate*, as the Hindus called the cotton screen, they showed me less respect. Others came to stare, and I did not dismount from my horse, though pressed to do so.

"Thy lord is not here," I assured them, "and before long I must seek quarters for the night."

"Thrice grieved will be Asaf Khan, if thou forsakest the shadow of his door before he has seen thy face."

This, I thought, might well be truth! But within the hour a shout arose, and a large elephant plodded through the gate of the enclosure—an elephant with gilt on its forehead and bearing a silver inlaid chair on its back. Scurry and bustle filled the place when the elephant knelt, and two of my Hindus hurried forward to salaam to their master.

Now indeed I had to dismount, and some one led my horse away. But Asaf Khan spoke to me in Persian quite affably, bidding me take the evening meal with him. He carried himself well, a man

broad in the face with a thick, close clipped beard. Diamonds of price gleamed in his turban aigret and sword hilt.

VERILY, that evening I felt ashamed of my plain mantle, for the least of his amirs wore velvet and fine linen. I had decided not to wear the robe of honor given me by Man Singh. I might as well have done so, since my packs were opened and ransacked and put together again, while I was with the vizier.

"Hast thou no better garment?" he asked when the others had withdrawn a little. "I will give thee one."

"Nay," I made response, "I have other garments, bought in Lahore; but it seemed to me fitting that I should go before the padishah in the dress of my country."

"Wilt thou seek audience of the king of justice?" As he said this, Asaf Khan leaned forward and touched the earth.

"God willing." I leaned toward him. "I have heard the men of Ind are excellent judges of pearls. No merchant am I; still I have some few precious stones. One pearl—I would like to know its value."

Before he could answer I took the leather purse from my girdle and placed it before him. He felt within it and drew out one yellow pearl.

"It is fair," he said, eying me sidewise.

"Honor me by keeping it as a journey gift, my lord."

He rolled it between his plump fingers, on which the rings of many hued gems outshone my poor offering. At once—for I am not skilled at playing with words—I whispered that I was a physician, an adept at bleeding, and a well wisher of Asaf Khan. That I sought the royal protection of Jahangir, and a chance to serve the lords of the court.

"And, though the pilgrimage hath left me bare of gear, I have three other stones the match of this one."

At this he became more friendly, calling me by name and bidding the servants bring wine, which I did not drink.

"Let me see the other stones, Ibn Athir," he cried playfully, "and I will judge if they be the equal of this."

Now I had the three pearls beneath my girdle, but I told him they were kept for me in Lahore against need, to be sent to me when I made demand. This he did not believe, nor did I think he would believe.

"What will be thy gift to Jahangir?" he asked.

I showed him a dagger set with a turquoise in the hilt, a long, curved blade of the kind the Hindus call *yama-dhara*, the death bringer, such a weapon as an assassin would choose, to slash open the heart beneath the ribs. It had not one tenth the value of the pearl, and Asaf Khan was satisfied.

In the end he swore that he would speak to Jahangir on my behalf and present me at audience, and I pledged him the three pearls.

YET UPON one pretext or another he put me off for one day and then two, saying that his master would think of naught but hunting. In this time his followers, as Jami told me, probed my saddle with their knives, and even lifted the ivory cap from the pommel.

"They are seeking a writing," the boy laughed, "and Asaf Khan is not easy in his mind as to thee. They know thou hast drawn thy reins hither from the *lashgar* of Mahabat Khan, who is the enemy of their master. They asked me many questions."

"And what answer didst thou make, O imp of the lower world?"

"I said thou didst seek reward from Man Singh, not knowing the peril of aiding one who had offended the padishah. And he turned thee away with empty hands."

"Good!" I praised the boy. "The roan horse is thine."

Jami grinned and cracked his fingers, saying truthfully that he could have stolen the pony, and I should give him now the *yama-dhara* in my girdle. His eyes brightened at sight of the weapon, that I had let him handle many times. But I told him he was over young to wear

steel and, besides, it was to be a gift to the padishah.

For a while after that he sulked, though he ceased not to pry about the encampment, eating with Moslem and Hindu alike, and often twice over.

"Eh, my master," he cried. "This is like a caravansery of all the world. Lo this day have I eaten melons from Kabul and ginger fruits from Cathay, and rice and saffron of the plains." His cheeks were stuffed like a squirrel's that has combed the walnut trees. "And the women are fairer than in Lahore."

"How didst thou make certain of that, O lord of a hundred wits?"

"I walked behind the elephants, those with bells. Aye, when the *meharenis* hear the tinkle of the bells, they raise their veils to be seen by the rider of the elephant, if he be a famous amir. Besides, the tent walls are not like stone. Go, Ibn Athir, and cry thy skill to the *meharenis*, and from the women who thrust their hands forth to be bled or cured, thou wilt learn many secrets."

"Nay," I muttered, "only one thing I seek—to have speech with Jahangir."

"That is a simple thing," he responded idly.

Now I had watched the morning and evening audiences of the padishah from far off. And he sat in the opening of a pavilion by a fountain, surrounded by his amirs who stood within a teakwood rail, within guards. The lesser nobles thronged the garden of the fountain, to cry a greeting to the man in the tent, and a silken rope barred strangers from the garden. I might have cried out to Jahangir, as some Hindus did, but Asaf Khan stood ever at the ear of the padishah.

"And how?" I asked Jami.

"By the pavilion where the padishah sleeps, hangs a gold chain, the end within reach from the ground. There are bells at the other end of the chain. This chain is for any man who has just cause, to give notice that he would speak with the padishah."

"Is it guarded?"

Jami nodded indifferently. I had not told him of the message I bore from Mahabat Khan.

"Aye, a spearman stands there to watch."

"No more than one?"

"Nay, my master—" Jami's eyes brightened—"only the one. Wilt thou go at night and sound the bells?"

"Perhaps."

Verily, what was not known to this youth? I thought that there were few men who would dare summon a king out of sleep, and that the chain of appeal was little used. Still, it seemed a way to what I sought. I had said to Mahabat Khan that I would deliver his message, and it was clear that Asaf Khan never meant to bring me to his master.

CHAPTER V

LIGHT OF THE PALACE

WHEN the cymbals clanged at the beginning of the fourth hour of the night I arose in the tent and clad myself in a loose black *kalifah*. To Jami, who had been sleeping curled up on a mat beside my quilt, I said that I was going forth alone.

"To return again?" he asked. "O my master."

On the threshold of the tent I thought upon this. Who can tell what the night may have in store for him?

"If I come not by the first light, when a white thread may be distinguished from black, do as thou wilt. Nay, take the black Tartar horse and ride him to the camp of Mahabat Khan. Say this: 'Ibn Athir, the Arab, delivered the message.' "

Jami, for some reason, began to grieve. He threw himself down and clutched at my ankles, bidding me take him with me. But this might not be. Within bowshot of the tent I waited to see if he would follow, and he did not. For awhile I heard him whimpering; then he fell silent, to watch, I think, for the appointed five hours.

It was a night of many stars. The

earth underfoot was still warm, and a light wind rustled in the growth of thorn and flowering shrubs. Many men moved about the camp, carrying lanterns, and of noise there was no lack because that day the camel train and artillery had crossed over the river, escorted by most of the army and on the morrow the rest of the *lashgar* would follow, in its journey toward Kabul whither the Mogul went, to pass the summer beyond the heat.

The lanterns made the darkness deeper, under the trees, and I passed from the lines of Asaf Khan without being seen. My black mantle merged with the night, and when I came to the place of the elephants, the lines of beasts chained among an army of keepers, I went forward slowly, beyond the fires where the men sat and gossiped.

Many times I had wandered through the camp, and the paths were clear in my mind. I turned aside into a place where few cared to go. In an open field by command of the Mogul some three score thieves had been put to death.

Some had been trampled by elephants, some shot with arquebuses. But the leaders had been set on stakes, to die slowly. Two days had passed since then, and life had left the last of the thieves. In the starlight, they were visible, heads hanging on their shoulders. I came upon one suddenly, beheld his teeth gleaming between drawn lips. Eyes he had none, for the crows and vultures had visited this place of death.

W'allah! Jahangir delighted overmuch in torture. Even when hunting, he liked to have the carcases stretched out at the end of the day for him to scan, and he kept at his side a servant whose duty it was to write down the total of each kind of game. For these unnamed miscreants, the thieves, the sword would have been punishment enough.

But they served me indeed that night, since I passed from the field into a trampled garden where a hundred soldiers sat about or snored by one fire. Beyond the fire was the *ata khanate*, the red cloth barrier around the imperial quarters.

I went forward slowly, crawling in the dry grass, the sound of my passage unheard in the murmur of the wind.

The cloth screen that flapped and shivered over my head made a poor kind of barrier. I felt for the bamboo supports and thrust up the cloth between them, crawling beneath and standing erect all in a moment.

NO FIRES glowed. Far off, lanterns swung gently on spears thrust into the ground, and the tops of the great pavilions swelled and sank. As I passed by the nearer tents I heard the tinkle of women's anklets, and laughter.

And straightway I sank into the grass again. Torches came around the pavilion —torches borne by barefoot slaves before some young nobles who looked like Persians. One of them held in leash a pair of hunting leopards, and the eyes of the beasts glowed when they turned toward me, scenting a man.

I gripped the hilt of my sword and lay without moving, until one of the courtiers, noticing the restlessness of the leopards, held back his companions.

"Not that way," he cried. "Yonder lies the field of the dead."

Another laughed.

"Nay, Amir ul Amira, whoso kneels upon the carpet of Jahangir may win to immortality in this world, or the next."

Nevertheless, they went away to seek a more distant gate, and again I had reason to be grateful for the unfortunate thieves. I had marked by the torchlight a single spearman standing beside the largest of the pavilions, and toward him I made my way.

He was watching the departing nobles idly, and I waited until he had turned his back, walking away slowly. Then I rose to my feet and sped to him, drawing the curved dagger from its sheath.

The warrior stopped, listening. He faced me, peering into the gloom by the tent wall. Before he could speak, I gripped his tunic at his throat and pressed the tip of the knife under his beardless chin.

Eh, he had the long spear in one hand, a shield upon the other arm; the hilts of other weapons showed against his white garment. But for all his many weapons, he trembled when he felt the steel prick his skin.

"Be silent and live!" I whispered. "Take me at once to the gold chain, the chain of justice that hangs by the pavilion of the padishah."

Doubtless he thought, if he thought at all, that I had come to carry off the gold. Before I let him move, I felt for all the knives at his waist and tossed them to the ground. In the darkness a long spear avails not at all, and a shield is of little worth; a sword may serve its turn, but the weapon that slays is a knife.

"This way," he muttered, drawing me with him. And, growing bolder in a moment, he asked what I desired.

"Speed," I laughed, and shifted the point of the *yama-dhara* from his throat to his back, beneath the left shoulder blade.

Indeed, he went swiftly around the pavilion, stumbling over ropes and his own spear shaft, until he ran full into another guard, who cursed him and warned him to be silent, in a whisper.

My man could not draw back, and dared not speak. The other peered at him, recognizing him, and yet doubtful. My eyes were accustomed to the near darkness of the starlight, and I beheld within arm's reach something that hung down from the eaves of the pavilion. A post and a kind of bracket showed dimly against the tent wall, and from this bracket above my head stretched the thing that glimmered softly.

It came into my mind that this might be the chain of justice and the man he who stood guard over it. I reached forth and pulled upon it strongly.

W'ALLAH! Above and within the pavilion bells without number tinkled and rang and chimed. The two soldiers cried out, and the one that had brought me hither, feeling my dagger withdrawn from his neck, turned and fled. The other grasped my arm.

"What madness is this?" he muttered. "O fool, there will come angry *mansabdars* to ask the meaning of this. If they find thee, they will drag thee before the king of justice and light of the law of Mohammed. And if they find thee not—"

He tightened his grasp on me. Truly, to free myself I would have needed to slay him.

"Has none come before me, to appeal to the Mogul?"

"Yea, desperate men, and—"

A lantern shone on the ground beside us, and came around the corner of the great tent—a lantern carried by a stout man in an embroidered robe who was followed by armed officers.

They held the lantern close to my face, exclaiming at my black garments. They spoke angrily to the guard by the chain, and the man in the robe of honor would have taken my weapons but I put hand upon hilt, saying:

"I am of the clan Nejd, a Sayyid, and the grandson of a chieftain. I have come to the light of the law of Mohammed in this fashion, at this hour, because evil men have kept me from his face."

The noble in command of the guard glanced upward fearfully. I had spoken in a clear voice, and doubtless many were listening, unseen.

"Come," said he. "The mercy of the Mogul is denied no one."

