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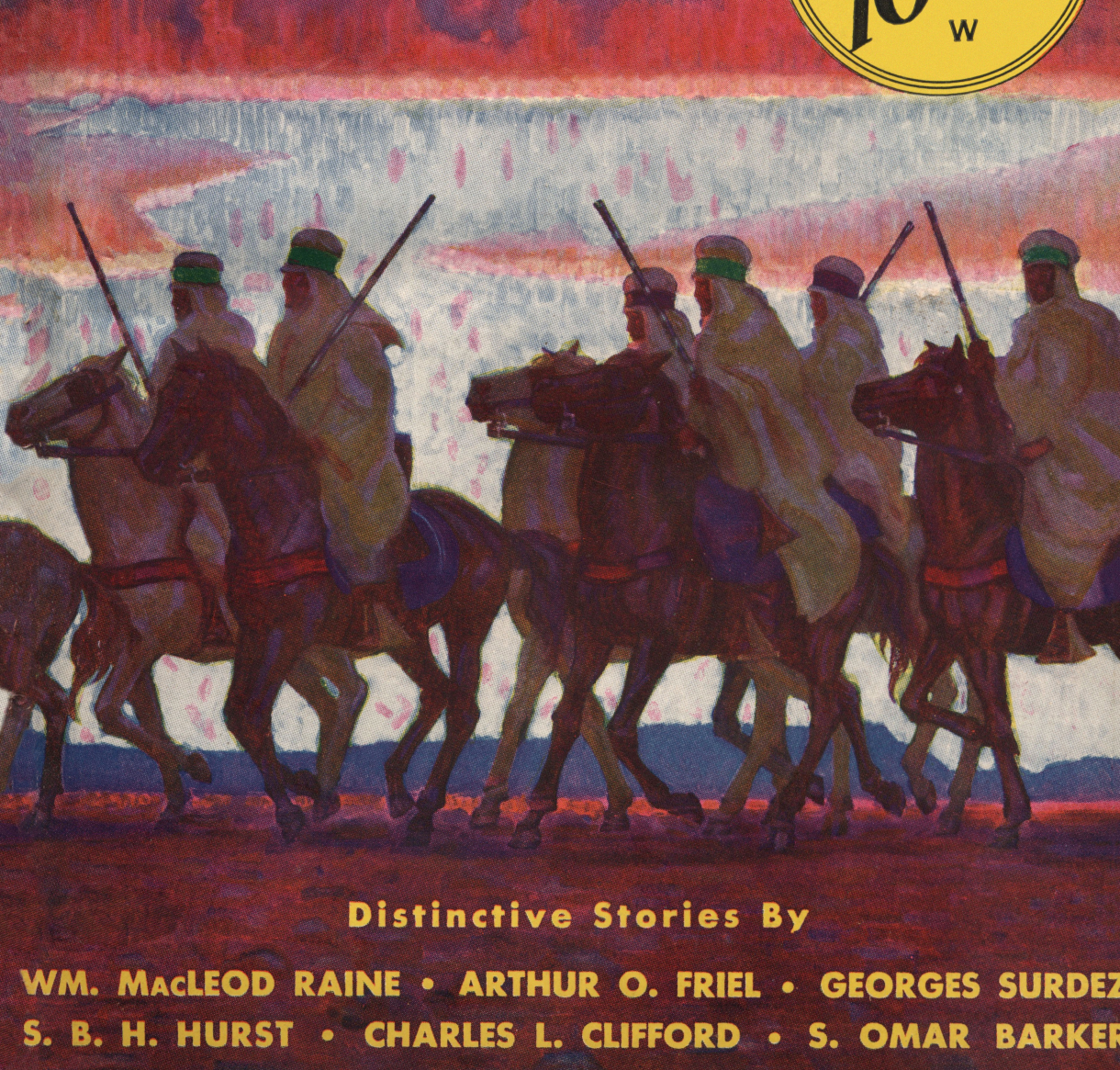