INDEED Jahangir, the Conqueror of the World,* sat awaiting us in the central chamber of the pavilion. His attendants led me through a curtain, out into the center of a wide carpet, holding fast to my arms, while others stood with drawn swords a spear's length at either side. The space was hung with tapestries woven into pictures, always of hunting, from elephant and horseback. And behind the Mogul stood a long screen of wooden fretwork, inlaid with mother of pearl. Above my head a canopy of cloth of gold swelled and shivered as the wind brushed into the pavilion.

*—The meaning of "Jahangir."

Jahangir half sat, half reclined against a round cushion—a stout man without a beard. When he moved, his head turned from side to side, as a lion's. He had the broad chin and the full, slant eyes of the Mogul race. Only in a pearl armlet and upon the loose ends of his girdle did he wear precious stones; but his garments were the lightest linen, and he breathed at times with heavy panting, as if a hand had clutched his throat.

In the beginning I thought this shortness of breath might be due to the heat of the night. After another moment I beheld the gray tinge of his flesh, the coarse lips and bloated eyelids of one who has denied himself nothing of forbidden food, of opium and spirits.

Indeed, I beheld the living carcass of a man, who would stand before the dark angels within the space of two years. I bent my head and shoulders thrice in the salaam of greeting.

"Thy hand caused the bells to sound?" His glance, that had been roving among the tapestries, passed over me fleetingly. "Speak!"

"O Lord of Ind," I said in Persian, which he readily understood, "dismiss thy followers and then hear me."

Again he looked at me and moved his shoulders in vexation.

"I was sleeping. Thou art armed. What is this?"

"A wrong to be redressed."

Suspicion, annoyance and curiosity flickered across his broad, pale face. I asked the Hindus at my side to draw the *yama-dhara* from my girdle and to present it to the Mogul as a gift. He fingered it a moment, drew blade from sheath and placed it beside him.

"Grant, O King," I cried, "that I may put my sword at thy feet and speak to no ear but thine." And I added, when his brow darkened, "The message is from one who would serve thee."

Eh, the ways of the court were strange to me; and I knew that already a messenger must have been sent to rout Asaf Khan from sleep, for his spies among the guard would have orders to report such happenings. So I took the boldest course, unwitting. If only I had spoken otherwise. . . .

But who may escape his fate? I did what I did. And a new look came into the eyes of the Mogul. He gave command that the chamber of the pavilion should be cleared. At once the officers objected, with many words, saying that I had come at night, without a friend. He bade them search me for other weapons, and they, finding none, told them sharply to be gone.

In the end, they went. The chamber was great in size, and though they may have listened beyond the hangings, they could not hear a word. Before they departed I had drawn my sheathed simitar and, holding it upon both hands, placed it upon the carpet within reach of the Mogul, stepping back three paces.

"Thy message?" he demanded, curling his bare feet under him and leaning forward, perhaps to understand the better, perhaps to have the sword under his arm.

"Thus was it." I reflected and said what Mahabat Khan had said:

> "Mahabat Khan sends fealty. Are his deeds forgotten? Think, if the hawk that strikes down its quarry be not a better servant than the crow that feeds from others' leavings?"

The Mogul's eyes widened and he frowned.

"Aye, a hawk indeed. He has drawn apart the heart of my army and follows upon my heels." For a moment he was silent. "Who art thou?"

It came into my mind that Mahabat Khan had told me to speak to this lord of men from an open heart. So did I, relating how I had journeyed to Ind to behold his face, and how I had fallen in with the Rajputs, and with the stricken Rao.

This seemed to trouble Jahangir. He started to clap his hands to summon a servant, then thought better of it and reached forth to pour with his own fingers a little amber fluid from a silver jar into a drinking cup. Such a cup! Half a palm high it stood, glowing with all the fires of Iblis, for it had been cut from a single

ruby. In gold inlay, there was upon it a single word—Nur-Mahal, the Light of the Palace.

NOW AS the Mogul lifted the cup and drank I heard the slightest of sounds, as if some one breathed deep nearby. But the hangings of the partition were five spear lengths away. Another sound came, the faint tinkling of a woman's anklet.

Eh, there was no woman within sight. Jahangir had not stirred, save to set down the cup, and he wore no bracelets or earrings. I looked covertly on all sides, and then at the wooden screen behind the Mogul's head, such a screen as bars the quarters of the women from the presence of men.

Jahangir choked and breathed heavily, feeling about with his fingers as if uncertain of what he touched.

"If I were sure—" he chewed his lip, eying me. "Mahabat Khan was my sword arm until too much honor made him over daring. He has been too long with the lords of Rajputana. If he had come into my presence, then I would know whether he be faithful or not."

"Verily he sent his comrade, Man Singh."

Jahangir moved impatiently.

"As to that I know nothing. If the Rajput came to the *lashgar*, he did not seek audience with me. I do not remember giving order for his punishment."

"Then others did so, in thy name."

"By the many armed gods! Who would dare give out a *firman* in my name? Let Man Singh come before me and point out the one. Let him complain!"

So said the Mogul, yet his thought was otherwise. The eye of his mind contemplated Mahabat Khan and the five thousand riders bivouacked within a day's ride. Now in the *lashgar* were men without number, horse and foot and cannon men, slaves, huntsmen and their families. A multitude, perhaps a hundred thousand, perhaps more. Who knows? Yet the riders of Mahabat Khan worried him, because he questioned me—indeed I think it was for this purpose he had endured my words—as to the number of horses in the camp of the khan, and the names of the chieftains. "Do many come in from the countryside to talk with the khan?" he asked.

"More than a few," I responded. "And this, O King of Justice, is clear to me. Mahabat Khan is true to thee in his heart. When the chieftains cried out against thee, he would have none of it. Yet the wrong done to his cousin is his shame, and now he is like a man goaded into a path he did not mean to follow."

Jahangir threw himself back on the pillow, taking up and playing with the dagger.

"If a king's son, the first born, rebels against him, how is he to put trust in a Pathan?" Nevertheless, he seemed a little reassured. "What would Mahabat Khan have me do? He has lifted his standard apart from mine."

"He did not say. Why not send for him, pledging him safety, and then judge the wrong done his cousin?"

"Did he say that?"

"Nay, the thought is mine."

"Art thou a sorcerer, to read good and evil in a face? A hakim, thou! A curer of ills. This shall be a fortunate hour for thee if Mahabat Khan makes his peace with me. *Besm'allah!* I will give thee the healing of the women's quarrels and a robe of honor with a stipend of twelve silver crowns a month."

He smiled reflectively, and it was clear that he believed Mahabat Khan had charged me with this last message. His broad face shone with good humor, though he still breathed with difficulty.

"Ibn Athir, I find thee a discreet messenger, and I bid thee return to the khan and say—"

He paused, thrusting the point of the dagger against his palm, then casting it down, as if remembering it might be poisoned.

"Say to Mahabat Khan that if he comes to seek me with no more than two hundred followers, I, Jahangir, his king, swear that no harm will come to him.

Much may be pardoned in a hawk that flies back to its master."

I bent my head and stepped forward to pick up my sword, when I saw the expression of the Mogul change. Turning, I beheld the hangings parted behind me, and a Hindu prostrate at the end of the carpet.

"Lord of the World," the fellow cried, not raising his head, "Nur-Mahal seeks thee, and even now approaches."

ALONE, she advanced to the carpet. A triple salaam she made, her light body swaying with more than the grace of a dancing girl at each bending.

"It is the seventh hour of the night," she said, "and a nameless wanderer keeps the lord of my life from sleep."

Her voice was modulated as a singer's. An echo of it lingered in my ears, like the cry of a mocking djinnee. She looked down at my sword, picked it up and placed it under Jahangir's hand. Though she had said no word, she made it clear that she feared for his life.

"Nay," she smiled at him, "is it not the pleasure of my lord to cross the river at sunrise? And the hours of sleep are few."

"The *ata-khanate* need not move until the cool of the evening," murmured Jahangir, "and I will sleep late. Have I not given command to hold no dawn audience?"

She had slipped to the carpet below him, and her arm rested across his fat knee that quivered a little when he breathed. Who can make clear with words what his eyes have seen? I saw that Nur-Mahal had draped herself in white, the folds of the linen hiding her shoulders and hips. Her eyes were of great size and almost as dark as the hair that was drawn back tight from her white forehead. One thing at a time I noticed, but always this. *She wore no veil.*

Eh, my pulse beat fast and strong. Unveiled, she had come into my presence, paying no heed to me. Though the Moguls made no great point of screening their women; still the favorite wife, the Light of the Palace, would not have revealed her face to one who would go from her presence and boast of it. Beyond doubt she did not mean for me to leave the pavilion.

"True, my conqueror," she said lightly. "So was the command wisely given. With the rebellious Rajputs drawing ever closer to our lines, one thing must be done swiftly. Surely we must put the river between us and their array."

"They advance?"

"With the last light Payanda Mirza beheld a band of two hundred horsed and in the brush trails."

Jahangir frowned, twisting his cup in his fingers. Nur-Mahal took it from him and laid it aside, as a trusted servant might remove some object in the way of his master. She spoke of the movements of Mahabat Khan with authority and clearness, without pleading or complaining.

Indeed I had heard that she herself directed the movements of the *mansabdars*, who were the officers of the Mogul. Until now I had not believed.

"When we are across the Bihat we can deal with the unfortunate ones who have raised their standard against us," she went on, watching the face of Jahangir from beneath heavy lashes. "Shah 'lam hath brought thee a score of hunting leopards," she smiled, "and an elephant trained to fighting. They await thee, across the river."

No word she uttered concerning Mahabat Khan, but she had made the Mogul restless and uncertain. Until she entered the chamber he had spoken with authority, suspicious, and hesitant, but open in mind. Now he waited upon her words, irritable and impatient, but confiding in her.

"Perhaps the Rajputs are merely making their way to some chieftain's hold, in the cool of the night," Nur-Mahal murmured, "or they may be coming to give their allegiance to us."

Jahangir grunted and breathed heavily.

"Asaf Khan," she laughed as if a little amused, "hath discovered a new hakim for thee, O lord of my heart. An Arab, who pretends to be well versed in blood

letting, who gave to my brother four pearls of size and good color. Three will Asaf Khan give over to thee. But this Arab hakim hath no mind to give thee more than a dagger such as that by thy hand."

Jahangir glanced at the *yama-dhara* and, angrily, at me. He rolled over on his haunches, like a badgered bear.

"A physician?" he muttered.

"Who tended one of the Rajput chieftains, the Rao of Malwa, Man Singh, during a fever and had a great reward from him."

Eh, Nur-Mahal chattered on, like a child with news to tell, and I wondered. I wondered how she had learned this, until I remembered the Persian hakim who had been a spy and had been beaten and cast off by the Rajput chieftain. No doubt he had sold his story well!

And now I knew that the coming of Nur-Mahal had not been by chance. There had been women who listened behind the screen, and had hastened to her as swiftly as limbs could take them.

SHE PRESSED against Jahangir's knee, to brush her fingers across his forehead, whispering softly. His eyes closed and opened without purpose. Verily of the twain, she was the one to command and he to question and scold—a woman's part. She had ordered the moving of the *lashgar* when she heard of the small party of Rajputs, or, more likely, she had used this as an excuse.

And now she beguiled and soothed the sick man into forgetfulness, until he reached out for his wine cup and his hand fell by chance on my simitar.

In that instant a change came over him. His eyes cleared, and his lips tightened. He sat upright, like a man with a purpose.

"Go, Ibn Athir," he said clearly. "But tell Mahabat Khan he must come alone, and across the Bihat to me."

Nur-Mahal seemed to pay no attention, though Jahangir watched her. But when I advanced again to take my sword, she signed for one of the guards to bear it from the chamber.

Having permission to depart, I made the triple salaam of leavetaking and rose from the last bending in the entrance.

At the instant I stood erect, the hangings were let fall before my eyes, shutting out sight of Jahangir and the Light of the Palace. And then all sight was reft from me. A heavy cloth was cast over my head from behind, and something closed around my throat, gripping tight through the cloth.

Who may escape his fate? I groped with my hands for the girdles of my assailants, seeking weapons, and feeling nothing. The noose about my throat put an end to breathing and by it I was dragged over carpets, until a red fire blazed up within my eyeballs and all strength left me.

Then the cloth and the noose were withdrawn, and in time I knew that I was bound at the wrists and knees, in darkness.

My head pained me and my throat ached. An hour might have passed before a torch appeared suddenly in the rift of a curtain and I rolled over, to stare up into the dark eyes of Nur-Mahal and the faces of a dozen armed men.

"Think, Ibn Athir," she cried, placing her slippered foot upon my throat under the chin and pressing down, so that pain anew shot through me, "think of this! It is unwise to meddle with strange affairs, and thy reward shall be to be carried upon the road in the carts of Asaf Khan, who will cover thee well with the fresh skin of an ox, sewn all about thee. Think—the sun is strong and great with heat, and an ox hide dries faster than any other."

Then, her foot still upon my throat, she bade her followers search me. They found nothing but the three pearls that were to have bribed Asaf Khan.

CHAPTER VI

THE FATE OF IND

UNTIL dawn I heard movement all around me. Horses trotted by in the distance, ox drivers muttered and swore, and carts creaked under heavy

loads. Near my head the sounds were of bare feet moving about.

In all this time the eyes of Nur-Mahal were in my mind, the lustrous eyes of a proud and beautiful woman. She alone must have had me bound, keeping it secret from the sick and besotted man who lay upon pillows and played with a jeweled cup. She had set me aside from her path as I might have flicked a scorpion with my staff.

And Mahabat Khan—for what reason did she seek his ruin? Had he offended her, or had he grown too powerful? No doubt her spies had beheld him on the road, and he had been taken and beaten by officers of the Mogul, who said the command had come from Jahangir.

So I reflected, and in time the light came. The stout *mansabdar* appeared at my side with two swordsmen.

"Pleasant by thy prayers," he grinned, bidding the men cut the bonds from my ankles. "The cart waits and the hide is ready."

We went forth, through the corridors of the great pavilion. At this hour the sun did not yet shine full into the valley, and a light mist hung over the river, casting its veil amid the clumps of cypresses and the high plane trees. I had come forth on a carpet of red damask that stretched from the pavilion entrance down to the mist.

The *khanate* had been removed, and I saw throngs of servants vanishing into the mists with their loads.

Overhead the blue of the sky became clearer, and the veil of mist thinned slowly. The *mansabdar* stood waiting for his horse to be brought and watching the last of the elephants go down toward the bridge of boats.

I also was watching the outline of the bridge take shape, wondering whether it were better to try to run from my guards and throw myself into the river. Few men were about—the tail ends of followers. The *lashgar* with its guns and armed bands had all crossed over.

AT LAST I could see the gray blue bed of the river, over the steep clay bank. And I saw a horseman trotting through the high grass toward us. The sun shone full into our eyes and the rider was within a spear's length before I knew him.

It was Mahabat Khan. Behind him rode a score, and after these still other Rajputs galloped across the trampled fields.

The officer beside me shaded his eyes and peered up, his teeth striking together sharply.

"*Ahai*! This is indeed presumption! Mahabat Khan, wait and I will go in and announce thee."

"Nay Salim Bai, I will go in before thee, this time."

The dark eyes of the khan met the startled gaze of the officer, and Salim Bai drew back several paces. The twenty who escorted the Pathan clattered up and some reined their steeds before the officer of the Mogul. Still others surrounded the great pavilion swiftly.

Servants came forth from the entrances and stared in wonder. The two men who had been watching me sheathed their weapons and went away. In all perhaps two hundred Rajputs had come to the *ata khanate*, with drawn swords and dark faces.

And Mahabat Khan lost no least moment of opportunity. Eh, he was a leader, above all, a man fit to lead cavalry in a raid. Paying no attention to the bewildered servants, or the irresolute Salim Bai, he summoned two score of his riders who carried bundles upon their cruppers. These he loosed like a flight of pigeons down the slope toward the river, galloping recklessly through the tail of miserable camp followers, until they dipped down the steep clay bank and smote the few guards who had been left at this end of the bridge of boats.

My blood warmed at the sight. The Mogul's men knew not what to expect, but they drew their weapons when the hard riding Rajputs were within a few paces of them. Some of the guards tried

to mount their horses; some tried to form across the first planks of the bridge.

In a moment the Rajputs had broken them, knocking men and beasts into the swift current of the river and clearing the end of the bridge. Then they dismounted and fell to work with axes, cutting through the bottoms of the boats, cutting the lashings that held them together. From the bundles they had carried they took dried rushes and flax and kindled fire in this, starting a blaze in many of the boats that were swinging out into the current now. More than half of the bridge was destroyed in this way.

And, mounted proudly upon my black Tartar charger that scamp, Jami, reined up to me, tugging his own pony behind.

"*Ahai sahib*," he laughed, "they have trussed thee like a goat that is to be slain. I have ridden many leagues since the first light."

But he slid down by the stirrup that dangled far below his bare foot and cut the cords that held my wrists at my back. He used a half moon dagger of a poor sort that he must have picked up in the disordered camp or begged from a servant. And he boasted without truth that the horses had carried him far, for the charger's coat was smooth, his limbs dry.

"The praise to the Compassionate!" I cried, stretching forth my arms.

Mahabat Khan glanced at me swiftly and nodded; then, seeing the boats burning out upon the river and all the armed forces of the *lashgar* save a retinue of young warriors waiting to escort the women of Jahangir on the far side of the river, he spoke to the chieftains near him and reined toward the imperial pavilion.

Nay, he did not dismount. Whipping out his light saber, he slashed down the entrance hanging and bent his head, urging his horse into the corridor between the tapestries. Several followed him in this manner and Jami quivered with excitement.

"Let us go in, my master," he whispered. "There will be a tumult, and—"

He meant there would be spoil for the taking. Without a weapon I followed, and the Rajputs made way for me with courteous greeting since they knew me for the man who had befriended the Rao. The horse of Mahabat Khan stood before the entrance of the audience chamber, pawing at the red damask underfoot.

Mahabat Khan himself paced forward slowly, and made a salaam, but without touching the carpet with his hand. Sitting among the disordered pillows, blinking in the sunlight, Jahangir the Mogul, without attendants and without armed men, faced him silently.

MAHABAT KHAN advanced to the feet of the Mogul and stretched forth his arms, holding high his head.

"I have come," he cried in a clear voice, "because the enmity of Asaf Khan hath sought my death."

In the court of the Mogul it was forbidden to pronounce this word, and Jahangir's dull eyes blazed with anger.

"If I am guilty of any wrong," went on the Pathan grimly, "I ask only to be put to death in thy presence; if I am blameless, it shall be known to thee."

At first Jahangir had trembled, his heavy hands moving across his weak knees. Verily, he had been roused from sleep a moment before, and he had seen me standing among the Rajputs at the chamber entrance. Perhaps he thought I had summoned Mahabat Khan out of the night, but surely he knew at once that he was a captive. The fleeing servants, the chieftains with bared swords, told him this.

So he sat upright, like a sick lion, barely showing his teeth, and striving to gather his wits together.

"Did I not send for thee?" he asked in his deep voice. "The sight of thee rejoices my heart, for with thee beside me I am safe from harm. Sit!"

Mahabat Khan hesitated for the space of a breath. The Rajput princes beside me murmured, fingering their sword hilts. They hated Jahangir, yet served him, as their fathers had served Akbar, his father. Their blood was up, and at that moment they would have rushed in upon the

bloated and cruel Mogul, the alien who was master of Ind. By a stroke of the sword they would have made an end of him.

The Pathan, who was still faithful to the Mogul, seated himself at the edge of the carpet. Jahangir cried for his servants to bring wine, but no one came. Alone, with drug dulled brain, he looked from one to the other, as if waking from a long sleep—he who had had men flayed alive and the skin torn from them for a whim.

"Nay, Mahabat Khan," he said, "is it fitting that I should sit, half clad before these amirs? I will go to the women's tents and put on fresh garments."

"In time, O Padishah. But first there is need to go forth with me."

"Whither?"

"To the five thousand that await thee."

Blood rushed into the heavy face of the Mogul, and his fingers tightened on the ruby cup.

"I am thy captive," he said sulkily. "My fate is between thy hands."

ONCE it was asked of a certain wise man whence he had his wisdom, and he made answer—

"From the blind."

And his followers asked the reason of this. He said—

"Because the blind take no step without feeling the earth before them first."

Mahabat Khan had drawn near the *lashgar* that sunrise with his two hundred, intending no more than to look upon the camp. Seeing the armed forces withdrawn across the river and the imperial tents almost deserted, he had put spurs to horse and charged, intending to secure the person of Jahangir.

W'allah! He had succeeded. And if Jahangir had threatened him, or had tried to flee, a single stroke of a Rajput sword might have made Mahabat Khan a free man, free to deal with his foes and to stir into flame the embers of war.

"*Now*," cried Jami, at my side, "we shall see swords drawn."

This, at least, was true. The Rajputs were escorting Jahangir to another tent not so near the river bank. They had not allowed him to put on better garments, but had brought up an elephant from somewhere, an elephant without an umbrella and with only a plain chair in a wooden howdah. Jahangir mounted to his seat and the mahout made the beast go forward.

Then the imperial horsemen far off, around the women's quarters realized what was happening. They ran about hastily, getting to horse and drawing sabers and taking the lances from the slings.

We followed—Jami and I—the elephant with its escort of a hundred Rajputs. It was no time to be without a weapon and I meant to find one and arm myself.

And it seemed as if there would be no lack of swords on the ground, for the *korchis*—the picked imperial guardsmen—charged at a gallop, shouting, and evidently determined to rescue their master. A hundred Rajputs put their horses to a trot and advanced through the dry grass to meet them.

In a moment the air was full of the clatter of steel and the war shouts. Saddles emptied all over the field. The Rajputs did not keep together, but fought each for himself, scorning the lance but wielding their light blades like *shaitans*.

The Mogul's followers soon lost their array, and in single combat the Rajputs beat them to earth and rode them down. Before long the *korchis* were flying from the field.

I WENT forward to pick up a sword when I encountered a woman coming from the nearest pavilion. She was veiled and wrapped in the colored mantle of a dancing girl and she walked with a swaying grace, without looking back at the fighting. Eh, it came into my mind that at such a moment a woman would keep to the tents—for the wives of the men of Ind are not like our women who follow the clans to raid or battle.

When she came abreast me she turned

away her eyes. And from her hair arose a scent that I knew, the perfume of dried rose leaves. I put forth my hand to stay her and she swerved aside to avoid being touched. Surely a dancing girl would not have acted thus.

"Thou art the Light of the Palace," I cried, certain indeed. "Is this the path to follow when thy lord is taken captive?"

She turned her head to look around, and Jami pressed close, alive with curiosity. In all the days of our wandering he had not seen me in talk with a woman.

Verily, this was Nur-Mahal. She lowered her veil with a swift motion and in the clear sunlight her beauty was no less than by night. But now her lips drooped and her eyes held appeal.

"I go where I must, Ibn Athir," she cried softly. "Calamity hath fallen upon us, and if I am taken by the Rajputs, they will take life from me."

Why did she withdraw her veil? Her skin was smooth and tinted by the blood beneath, like the rarest silks that come from Cathay. Startled, and dismayed, her pride hid all weakness as a cloak covers the rents of a garment. Only her eyes pleaded with me to keep her secret and suffer her to go, in her disguise.

"To go whither?" I asked.

"As God wills, perhaps to Lahore." Her eyes still dwelt upon my face, seeking my thoughts. "Will it profit thee, Ibn Athir, to deliver me to death?"

"Without honor, there is no profit."

At once she leaned toward me, half smiling.

"Thy sword! That is thy desire. Salim Bai took it, and thou wilt find it in his baggage."

Surely, she had read my thought! Even while I meditated, she fastened the veil in place and went on, moving without haste toward a clump of flowering shrubs. And I—I rubbed my fingers across my eyes, as a man will do who has been sleeping in strong sunlight. She was Nur-Mahal, and what was her fate to me?

Nay, if I had taken her then to Mahabat Khan the fate of Ind might have been otherwise. I thought: She is alone, flying from execution. Let God guide her steps.

And in days thereafter I wondered whether she had not willed that I should think thus. But then I hastened to find Salim Bai and demand that my sword be given back. He was too afraid of the Rajputs to refuse.

Jami, meanwhile, had deserted me again.

AFTER the dawn prayer on the second day I was summoned to the quarters of Mahabat Khan to attend Jahangir, who was worse than usual. I found the Pathan striding back and forth restlessly, while the Mogul lay prone on a white cloth with untasted dishes at his side.

"He thinks that I have poisoned him," cried Mahabat Khan angrily.

Jahangir glanced at me as a trussed criminal eyes the goaler who comes knife in hand. He was grunting and breathing with difficulty, and the blood throbbed in his pulse. Though the cool morning air blew through the tent, sweat hung upon his eyebrows and thick jowls. In spite of this, he pretended to be in excellent humor and called the khan his sword arm.

When I rose from his side I beckoned toward Mahabat Khan, and when we were beyond the hearing of the sick man gave my opinion.

"No man may outlive his allotted span, O my lord. The seal of *al maut* is written on the forehead of the padishah. He will not live more than two years."

The Pathan started and clenched his sinewy hands.

"Nay, Hakim," he responded grimly, "dose the padishah with physic, bleed him, purge him, and set him on his feet. Stripped of the parasites that have sucked his manhood, he may yet be king."

"No man may alter what is written. Though I were promised the emeralds of Golkunda, I might not lengthen his life. Others might promise more, and lie. I have spoken the truth."

For a moment his dark eyes bored into mine.

"I believe thee, Ibn Athir."

Then he turned back to the sick man, striding back and forth by the prostrate and panting form. The long, clean limbs of the warrior, and his clear eyes and firm step, gave him authority that the Mogul lacked. Suddenly he pulled at his beard and cried out in a loud voice:

"In my youth, I served Akbar the Blessed, thy father. And I will say to the son what no other hath dared to utter. Upon my head be it!"

He strode to the entrance of the tent, which was of heavy black velvet and, after looking out, let fall the flap.

"Thy great-grandsire Babar the Tiger conquered India and he was a man in all things. Thy father, passionate in temper and too fond of intrigue, was yet a true ruler, who devoted every hour of wakefulness to the affairs of the myriads that worshipped him. Lo, calamity came upon his head in his children. Thy brothers died in drunkenness."

"Aye," nodded Jahangir, "they went out of the world in wine soaked shrouds."

Mahabat Khan glared at his royal captive and pulled the wide sleeve back from his muscular right arm.

"These scars I had from the edge of steel in thy service. Because I was faithful to the salt, thy ministers sent me from the presence, giving me perilous tasks for nourishment, and stripping me of honor with their lies. Behold!"

He drew from his girdle a gold coin, of a sort I had never seen. It was a mohur, one side bearing the likeness of the beautiful Light of the Palace, the other that of Jahangir, smiling, a cup upheld in his hand. Mahabat Khan threw it down and spat upon it.

"Worthless! Asaf Khan the Persian hath taken the reins of authority from thee, and Nur-Mahal rules thee. Cease emptying cups and eating hemp and searching for new women! Give order to lead out thy horse and take command of the army, summoning the best of thine officers to thee. Then will we deal with Asaf Khan and his parasites."

The dark faced Pathan checked in his stride and laughed.

"*Kya!* Asaf Khan is a jackal. Why did all but a few of thy *lashgar* cross the river, leaving thee defenseless when I was within a ride? Asaf Khan knew that I would strike, given the opportunity. He thought that the Rajputs would slay thee."

JAHANGIR rolled over on an elbow, his lips working.

"Nay, what gain to Asaf Khan?"

The Pathan's teeth gleamed through his beard.

"Think! Thy son hath drawn the sword against thee, and the daughter* of Asaf Khan is the wife of thy son. If they could put an end to thee, an end also there would be to the power of Light of the Palace and Asaf Khan would rule from behind the throne of thy son."

Suspicion flared like a ray of sunlight across the heavy features of the sick man, and he felt at his girdle with a trembling hand as if feeling for the sword he no longer wore.

"Rouse thy courage!" stormed the Pathan. "Ride with me to the hills, and we will gather an army—a true army."

Jahangir sank back on his pillows, uneasily.

"Where is the Light of the Palace?"

"O my king, it is written, 'Unhappy the kingdom ruled by a woman.'"

Mahabat Khan gripped his beard, and I saw that his brow was damp.

"Nur-Mahal is a Persian, and a woman who sways thee as if holding thee in the meshes of her hair. They who know her—" he became silent, thinking. "O my Padishah, the Rajputs and the princes of the Dekkan, the Afghan amirs will not submit to have decrees signed by a woman in thy name."

"She it was," muttered Jahangir, "who put thy cousin to public shame."

"Aye," nodded the Pathan grimly, "so that I would lift the standard of war against thee."

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*This daughter was Bibi-Khanum, called Mumtaz-Mahal, or Glory of the Palace, and the famous Taj-Mahal is her sepulcher. She had as great an influence over her husband as Nur-Mahal had over Jahangir.

"I have always trusted thee, O *bahadur*." Jahangir spoke too readily. "And in this moon I gave command to increase thy revenues to ten thousand mohurs."

Mahabat Khan swerved as if he would have struck the sick man.

"*Bism'allah!* What care I for that? Nur-Mahal is a chain—a shackle upon thee. By scheming, by intrigue and by wiles, she rules India. And there is no help for it. She must be put to death."

These words had a curious effect upon Jahangir. He frowned, as if considering the torment to be dealt a criminal; then he shook his head helplessly, looking all around him. His hand stretched forth, fumbling for the cup that was not there.

"No help," he muttered. "But she is Nur-Mahal!"

Silent, with folded arms, Mahabat Khan waited.

"Where is she?"

The Pathan made a sign that he did not know, and Jahangir began to finger the pearls upon his armlet. Without Nur-Mahal at his side, he was no more than the husk of a man.

"Let it be so," he said at last. "Prepare a *firman* and I will sign it."

And he begged that some opium be sent him, his eyes glistening with real anxiety. Mahabat Khan gave an impatient exclamation and strode from the tent, gripping my arm. As he flung back the entrance flap, he breathed deeply, and I heard the words that came between his set teeth.

"May the Pitying, the Pitiful, have mercy upon me. This also was to come upon my head, after these years. Is there easement in all paradise for my spirit—I that have loved Nur-Mahal since she was a child upon the caravan road?"

CHAPTER VII

BATTLE

WITHIN an hour we had tidings of Nur-Mahal. A messenger galloped up, raising dust among the tents, and crying that the imperial cavalry was mustering across the river south of us.

Eh, the bridge of boats had been destroyed, and a small party of warriors that had tried to surprise us in the night by swimming the Bihat had been drowned for the most part. But there was a ford within two leagues of Mahabat Khan's standard, to the south, and here he had posted scouts to watch—a ford made treacherous by deep pools and by the swift current.

At these tidings Mahabat Khan was a man transformed. Now that he had to give battle to Asaf Khan and the other ministers, his eyes lighted and he called for his charger, riding out to where his Rajputs were already mustering.

Leaving a thousand to guard the camp and its royal prisoner he hastened down the bank with his veteran cavalry.

And at the ford we found the fighting already begun.

At last the lords of Ind had stirred out of their stupor and were advancing to regain their monarch. Only the light cavalry was on their side the river, but many thousand armored foot soldiers were massed on the far bank. From time to time white smoke billowed out toward us and a cannon roared.

But the range was too great and the khan and his Rajputs jested merrily at the balls that dropped here and there, or plunged into the steep clay bank. At the foot of this bank sandy spits ran out into the stream, making the current less; but the sand itself, so our scouts said, was evil footing.

The detachment left at the ford had gathered at the edge of the bank, firing from bows and matchlocks at a dozen elephants covered with leather armour. They were making their way slowly across the river, which rose to their bellies.

When Mahabat Khan had watched events for a moment, he gave command to draw back. The Rajput princes remonstrated, but he waved them away and they led their followers to a ridge more than a musket shot from the bank. Only a few were left to dispute the crossing.

And these fell back as the elephants

began to top the rise from the river, their painted skulls showing first, then the howdah with its archers and finally their whole bulk of wet and glistening leather.

Once upon the bank, they waited for the foot soldiers—turbaned Mahrattas and shouting tribesmen. These were wet to the beards. Behind them came some Turks with matchlocks, and finally the first riders of the light cavalry.

The shouting and clashing of cymbals excited the Rajput chieftains, who grieved at beholding the van of the Mogul lords unharmed at the crossing.

"Let us strike!" They who stood nearest Mahabat Khan pleaded.

He made no answer, and the standards of the light horse came into view over the rise.

"By Siva," cried a raja, the lord of Jesselmir, striking his sword hilt, "it is not good to wait!"

But Mahabat Khan threw back his head and laughed soundlessly.

"Verily, it is good to wait when the foemen hath so foolish a leader as this."

"Yet they advance, more and more."

THE KHAN nodded and, after awhile, to still the grumbling of the chieftains, he related a tale of a lion that lay in wait for a herd of horses. So long as the horses were not aware of their danger the lion kept himself hidden. Not until they scented him did the lion rush out and strike down his prey. For he was wise and knew that he could not slay all the herd, only the horse that came near his hiding place.

Some of the chieftains laughed, seeing the meaning within the tale. Verily, they could not strike the foemen across the river. Still more of the Mogul's bands appeared on the bank, spreading out to the flanks, the elephants advancing in the center. Perhaps four thousand were in sight when Mahabat Khan rose in his stirrups and cried out:

"Raise the banners!"

Eh, it was a goodly sight. The kettledrums rattled, and the lofty banners were lifted from the ground to the stirrup rests. The chieftains in advance of their men put their horses to the trot, down the ridge.

From a trot they spurred to a gallop. And, rushing upon the elephants, the lines of horsemen edged away to the right and left of the beasts. Some of the Turks began to fire from the matchlocks and there was noise and smoke. But some had wet their powder, and the Rajputs came on so swiftly, they had little time to settle their rests.

"*Ho—nila ghora ki aswar!*" Thus shouted the clans of Malwa and Jesselmir, remembering Man Singh.

They struck the hastily arrayed lines of the Mogul's officers as a torrent in the hills sweeps upon loose sand. Here and there the torrent was flung back—here and there it eddied—but the right of the foe was broken at once, and the Rajputs rode down into the center.

Who can tell all the events of a battle? I had kept behind Mahabat Khan, and I saw him strike two riders from the saddle, slashing one above the head of his own charger. I heard the deep trumpeting of the elephants, and the cries that rose on every hand—despairing shouts as the Mogul's men were pushed back to the edge of the steep clay bank.

They had crossed rashly, had formed without order and had been met by a well timed charge of splendid cavalry. Hundreds lay upon the crest of the bank, hundreds more were slain by arrows as they struggled back to the ford. Meanwhile the Rajputs surrounded the elephants and slew the *mahouts* and archers from far off.

Mahabat Khan gave command to lead off the captured beasts, lest they run loose through our ranks, and he reined in his horse to gaze across the river.

"By the ninety and nine holy names, Ibn Athir," he cried, "would that Asaf Khan, the dog born dog, had come over with those men."

But Asaf Khan, the wily, the covetous, did not show his person. We looked for a long time, trying to make out the leader of the foe. And in the end it was clear

to us that somebody in the howdah of a fighting elephant gave commands. The elephant stood at the beginning of the ford, not moving from that place.

The howdah, of silver work, hid the riders and at that distance we could only see officers coming up to the great beast and riding hence. Whoever it was—and we both, I remembering the three pearls, prayed that it be Asaf Khan—knew little about the maneuvering of men, yet lacked not determination.

Perhaps a hundred thousand of the Mogul's retainers had gathered on the far bank and one after the other different chieftains led their followers down to the ford and essayed to storm our ground. But the four thousand Rajputs made good their ground.

ONLY for an hour was there doubt of the issue. Toward sunset the leader on the black elephant advanced into the ford with a multitude of foot soldiers. They plunged through the dark water in disorder, the current foaming about their shoulders. But they shouted with a mighty voice. Some of our clans had gone far to right and left to drive back scattered parties, and the Raja of Jesselmir held the crest of the bank with his veterans.

Above the turbaned heads of the oncoming warriors the black elephant loomed, feeling its way and flapping its ears restlessly. The level rays of the last sunlight struck full upon the glittering howdah, and Mahabat Khan and I cried out at once.

Under the tasseled hood we beheld the slender figure of the Light of the Palace. She, the empress, sat tranquil, a child on her knees. And it was said to me thereafter that this child was her youngest born.

We heard her voice, urging on the soldiery, and Mahabat Khan swore in his beard, looking this way and that like a man who knows not what path to take.

"May God shield her," he said under his breath.

But the lord of Jesselmir was weary of shooting arrows, and the Rajputs had no love for the matchlocks. He may have recognized Nur-Mahal; more likely, he could not hold back at such an opportunity.

Verily, he did well! He had been charged with the defense of the road and the bank; the assailants were too numerous to permit them to form on the top. So, before Mahabat Khan could send a galloper to him, he mustered his riders and charged down the winding road, slippery with blood and loose clay, and littered with the dead. He struck the head of the advance while the first hundred were crossing the sands.

Other Rajput clans rode up to take a hand, and the arrows began to fly about the elephants, some glancing from the silver work of the howdah.

The sun had left the surface of the river, though it still blazed in our eyes, and Mahabat Khan cried out to me—

"They will slay her, unknowing!"

Eh, this was what he himself had decided must be done, and surely it would put an end to the battle. But his eyes were dark with suspense and grief.

"If God wills it," I made response. "Nay, the issue will soon be decided."

Then Mahabat Khan remembered his leadership. Five hundred of his cavalry were fighting hand to hand down in the shadows, in the muddied and blood stained water, and the treacherous sands. He spurred off to lead up reinforcements. When a thousand had mounted and formed under his quick commands, he led them down the road, to rescue the chieftain of Jesselmir.

WAH! It was like the oft told battle of the camel, when the woman Ayesha seated in the litter of a white camel cried on the avengers of Othman, and seventy of the clan Koreish died at the camel's bridle. Indeed, the spirit of a woman at such a time may put men to shame.

In the growing darkness there was heard only the screaming of the mortally stricken, the whirr of steel, the shrilling

of wounded horses and the trumpeting of the elephant.

I no longer saw Mahabat Khan. Swept away among the Rajputs, I was drawn out upon one of the sand spits. The elephant's *mahout* had been hurt by arrows and pulled from his seat. Masterless, the great beast swayed this way and that, and finally plunged out upon the sandbar.

With a loud shout the Rajputs around me made toward him, slashing down the spearmen and slaves who tried to hold us off. Once the elephant smote a rider with his trunk, and the man and horse went down. Others cut at the sinews of his legs which were protected by the leather armour.

"Bow and horse!" shouted a shieldless warrior behind me.

"Climb!" cried another, thrusting at me to get closer.

We splashed into water, and the horses reared. The great beast turned this way and that, infuriated with pain, and for an instant I beheld the face of Nur-Mahal.

The sky was still bright overhead, and her features were distinct, as she bent forward, no longer crying at the battle. The child on her knee seemed to be bleeding, and with cloth torn from her sleeve, the Light of the Palace was binding up its hurts.

By then the last of the Mogul's guards had been driven from the elephant by the Rajputs. But the black beast had had enough of pain.

Turning around, he made off through the welter and almost at once plunged into a deep pool.

The current tugged at him, and he struggled for footing, sinking and rising and drawing farther into the center of the river.

This was the omen of defeat for the Mogul's forces. Those in the ford, yet living, drew back, wet and dispirited. And fifty thousand eyes followed the laboring beast that carried Nur-Mahal.

We saw the silver howdah sway like a bush in a great wind. We saw the glistening head of the elephant move slowly toward the other shore.

Why make many words of our waiting? In the end the elephant reached shallow water and moved out to safety, far down the river. It had been written thus, and how was it to be otherwise?

CHAPTER VII

PEACE

AFTER the battle, the sun of fortune shone upon us. Mahabat Khan had prevailed over the favorite, Nur-Mahal. And the chieftains who had held aloof until now hastened to ride in to our *lashgar* with gifts and words of praise.

Venerable men blessed the Pathan when he passed by. And Jahangir, hearing of these things, announced that he had no friend so faithful as the khan. He proclaimed that the will of Mahabat Khan was his will. So the lords of the Panjab waited upon the khan with immense throngs of followers.

In those seven days I attended Jahangir daily, and it became clear to me that he was using drugs and spirits without cessation, buying them, I think, from the slaves.

"Nay," he said to me, "soon I will be able to mount my horse and review my followers."

Day followed day without his doing so. He did not like to have the amirs and *mansabdars* come to greet him; perhaps because he was a captive, and his nobles knew that the real power lay with Mahabat Khan.

Omar, the tentmaker, hath said, "Man is a magic lantern with a light within." And I thought that Jahangir was no more than a dull lantern, and Nur-Mahal the flame that had animated him and made him, at least, the figure of a king.

In those seven days I beheld a change in Mahabat Khan. He was victorious, bepraised and besought. But he waxed moody; his eyes became dull, and the talk of government wearied him.

On the seventh night Jami appeared in my tent. At first I did not know him.

His tunic glittered with gold thread,

and his trousers were bound at the ankles with strings of small pearls; his hair had been combed and oiled, and he smelled of mingled civet and musk!

"*Wai*, Jami!" I cried. "What is this?"

He grinned down at me where I sat, and thrust forward the hilt of a light saber—a hilt set with turquoise. Then he squatted and dipped into the bowl of rice that I was eating.

"I crossed the river, O my master," he laughed, "and I have had fowl and jellies and sugared fruits. I followed the Light of the Palace and hid in the fishing boat that took her over to the *lashgar*. She gave the boatmen five gold mohurs. I wanted to listen and learn what would happen and bring word of it to Mahabat Khan."

The graceless rogue glanced critically at the plain carpet and worn quilts of my tent.

"Has fortune not prospered thee, my master?"

"Only a thief prospers after a battle," I said severely, because conceit made Jami over glib.

"I took no part in the battle," he remonstrated gravely. "Nay, I sat on a cart tail and watched. What a night!" He laughed and hugged his shoulders. "Ibn Athir, never was there such a running about. Baggage was cast from the carts and saddles tossed from horses. I slept in the tent pavilion of a Persian amir. By dawn the *lashgar* had dwindled to half—so many had fled the standards."

He reflected a moment, fingering his newly acquired sword.

"I wanted to hurry back with the tidings, but not until tonight could I find a boat and men who would cross."

"Is Asaf Khan planning to advance again?"

Jami shook his head idly.

"Nay, when he is not watching the men who guard the imperial treasure, he is quarreling with the nobles who still adhere to him. He has no stomach for more fighting. It was the Light of the Palace who went to the amirs and made them ashamed that they had not attempted to cross the river. She gave commands."

"And now?"

"Eh, my master, we will see what we will do."

Jami cocked his head and looked at me curiously. Near at hand we both heard the strumming of a rebec and the *clink-clink* of women's anklets. Some one was singing a song.

"What?" asked the boy, licking his fingers.

"Do not go near that place. It is Jahangir's, and the guards are wakeful."

It was an old custom of the Mogul court every week for the dancing girls, or a troupe of them, to come into the presence and bow down, to receive some gift. Jahangir had formed the habit of keeping some three or four to divert him.

"I will sleep." Jami picked out the quilt that lay nearest the entrance. "Hast thou aught of sugar, Ibn Athir?"

"Nor thou, of caste!"

JAMI chuckled and lay down, making much ado of taking off his sword and girdle.

"*Ohai*, my master, dost remember the evening when we first met by the blue mosque on the Lahore road? Thou wert then a wanderer without friends, and I a boy." His bright eyes considered me and he nodded. "Harken, Ibn Athir, bear thou my message to the khan, and accept of the reward."

Indeed, he knew very well that he would not be admitted to speak with Mahabat Khan, if he were not bound and held to be questioned.

"As to the reward," he added, "it is time and more than time thou hadst a servant and a few horses. Mahabat Khan is verily thy friend."

"Peace!" I assured him. "What profit is to be taken from friendship?"

Yet it seemed good to me to go to the Pathan with the boy's story, and I left Jami curled up asleep. It was no more than a bowshot to the tent of the khan, and I went slowly, deep in thought. Even at that hour the sun's heat lingered in the dry grass. Against the stars rose the

thin leafed stalks of bamboo. A dim gleam from the sickle of the new moon showed me the guards by the wall of the garden in which the Pathan's tent had been pitched.

They knew me and suffered me to pass, through a clump of cypresses to the edge of the trampled jasmine bed. The Pathan's tent was no richer than mine and he sat motionless on a carpet in front of it. Two soldiers standing beside him peered at me, but he knew me and cried out—

"O Hakim, pleasant be thy coming!"

Yet his voice lacked the hearty ring of a month ago, and he seemed weary. He ordered me to sit and sent a man for a tray of sherbet and fruit, listening while I told him Jami's story.

"Aye," he said at last, "many of the amirs have come from Asaf Khan's following to mine. They were at the durbar this evening."

He folded his arms, twisting his strong fingers in his beard, frowning. I saw then that he wore the long signet ring of the Mogul, and even in the faint glow of the night sky the diamonds and sapphires gleamed against his dark hair.

"They urged that an army be mounted and sent to seize the treasure before Asaf Khan might carry it into Persia. At the same time came Hindus of the Multan plain to render fealty and ask that the collection of the revenues from the Panjab be allotted them. By God, the spittle of wrangling fouled the carpet of our council! And lo, even at this hour another comes!"

A palanquin with four bearers had passed the outer guard post, and our two swordsmen went forward to learn what it might be. I rose to ask leave to depart, but the warrior lord bade me stay.

"Happiest of men art thou, O Hakim, who wanderest at will, guiding with thy hand the reins of one horse. For those who hold the reins of government, there is neither rest, nor ease of spirit."

Drawing in his breath suddenly, he sprang to his feet. Out of the palanquin stepped a *pateran*, moving gracefully toward us, veiled, her mantle cast about her shoulders.

"Protector of the poor," said the soldier who had accompanied her to us, "this one swears she is here at thy will."

"Get thee gone!" cried the khan harshly. "And thy fellow, and suffer no other to come in to us."

VERILY, in the starlight and veiled as she was, he had recognized the Light of the Palace, as I had known her by the proud carriage of her head and shoulders. Hours without number his eyes had dwelt upon her in the past, from afar.

"What madness is this!" he whispered fiercely the instant the guards had passed obediently beyond hearing, taking with them the litter and its bearers.

Perhaps we both doubted that this was really Nur-Mahal, or perhaps our hopes made us doubt, because the *firman* of her death had been signed these seven days.

"At thy summons, O Well-Beloved Lord*, am I here!"

When she spoke, we no longer doubted, for the voice of the Light of the Palace was like the chime of golden bells.

"The order for thy—" he blundered upon the word.

"For my execution hath been signed. That is known to me, Mahabat Khan."

Even defeated and forsaken by the half of the nobles, she had had the tidings from spies in bazaar and household. Nay, she quoted to us the next of the decree:

> "Because she hath displeased us by her ambition, causing coins to be minted with her likeness, and *firmans* signed with her name, and the conduct of the empire discussed and decided in her presence, she, the daughter of a Persian singing woman, a child abandoned on the caravan track, hath presumed too greatly, and is to be given to the sword of judgment."

"And is not this true?" demanded Mahabat Khan.

"True. And so am I here at thy summons." She had seen the signet ring and she laughed a little under her breath, turning toward me. "Wert in the right,

*—The meaning of "Mahabat Khan."

Ibn Athir; my place is with my lord husband."

The tall Pathan, hands thrust into his girdle, made answer without mercy.

"Harken."

Beyond the brush of the garden stood the pavilion of the Mogul and little bursts of laughter could be clearly heard, and the voice of a singing girl.

"Others are in thy place, besides thy lord husband," he said.

Nur-Mahal fingered the dancing girl's scarf that had helped to disguise her within the palanquin.

"Not so, Mahabat Khan! Many days hath Jahangir spent with his idlers and slaves, but I alone know his weakness, his failing health. For years I have ministered to him, and none can stand in that place."

"Thou art clever," he growled.

"As I have need to be."

"And faithless."

"But not to him."

The Pathan bent, to look full into her dark eyes, and she did not flinch.

"God alone knows whether that be true. Jahangir hath set his feet in the wrong path. He tortures his nobles, or buys them. He lacks heart and is not fit to command an army in the field. In the last days I have seen this."

"And not before now?"

"Nay, how was I to know?"

"Nor did the other amirs know." The Light of the Palace flung back her head, pressing both hands to her forehead. "I—I have kept them from knowing. How often have I sat at Jahangir's side at durbars when his wits were muddied? Aye, thy *firman* spoke the truth; I have tried to rule his subjects, so that his weakness should not be known."

MAHABAT KHAN uttered an exclamation and turned, to stride back and forth between us. And I thought of the morning and evening audiences in which Jahangir had barely shown himself to his court—a glittering and remote form, to be greeted and gifted. I thought of the chain of mercy, the gold bells that announced a suppliant, bells that the Light of the Palace could hear.

"What matter now?" he cried under his breath. "Between us the sword has been drawn."

"Aye, now." The Light of the Palace bent her head, rousing to look about the garden. "Rememberest thou, O my khan, a garden like to this and three children, thou and Jahangir and I, when he was prince and thou his playmate, and I a foundling of the caravan paths? We had two doves, and Jahangir gave them to me to hold and one escaped; the other I tossed into the air. Jahangir was angered, because he had been tormenting the doves, and that was why I freed them."

The Pathan checked his stride at a sudden thought.

"And by whom was Man Singh put to shame?"

"Tell me this, O my Khan, is thy mind firm? Am I to die?"

He caught his breath at that, devouring her with his eyes, his hand closing and unclosing upon the hilt of his sword. Then he nodded.

"If so," responded Nur-Mahal after a moment, "I can say that I had no part in thy cousin's torment. It was a whim of my husband's when he was in his cups. For he feared thee, as I did."

"With good reason. For now is our strife ended."

"And the decree written."

Defeated in the field of battle, she had come alone and without defenders, to play another part. I wondered whether she meant to throw herself at the feet of the Pathan, or whether she was in reality, resigned to death.

"By the Resurrection and by the hour when our deeds shall be weighed against our naked souls," cried Mahabat Khan, "I swear that Jahangir has not been threatened. Of his own will he signed the *firman!*"

Just for an instant she caught her breath and swayed upon her feet. Then she closed her eyes and responded quietly—

"Wilt thou suffer me to speak with Jahangir alone—now?"

I looked at Mahabat Khan. If he allowed her to talk with Jahangir, nothing was more certain than that the idle and capricious Mogul would change his mind and cling to Nur-Mahal as in the past. And if Jahangir publicly countermanded the *firman* and shielded her, Mahabat Khan might not put her to death without blame.

"Why come to me?" he said, musing.

"Nay, art ruler of India!"

"I? God knows I seek no throne!"

"Who puts foot in the stirrup must mount to the saddle." She looked at him gravely and stretched forth her hands. "Suffer me to go to my husband."

The Pathan began again to pace to and from between us, with bent head. And this I took for a sign that he would not grant her request. But then the silence of the garden was broken by the twanging of a dulcimer, yonder where lay the Mogul and his companions. A voice shrilled out a snatch of song, without sweetness or melody:

"My heart is like a rosebud spotted with wine—
Lo, when my petals have fallen, I am thine!"

Again the lute twanged, and laughter resounded. Mahabat Khan ceased his pacing and stood, grimly silent. A dozen voices of young girls seized on the refrain—

"My heart is like a rosebud—ai-ai-ai!"

Mahabat Khan raised his head, as if goaded into speech.

"It is time to make an end. Our strife has come to this point; it is thy death or mine. I will summon my men."

He raised his hands to strike them together, when Nur-Mahal seized his wrists, and cried softly:

"Nay, I will not have their hands upon me. Let it be by thy sword—here—now."

Indeed she knew that if he gave her to the keeping of his guards, he did not mean her to see another sun. At her touch he shivered, looking down upon her dark head, and now she spoke without hope, or cunning, but with the fierce eagerness of one who casts off old bonds.

"That *firman* lied! O blind that thou art! Have I struggled during these years for myself? Thou hast no child, Mahabat Khan, but I have a daughter, who—" she ceased and raised her head proudly, lest we think she begged for mercy.

But in that moment of silence I thought of Nur-Mahal in the howdah of the wounded elephant, shielding the young girl with her body from the flying arrows, intent on binding up the scratch that had pained the child. Surely Nur-Mahal was fearless and surely she loved her daughter. These few words of hers were naught but truth.

Then she sighed and smiled up at the tall Pathan.

"Does my face trouble thee. I will veil it—thus may thy stroke be swift and sure!"

Drawing a fold of the light mantle from her left shoulder, she held it over her head, her slender arm gleaming in the starlight. Motionless she stood, that faint scent of dried rose leaves clinging to the air about her.

Mahabat Khan laid his hand upon his sword hilt and half drew the blade. The muscles of his face twitched and his eyes glowed like embers beneath black brows.

And lo, my eyes beheld a strange thing. The woman, standing erect and tranquil, seemed at peace and joyous, while the man, his hand clenched upon the steel, his face tormented, was in an agony of spirit.

Only for an instant. Then his arm thrust down—the sword was rammed back into its scabbard, and he folded his arms.

"Go to the Mogul. I give thee life, Nur-Mahal."

WE SAT together, the Pathan and I, until the seventh hour of the night. The men at the garden entrance changed post with other guards, but the two at the tent had been sent to escort the Light of the Palace. It was quiet among the

jasmine beds, and a slight breeze stirred the cypresses. The revelry in the imperial pavilion had ceased.

Mahabat Khan was sunk in reverie, and by degrees his brow cleared. When the cymbals struck for the seventh hour he reached out his hand and ate some of the dates that had remained untasted upon the tray.

"Eh, Ibn Athir," he said. "Mount thy horse and go."

The glitter of the precious stones in the signet ring caught his eye, and he drew it from his finger, weighing it in the palm of his strong hand.

"Come," I said then, "with me."

"Whither?" he smiled.

"To a ship. A little voyage and we can reach the land of Athir that is my land. There the horses are excellent, and the folk of the desert are hospitable. Thou canst draw thy reins at will, to north or south."

Verily in that moment something came into my spirit—a longing to see my people again and wander with the sheep and the herds.

"Why?" he asked again.

I made bold to voice my thought. Mahabat Khan was an upright man, a daring man, and a companion to be desired.

"It will happen in this place that Jahangir will forgive Nur-Mahal and she will regain her influence over him and his nobles. She will contrive to set him free from thy restraint, and thy influence will be lost. What then of thee?"

He swept his arm toward the silent camp.

"I can not leave my followers." And after a moment he smiled. "Thou art a true prophet, Ibn Athir, and—having made enemies in this court—'tis best for thee to depart while the way is open." He thrust the ring into his girdle and rose. "I serve the salt. And they have need of me. They may send me to the frontier with my cavalry."

And this thought pleased him, for he stretched forth his arms and breathed deep, as if casting a burden from his shoulders. To the guard post he walked with me, and lifted his hand in farewell. I watched his tall figure moving with its long, noiseless stride toward his tent in the deserted garden, among the shadows.

The warriors, newly arrived at this post, were looking at the palanquin that stood where it had been left by its bearers.

"Eh, Hakim," said one, "what was the woman who went in to the lord *bahadur* in the last hour?"

"Some say," whispered another, "that she was the empress, but this is the litter of a dancing girl, a shameless one."

I considered this in my mind, wondering what would be best to say.

"She was the mother of a child," I made response, "come to beg of the lord *bahadur*."

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

Pilgrims' Progress

SOME months ago Albert Richard Wetjen and James Stevens shipped on a freighter bound for the Argentine. Stevens sent a farewell note to Camp-Fire as their ship drifted down Grays Harbor; Wetjen sends the first tidings of their arrival on the Plata.

The trip progresses magnificently so far. No rough weather. Sunshine, heat, flies, mosquitoes and so forth, but no fever or such. The Argentine's an amazing country, a second United States in the making. It's nearly all British capital down here, the railways, power plants and such being run by English concerns; but up in Brazil the situation is beginning to reverse itself and American capital plays an important part.

We met about every one in Buenos Aires worth meeting. We went up the Plata River to a small town of 8000 named Villa Constitucion where they have eight or nine murders a week. The English heads there make their cocktails in liter bottles and compound them of equal parts of brandy, whisky, gin, vermouth and port wine. After six, no man can stand, unless he has been raised on such a conglomeration from birth.

Going up to Villa, by the way, we got stuck on a mud bank and had to wait for a *pampero* to come along and blow us off. This sounds like bunk, a wind blowing a ten thousand ton inert mass off the mud, but it actually happened. In ten minutes from a dead calm the wind had raised waves several feet in the river and was making the ship stagger. They tell me the depth of the river literally depends on the wind, which blows the water away from the channel or piles it up.

Jim's written a humorous diary of the trip that ought to be a knockout. He's an example of how a lumberjack suffers when out of his environment. It's really been sad the way the sailors have been kidding him, telling him about iceberg sharks, blind albatross and so forth.—DICK WETJEN.

Skeena River

Bitterly, bitterly, and pitilessly flows
The swift gray caravan of homing snows.

—NOEL STEARN

Prisoners in Siberia

IT IS little wonder that these unfortunates welcomed the more prosperous Allied guards, as described from first hand experience in Major Wheeler-Nicholson's story.

The item in Camp-Fire in the April 1st issue of your magazine about the one volume library found in an old tin can, interested me very much. Although *Adventure* is supposed to be a man's magazine and I do not happen to belong to the male sex, I derive a great deal of enjoyment out of it.

Apropos of Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's story "Lost Legions" which appeared in the March 15th issue, I have the diary of one of my cousins who was a prisoner in Tschita, Siberia, for five years. When my cousin returned to Prague from Siberia

in the spring of 1920, he had aged more than twenty years. His return was so slow that it took him five months. To this was added two weeks quarantine for typhoid during which time he was cared for in his cousin's home at Budweiss while some one went to Prague to prepare his mother for the great change she would find in him. For he looked filthy, lousey, wild and half mad. He had become very bald and the fringe of hair that was left was all gray.

According to this diary, bread was a very great delicacy. As the writer says: "Our rations consist mainly of corn beef, soup, tea, sugar and *zwieback*. We receive rations only once a day, sometimes at five in the morning, and sometimes not until eight o'clock at night. Sometimes we get soup and meat and some times only soup." He was mobilized to the Galician Front on March 23rd, 1915, and was taken prisoner on the 3rd of April. He says: "The first day we had nothing to eat all day; the second we received half rations, the third day at five in the morning we had a little soup and a little meat. Not until today did we receive enough bread and soup to allay our hunger." He was more fortunate than the others for he had a little money and some cigarets too, but he writes of the others: "There is great want among the soldiers (prisoners) and they sell everything they have for a shameful price. Good blankets sell for 1 kronen and army tents for 6 shilling. Quite as great as the lack of food is the the lack of cigarets."

The line of march after they were taken prisoners made it necessary for them to camp at night on refuse heaps along the highroads of Galicia. The roads themselves were strewn with filth and refuse of all kinds. From Prework the prisoners entrained for Moskow and during this part of the trip the writer complains of the monotony of the journey. At Moskow however this was all changed, for his companions from thence were ignorant, noisy, quarreling peasants, whom he regarded with contempt and disgust. Living in daily contact with these his contempt changed to pity and at the end of a week or ten days he records in his diary that he is acting as mediator in all their quarrels, for they regard him as a wise man and that he has taken over the division of their food.—MARGARET JUNG.

Greetings From Norway

OUR VIKING cousin hones for Ike Harper.

I will write my yearly letter asking for a copy of the index for 1927.

The little friendly contest about what stories are most popular I will not partake in. Firstly because I'm not sure my letter will reach you in time and secondly because I've heard about something called "the right of the minority."

I think most of your authors are "jolly good fellows," even if three or four of them are my favorites, namely: Arthur O. Friel, Gordon MacCreagh, Talbot Mundy, Leonard Nason, Thomson Burtis and W. C. Tuttle. Well, say six, then,

One story I'll mention however, as the very best I've read by it's author: Tuttle's "Ten Points for Piperock." I've reread that story time and again and each time enjoyed it thoroughly. If Mr. Tuttle *knew* how I long for renewing the acquaintance with Ike Harper & Co., he would write one for my sole benefit, I'm sure. *Kindly tell him,* I should like the old days back, when Ike made Yeller Rock County uncertain in each alternate issue!

A hobby of mine is motorcycle racing, and I'm sure many of your readers have the same hobby.

With these lines I finish, sending greetings to all who wish to receive same.—THOR HALVORSEN, Oslo.

To the Highest Bidder

WHOEVER offers the most—in money, or in service to which the magazines will be put—please communicate with Comrade Hitchcock.

I have all issues of *Adventure* complete from October 10, 1923, up to the latest. They are in very good condition, clean and no torn covers. Could you please let me know a way I could dispose of them altogether?—PAUL B. HITCHCOCK, 618 S. Downing St., Piqua, Ohio.

Foster-Harris

"BOOM," his first story in *Adventure*, brings our fellow editor from Texas to the Camp-Fire. Yes, that's his whole, and real, name.

Once upon a time, when I was a news correspondent in an oil boom section for a press association and sundry newspapers, I wrote a yarn about various peculiar happenings in one of the boom towns. It was a true story. However, the next day after the thing came out several large, rough persons from the town concerned arrived in the office very anxious and willing to wallop tar and tarnation out of the egg responsible. They would have done it, too, except that there were several more bruisers present on the truth and light side of the argument.

Incidents such as this bring out one's Scotch blood and teach one to be much more carefuller. So: I understand, on good authority, that I was born in the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory and that my right name is Foster-Harris. Both surnames, which makes me one of these hyphenated Americans, but a 200 per center, since it's 100 per cent. American on both sides.

Not being an Indian, unfortunately, I didn't qualify for any Osage oil lands or allotments.

My Dad is an oil man, and I've been around oil fields, wildcats, boom towns, and similar scenery quite a bit. Was exposed to a petroleum geology

education, but must have been naturally immune or something, probably just not very bright, because I landed *pronto* in the newspaper game, starting in a daily newspaper cub reporter and ending up an oil paper editor. Handle the editorial desk for *Western World*, oil and mining paper at present.—FOSTER-HARRIS.

Emeralds

A NUMBER of readers were interested in the search for the Mexican gems described by C. R. N. in a recent issue. At least a dozen seekers after adventure have offered to go along with him; but it seems he must have started on his way, since letters forwarded to the address he gave have been returned unclaimed.

Comrade Devine has some corrections and interesting information to offer, concerning the stones and where they have been found.

The writer says:

"—— the only place on earth where emeralds have ever been found is Colombia—"

The writer is mistaken. Emeralds have been found in Upper Egypt, also in and near Tokovo or Tokovoja and Ekaterinberg, in the Ural mountains in Russia. Also in Habachthal in the Tyrol, also in North Carolina and in Brazil. They are still found in all these places. They are said historically to have been found in ancient times in India, Siam, and Africa south of the Egyptian empire.

Emeralds are beryls. They are the same chemical composition as aquamarine and golden beryl and morganite. Beryl may be, in color, transparent to opaque and of blue, green, yellow, rose red or color called white. Also there is a beryl known as heliodor which is found in southwest Africa. When there is a trace of chromium in the stone it is green and is called emerald. The stone is not brilliant. It is transparent. Many emeralds are found near Muzo in Colombia. Rose red beryls are found near San Diego, California. Wherever there is beryl it may be green and then is an emerald. It is softer than zircon, diamond, ruby or topaz. Beryls are sometimes very large. One found in Brazil weighed 243 pounds. It came from Morambaya, Minas Geraes, south of the Amazon. Beryls are also found in Maine, Madagascar, Connecticut, Colorado, the island of Elba and the Mourne Mountains of Ireland.

Your correspondent should read at least "Gems and Gem Materials", written by Edward Henry Kraus of Michigan University at Ann Arbor, Michigan and published by McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York. He has much to learn of emeralds. The emerald yields to synthetic treatment; that is, by heat, chips, dust and fragments of emeralds are fused, allowed to cool and are then recut as gems; and they are genuine in every regard, as beautiful as the best, free from imperfections and flaws, and can be purchased for about $3.00 a carat. I can furnish addresses of dealers of them in New York which is the greatest gem center of the world. Any thing concerning gems can be learned at the Metropolitan Museum there where the different gems are shown at their best.

Nevertheless your correspondent is interesting, and I enclose a copy of this letter which I hope you will send him. When he is ready to make the trip it is possible I could go, and if not barred would enjoy going. It would not be exactly a coddling experience but the wanderlust is gripping me. He may be able to estimate approximately the expense. With proper equipment reduced to a minimum after discarding every possible thing that could be omitted, the trip might be made. Food should not be necessary. Flint and steel could serve as matches. Clothing could be one suit and underclothes the same. Gloves and a little silk mosquito netting, firearms and ammunition, knives, small things for trade with natives, the best possible shoes, perhaps with artificial soles and women's high stockings, also good puttees, perhaps good serapes; and would want very little else to get along provided he treated natives properly and did not become fresh with females, which is often a source of difficulty.

As to death, "Azrael has us all by the heels", and it is lurking in the streets here as it is in the jungles and the unexplored places. I would like to hear from your correspondent. My Spanish is very limited indeed and I do not know about getting in and out of Mexico; but if one was in, he would not be bothered by officials.—JOHN DEVINE, Vincennes, Indiana.

Another Newcomer

WE WELCOME a brand new author to our writers' brigade. Comrade Gery is an Oxford man, now in Saskatchewan—and his story in this issue is his second to be published.

We wish him more than tenderfoot's luck.

I am very much a beginning writer, and "Four-Times-He" is my second venture in print—the first being one of the prize winners in a Canadian magazine contest last year. I am an Englishman, six years over here, and with the usual war service—including some time with the Lahore Division of the Indian Corps in France in '15, whence some of the background in "Four-Times-He". At present I am languishing in the teaching trade, at this writing in a village well on the way to the edge of civilization (but by no means wild and woolly, thank you); and I have just completed a couple of years in a frontier city of three thousand people.

You won't want any "chronique scandaleuse" from me, and I'll close what must appear a vilely dull letter by making my best bow and retiring out of the firelight to listen in to what you real writers have to say.—R. V. GERY.

"Mosquito" for "hawg"

IN SOMEWHAT roundabout way, geographically, one comrade in Central America offers another comrade in Central America a bit of etymology.

My father, Theodore Petit, of Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic, is an enthusiastic reader of the stories in your magazine, which I have recently been sending him from here, and he writes me with reference to a letter of inquiry which he has seen among the Camp-Fire letters, from Howard X. Whitener, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, asking, among other queries, where the "Mosquito" Indians of that section got the word "*chancha*" for hog.

He says (my father does) that he does not know if the question has been answered by the Ask Adventure staff, or by some other reader, but thinks that possibly it has not.

On his suggestion I am writing to advise Mr. Whitener, through your department, that "*chancha*" is probably a deteriorated form of the Spanish dialectical word "*choncho*," a colloquialism signifying the young of swine, especially if plump; and which, in its turn, is derived from the pure Spanish word "*rechoncho*," meaning chubby, or corpulent.

The consonancy is evident, excepting that the "Mosquito" Indians, in this connection, "go the whole hog."

If you will print this explanation perhaps Mr. Whitener will see it among the Camp-Fire letters.

—J. M. PETIT

Free Speech—1928

IN NEW YORK State a young man named David Gordon has been sentenced to what may be three solid years in the Reformatory, for writing a poem judged obscene. It was not good poetry; and it lacked much, considered as a Demosthenean Philippic. By the time this paragraph can appear in print, more effective agencies doubtless will have settled the case of Mr. Gordon in some manner more consonant with common sense, but for myself I simply find the whole thing next to impossible to believe. Just *where* are we going in this modern world of ours, if we can shut up in jail—in the company of petty thieves, degenerates, procurers — an eighteen-year-old student of the University of Wisconsin, just because he went a little wild on one occasion? For writing some inelegant words on a typewriter, one night when he was soreheaded, and at odds with poverty and his own lot?

There is no use thrashing over his case, which in substance is plain silly. By now the whole country knows the details. Yet I wish to point out again that this was no vicious moron who needed restraint. Even if he proved himself no poet, he was a boy—perhaps four years out of knickers —who had *earned* a scholarship at the University of Wisconsin donated by that splendid authoress, Zona Gale!

In more than one way Mr. Gordon has proved himself brilliant and of great promise. *What* are we doing to him, all on account of one wordy overflow of boyish bitterness?

Are we offering him a chance at better balance, greater strength? Are we adapting a sharp intelligence to the best purposes of humanity—by forcing him to learn the jargon and hellish habits of thieves?

I do not know Mr. Gordon and I have seen only one copy of the publication in which his effusion appeared. Yet this happening certainly makes me wonder just what *can* be my own responsibilities as an editor!

Am I guiltless if something rotten appears in *Adventure?* Should the author be thrown forthwith into the hoosegow, and I go free? Somewhere in a great Book I seem to remember one of the calmest and most beautiful utterances of all time:

"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. . ."

If every American author appearing in *Adventure* were to be judged and jailed on the strength of the most violent or most erotic ninety words he or she ever wrote—and *mailed*—almost all the stories in every issue could be signed by numbers, instead of names. Why, shucks, show me a real writer who never delivered himself of *anything* violent or nasty—and I'll show you a pomegranate without seeds!

—ANTHONY M. RUD

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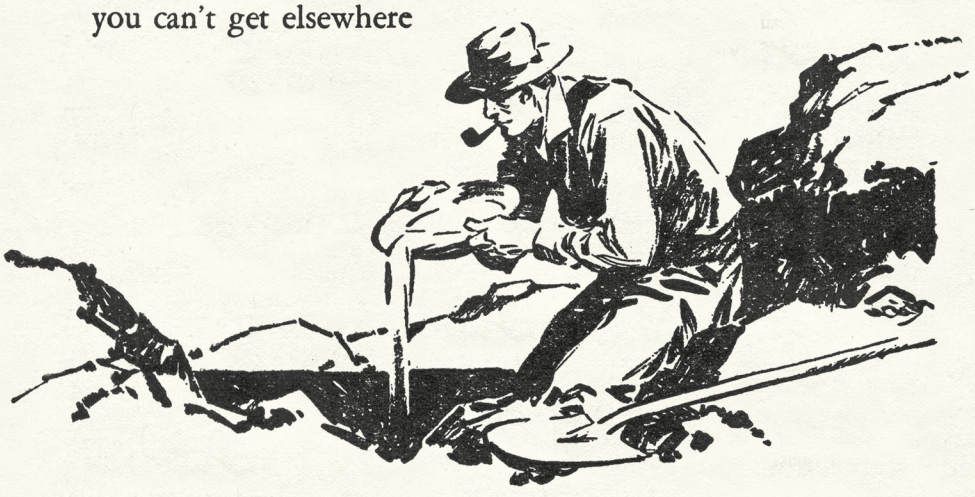

Black Magic

THE EVER fascinating subject of Haitian obeah, whose mysteries have long baffled incredulous white men no less than ignorant blacks. The religion of voodoo.

Request:—"I read in a newspaper that voodooism and obeah were still practiced in the interior of Haiti. I wish you would tell about this kind of a religion or whether it may be."—C. CASE, Los Gatos, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—Much has been said of the weird, mysterious rites of voodoo and obeah in Haiti, many falsehoods have been told and many truths denied, but that both voodooism and obeah are prevalent there, there is no denying. These are not, however, confined to Haiti, for they are rampant in all the islands where the negro race predominates, more especially in the French colonies, and in the British colonies that once were French. There is a vast difference between voodooism and obeah, however, although most people confuse the two and have a vague idea of the real meaning of each term.

Voodooism is a religion brought over with the negro slaves from Africa; it is a form of devil worship, in which the principal deity is the Great Green Serpent who is represented by a high priest and priestess known as "Papa Loi" (pronounced as if spelled Loo-ah) and "Maman Loi." In its most fanatical form, voodooism requires human sacrifices, which are accompanied by cannibalistic feasts and unspeakable orgies, but it is doubtful if in any of the islands, with the possible exception of the interior of Haiti, it is carried to such extremes. As a rule, even in Haiti, the "goat without horns"—as the devotees call the child to be sacrificed—is replaced by a young kid, but even in this modified form it is a most debasing, disgusting, savage institution.

OBEAH, on the other hand, is merely witchcraft, with no religious significance whatever; and which, in its most malignant form, consists of poisoning with devilish ingenuity, and, in its commonest and least virulent form, amounts merely to a lot of nonsense, hocus-pocus and mummery. But, to the negroes, obeah is a very real and awful thing, and the obeah men and women, or witch-doctors are beings of supernatural power and persons to be dreaded and propitiated.

Such a firm hold has obeah upon the people, that many of them actually are killed by fright produced by the "spells" of the obeah men.

And the belief in obeah is not confined to the lower classes, or to the ignorant laborers, for many merchants and planters, even officials, who are intelligent, well-to-do, educated men, are as firm believers in obeah as the most superstitious peasants, and they would not dream of undertaking any serious matter without first consulting their favorite obeah man or woman.

The worst phase of this nonsensical, ridiculous, despicable black art is the fact that, in order to produce the most powerful of their "charms" and nostrums, the obeah men must employ certain parts of human beings, and to procure them they often kidnap and murder children.

Every effort has been made by the authorities to suppress obeah in the islands. Men and women are convicted, fined and imprisoned constantly for practicing the art, and executions are not unusual when murder can be proved; but still it thrives and holds full sway, for to the negroes such attempts to stamp out obeah proves its genuineness.

As one prominent West Indian merchant put it, "There must be something in it, if the Government tries to stop it." And, incredible as it may seem there *is* something in it, for it is an indisputable fact that many of the obeah men and women possess strange, incomprehensible powers—hypnotic maybe—but inexplicable and, to the natives, supernatural. Many such happenings have come under my personal observation; reliable and truthful Englishmen and white West Indians can vouch for many others, and volumes might be written on the unsolved mysteries and absolutely baffling occurrences which have taken place, and still take place, where obeah is practiced.

Pistols

ACCURACY and range versus barrel length.

Request:—"In a pistol or revolver will a 6-inch barrel shoot farther and more accurately than a 4-inch barrel? What is the longest barrel you would advise for a .38 S. & W. Special or a .38 Colt New Service Revolver? Is this also true of rifles that a long barrel will shoot farther and more accurately that a short barrel?—P. H. HEALY, Purcell, Okla.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—I believe that any barrel with sufficient length to cause complete combustion of the explosive employed, whatever type it may be, will shoot a bullet about as far as a long one, granted everything to be favorable as regards conditions. I recently made a long shot with my .38 Special 4-inch Smith & Wesson that surprised even myself.

As to accuracy of fire and grouping of shots, that's another matter; I know of no one who does a great deal of target shooting who uses less length of barrel than 6-inch, and the most accurate target revolver I possess, a .44 Smith & Wesson Russian Single Action, has an 8-inch barrel.

Of course a long barrel requires less elevation for similar distance than does the short barrel, as my experiments seem to show. Like the carbine and rifle for the same cartridge, you know; we consider that the 20-inch carbine barrel has 80 feet per second less velocity than the 26-inch rifle, say both being selected for the .30-30 cartridge.

But I must confess that I prefer a barrel of five inches in length for my own use. This in the .38 Special, as it shoots well enough, and carries and swings a bit easier. I have the .45's with 5½ and 6½-inch barrels; and when carrying one, generally select the 5½-inch one.

But I believe you'd better select the 6-inch .38 Special, unless you wish to carry it concealed all the time; our local officers mostly use the 4-inch .38 Special in a shoulder holster, and like the length well for their work, which is all short range.

Mr. Eric Johnson of the Hoffman Arms Co., Armdore, wrote once that the best shooting he did with an experimental .22 barrel was after it had been cut to 18 inches from 30 inches, an inch at a time being removed, and groups shot after each cut. I have always considered the short barrel all right for accuracy, and it certainly balances to suit *me* better, but most prefer the longest possible.

Camp Bread

RECEIPTS for the oven baked or ovenless loaf.

Request:—"What are a few simple receipts for camp bread?"—J. H. DOYLE, Los Angeles, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Horace Kephart:—There are many kinds of camp bread. Which is best depends on circumstances, as, for example, how much time you can spare for the business.

Assuming that you have only half an hour, and you have an oven of some sort, make biscuits as follows:

Mix well together

1 pint flour,
2 heaping teaspoonfuls baking powder,
½ teaspoonful salt.

Into this, with tips of fingers, work 2 heaping tablespoonfuls of lard, crisco or bacon grease, until there are no lumps left. Then stir in, a little at a time, about ¼ pint water. Some kinds of flour require a little more. Anyway, enough water to make a soft dough that can be handled. Milk, instead of water, makes a richer dough. Keep outside of dough floured so it does not stick to the pan or your hands. Then with a bottle or peeled stick, roll out the dough to a sheet and cut out biscuit with a can top. Have bake pan moderately greased and oven hot. Biscuit should be about ¾ inch thick when cut out. Bake 20 to 25 minutes in a reflector or 10 to 15 minutes in closed oven.

If you have no oven, use more water in dough and 3 tablespoons lard. Mix dough thin enough to smooth with knife: that is, a thick, stiff batter. Heat frying pan and grease it. Pour the dough into it. Hold pan high above fire until dough has risen to double its original thickness; then lower it and bake until under side of loaf is brown, shaking pan occasionally to keep loaf from sticking. When one side is done, turn and brown the other. Time, 25 to 30 minutes.

Sailing Ships

THE GENERAL principles that underly the rigging of sailpieces on various kinds of vessels.

Request:—"Could you be so kind as to give me an opinion on the following points? I have in mind vessels meant to dodge handily in shallow waters.

1. What are the relative advantages of a schooner and a topsail schooner? Is the latter better before the wind, and vice versa? Does the topsail bear down the head?

2. What are the advantages of schooner, brig and brigantine? Does the brigantine successfully compromise the advantages of the former two?

3. What are the relative advantages of the schooner and lugger (standing lug) in craft of 100 tons or less?

4. Does a standing lug lighten the bow?

5. The term *falouche* seems to be Louisiana patois; not French, Spanish, or English. It definitely does not mean felucca. Do you know if it means the New Orleans lugger?

6. The Spanish used the term 'pilot boat' in the form 'paile bot,' evidently referring to a type of vessel, rather than to a function, since the boats they so describe were not so used. What rig would they probably mean? Always a schooner? Sometimes a sloop, cutter, or yawl? Might it refer to size, tonnage, or draft?

7. Did the polacre differ from a ship or brig except in having one-piece masts?

8. Can you recommend a handbook in which I could find the answers to questions of a similar nature? All I have at hand is Bradford's 'Glossary of Sea Terms,' and some tracts on navigation."

—XYZ, Aurora, Ill.

Reply, by Capt. Dingle:—1. In general, any square rig presents a more efficient sail spread for running before the wind than a fore-and-after. Unless the masts are raking forward, a square topsail should lift rather than bury the head. Of course, when the wind is more than a topsail wind the ship will "root" anyhow until sail is reduced. A fore-and-after always works to windward better than a square rigger. And in windward work, close; that is, a topsail schooner need not use her square topsail; though even then her yards will hamper her somewhat.

2. The brigantine was probably evolved more in the effort to reduce crews than anything else. (Similarly to the bark from the ship.) As above stated, the differences between square and fore-and-aft rig are chiefly dependent upon prevailing winds. I have no doubt that given the same hull a brig would beat a schooner on almost any long ocean passage where winds ruled strong and free. But where the route lies close along a coastline, or against much head wind, the brig would never see the schooner's wake after the first day or so. Don't forget, however, that if you take a brig and a schooner of say three hundred tons each, the brig will need at least twice the crew, and in the event of mishap to rig, will cost four times as much to refit.

3. The lugger is less easy to handle for one thing. There have been luggers that would outsail any schooner, but when a certain size is reached—and 100 tons is big for a lugger—the shifting of the lugsail yard is heavy work. A schooner will tack herself. And in the matter of taking in or shortening sail, everything must come down into the lugger, while a schooner's decks keep reasonably clear.

4. If the masts are properly stepped, any forward sail ought to lighten the bow rather than depress it. In the lugger, more would depend on the stepping of the mast than anything else.

5. *Falouche* beats me. I never heard the word. Perhaps one of the *Ask Adventure* men doing the Gulf States might know.

6. I'm afraid the Spanish use of the term "pilot" boat also stumps me. You see, pilot boats have always been rigged and built to suit local conditions and usages. It could be any rig. There have been pilot brigs, schooners, cutters, luggers, feluccas, simple pirogues, catamarans—almost every rig adapted to small craft. The Bermuda pilots go as far as a hundred miles offshore in rowing skiffs, with just a small sail rig to help them in running. For years the Calcutta pilots were stationed in a brig. I scarcely believe in the case you state that the term could mean a type, unless used very loosely indeed.

7. There were too many differences about a polacre to set forth conveniently in a letter. Chiefly, the polacre varied in having squaresails on the mainmast and fore-and-aft sails on fore and mizzen. The fore-and-aft sails were lateen-slung to a fore-and-aft yard, while the square sails were bent to yards which lowered clear down to the next below. What I mean is, instead of the men lying out on footropes to reef or furl a topsail or topgallantsail (the highest in the rig), they stood on the topsail yard to handle the topgallant, and on the lower yard to handle the topsail, while the lower yard was lowered to the rails when the course had been hauled up in the brailes ready to furl or reef. In some of the French polacres all three masts were square rigged, however, though these also were handled as stated.

8. Handbooks giving reliable data on old sailing vessels have to be taken with care. So many have recently been published which are simply cribs from old ones, with sufficient of the new authors' own ideas inserted to remove the charge of stealing, and at the same time enough to generally botch up the book for all serious purposes. I have been hauled over the coals myself by readers who quoted some Johnny-Come-Lately's book to refute something in a story of mine. Any seaman of my age and service has come across plenty of text books on navigation and seamanship containing enough errors to put the combined fleets of the world on the beach. The best advice I can give you is that you

write to the Marine Research Society, Salem, Massachusetts, stating just the sort of information you want regarding rigs, etc., and they will send you a bulletin of their works. Some are fairly costly, but most are reliable.

Finally, I may say that as a general principle for your advice, the ideal sailing vessel would be one with all its sail in one piece, fore-and-aft. But you will readily see how impossible that is when the sail area reaches a certain size. And so the sails have been cut up into handy pieces. This, also, because when shortening sail, by dividing the area up it is always possible to keep enough sail set to have control of the ship, which is scarcely possible if the cloth is all in one patch. But if human effort had permitted it, and human commercial profits agreed with so many men involved, the real clipper would have been a fine hull rigged with one great sail slung to a long yard, which would trim fore-and-aft on a wind and run broad square off when before it.

Fox Farming

A VENTURE that repays well for time and care that must be alloted to it.

Request:—"1. I have read several articles and stories where fur farming is done on islands. They seem to favor the Pacific coast more than the Atlantic coast. I always thought that the Northeast was the ideal section of the country especially the islands in that section of the country, because of the Hudson Bay territory. Which do you consider the best? How are the islands obtained?

2. What do they feed foxes? I have read that they feed lots of salmon to them on the west coast.

3. How many litters of pups do they have a season? I understand it is the custom to mate high grade males with the poorer class of females.

4. How are they killed for the skinning? How is the skinning done? Some years ago I had done some skinning such as rabbits and coyotes for my own pleasure and for bounty.

5. How are the pelts cured? How do the trappers cure their pelts?"—PAUL STOETZEL, Omaha, Neb.

Reply, by Mr. Fred W. Bowden:—1. Islands make ideal places for fox farming. Except for the fact that in the winter it is apt to be mighty lonesome. You are wrong on the location, as the center of the black fox farming industry is at the present time located on Prince Edward Island; that is where it had its start, and there are still more fox farms located there in a small area than any other place in the world, so far as I know. Not much difference as to location, I guess. However I notice that according to the price lists of furs as published in the papers the Northeastern furs command as good if not better prices than the Western pelts. There are any number of islands off the coasts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Maine, most of them privately owned, and which I should say could be leased or bought reasonably enough, and I should also say that any which you would consider suitable for the purpose of fur farming would be wooded, and have quite a lot of timber on them. In the locality I have mentioned the timber would be mostly spruce, pine and hemlock, with the usual hardwoods, where it had been closely cut off, and consisting of maple, birch, beech, etc.

2. Rabbits, partly cooked horse meat, partly cooked beef, beef livers and hearts partly cooked, oatmeal porridge, with the meat mixed in it, ground bone, some cooked vegetables. One of the things to watch out for is not to feed your foxes too much; this is important. You'll feed no salmon on the eastern coast; salmon are too valuable to feed to foxes here.

3. Usually one litter. From one to four in a litter. The latter custom is a mistake, you are sure to get a number of poor pups and throwbacks if you follow this custom. You can't be too careful about this matter, and remember it costs no more to raise good foxes than poor ones.

4. Usually by hitting on the nose with a club; there are various ways of slaughter, nearly every one has a different manner of doing this, probably the less said of some of the methods the better. The main thing is to accomplish the killing without injury to the pelt. If you have had experience in skinning rabbits the foxes should give you no trouble. The skinning can be summed up in a few words: DON'T CUT THE SKIN.

5. There are a number of ways of curing the pelts. I suggest that you get in touch with some good fur dealer, and ask him to send you his formula for treating the skins; the dealers are the ones who do the worrying in this matter, and it is important that the pelts reach the dealer in the condition which the trade demands, which is the reason I give you the above advice. Suggest that you get a copy of *Hunter, Trader, Trapper*, which always carries a number of ads of fur dealers.

Canoes

HOW to do a good reconditioning job.

Request:—"I would like to know what kind of varnish or paint I can use for reconditioning a sponson canoe and also some hints as to how I could go about it to do a good job?"—CHARLES C. JONES, Cumberland, Md.

Reply, by Mr. Edgar S. Perkins:—Use any good canoe enamel paint; Valspar varnish is one of the best and fine for canoes. Be sure to take all the old paint off and also the old varnish. This can be done with a strong solution of washing powder and a fine grade of steel wool; or with some paint remover and putty knife. If the filler is out of the canvas put another on before applying the paint; then if you care to cover the paint with a thin coat of varnish it will improve the looks of the paint job and make it more lasting.

The TRAIL AHEAD

The next issue of
ADVENTURE

Beginning

The Roaring Horn

By George Allan England

An exciting novel of a condemned windjammer and its shanghaied crew in the perilous, gale swept waters old salts called "the World's Worst Corner."

TWO COMPLETE NOVELETTES

The Thraldom of Singan

By Charles Gilson

As *Charles Cartwright* sat on the noisome dock of Singapore, observing the lights of the ships at anchor mirrored in the black oily waters, despair seized him, and he felt he was done—done. The East had got him, body and soul. And then, out of the dark, came the perfumed and silken woman with the great fear in her eyes, to beg his aid in breaking the chains of a terrible bondage.

The Duke and the Ducats

By Thomson Burtis

How *Tex MacDowell* and *Duke Daly*, of the Border Air Patrol, drop down for a little private business with the crooked boss of a booming Texas oil town.

And—*Other Good Stories*

By Order of Buck Brady, the story of a whittling sheriff, by W. C. Tuttle; The White Elephant, a story of the teak forests of Siam, by Clark Brockman; Especially Dance Hall Women, a lucky strike and a miner's loyalty, by Alma and Paul Ellerbe; The Man Who Hated Himself, a powerful tale of the cattle trails in the great blizzard of '86, by Walt Coburn; The Ice Goes Out, a story of Alaska, by Frank Richardson Pierce; In Line of Duty, a story of the War flyers, by H. P. S. Greene; Empty Bottles, a stranger at the One Way Thru Saloon, by Raymond S. Spears