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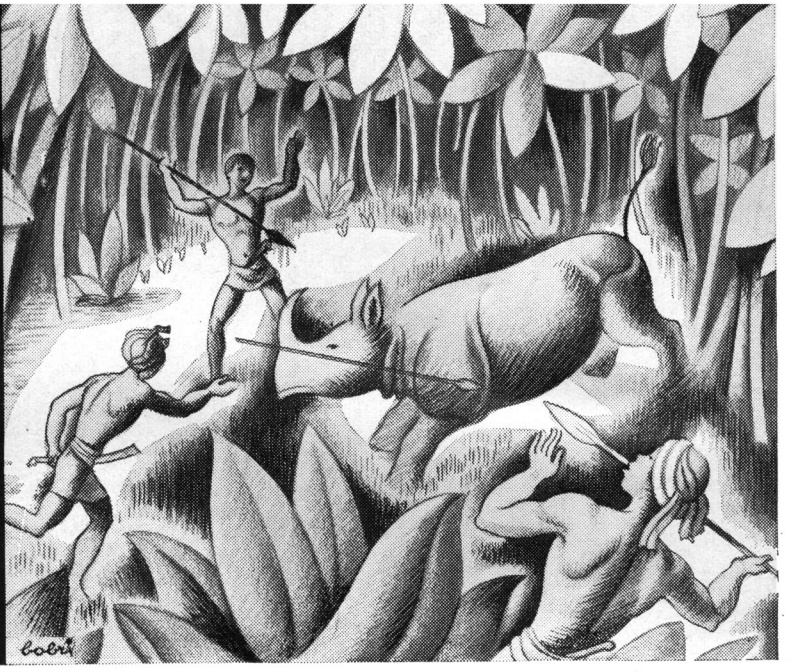

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1932
VOL. LXXXIV No. 1
for September 15th
A. A. Proctor
EDITOR

Cover Design by Hubert Rogers *Headings by Neil O'Keeffe*

Published twice a month by The Butterick Publishing Company, Butterick Building, New York, N. Y., U. S. A. Joseph A. Moore, Chairman of the Board; S. R. Latshaw, President; W. C. Evans, Secretary; Fred Lewis, Treasurer; A. A. Proctor, Editor. Entered as Second Class Matter, October 1, 1910, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Chicago, Illinois. Yearly subscription, $2.25 in advance. Single copy, Ten Cents. Foreign postage, $2.00 additional.

Once an OFFICER

By GEORGES SURDEZ

RALPH KENNEY, sergeant in the depot company at Krederville, joined a group of noncommissioned officers before the bulletin board outside the battalion office. As he had expected, he was scheduled to command one of the patrols which would strive to keep a reasonable measure of order and dignity; for the local police force would be inadequate to handle the situation.

Sacred traditions of the French Foreign Legion ordain that payday be celebrated boisterously; and the recent arrival in town of detachments fresh from prolonged sojourns in the Saharan outposts a few hundred miles southward complicated the problem. Kenney's turn at such assignments came often, for he paid thus for his good reputation.

He was not only tall, strong, impressive to look at and able to justify the impression when called upon, but he was known to be sober, even-tempered and reliable. He was rather handsome —clean shaven, blond, thirty-two years old—and had served in the corps more than six years.

"You're on patrol duty tonight, Raoul," one of his comrades addressed him. "Some tough guys in that returned outfit. They only had a few hours' liberty in Colomb-Béchar before entraining for this dump after nine months in the blockhouses, and they're primed to go off with a bang. At the very first arrest you make, it will start raining beer bottles and cobblestones. They're tough, let me tell you!"

"They don't eat cast iron, do they?" Kenney wondered sarcastically, in his accented, drawling French.

"Mean job, patrol duty, let me tell you. After going through the Riff campaign, Bibanes to Iskraten, unhurt, I got a cracked head while on police detail in Meknes one pay night. That was some evening! Guys were still fighting

in the streets of the *bousbir* at four in the morning; the emergency ward was overflowing."

The speaker interrupted his tale to address a young orderly, who had halted nearby.

"What do you want?"

"Sergeant Kenney."

"Here," Kenney said.

"Lieutenant Maillebois wants to see you at once."

"Where?"

"Company's office, Sergeant."

"What for?"

"Didn't say," the orderly replied over one shoulder.

One of the sergeants laughed.

"What will you bet it isn't to do you a favor? That little guy is a martinet."

"He won't bite me," Kenney retorted carelessly.

He surmised that the call was motivated by some minor matter of service, because the officer often needed information concerning the local routine which Kenney could supply. He strode the few yards to the office, smoothing his tunic carefully before entering.

Maillebois was termed a little guy because of his youth rather than his size. The lieutenant was not more than twenty-three, but he was as tall and broad as Kenney, though somewhat lighter in build. He was a very handsome fellow, obviously well bred; and the ribbons on his lightweight khaki tunic revealed that he had military qualities as well as social and educational achievements.

"You're slated for patrol duty tonight, Kenney?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"What's your beat?"

"European town until nine, reserved quarter later."

"Right." Maillebois consulted a sheet before him. "Kenney, you know Cherbacheff, Michel Cherbacheff?"

"Sergeant-Chief Cherbacheff, who was with Third Battalion of the Second Regiment a couple of years back? Sure, Lieutenant, I know him. Fine fellow."

"Fine fellow," Maillebois repeated with irony. "It so happens that he was reduced to corporal four months ago for conduct unbecoming a noncommissioned officer."

"Yes," Kenney admitted mildly, "he drinks a bit."

"I know the man. I sent him before the disciplinary council. You and he were firm friends?"

"The best, Lieutenant."

"Which means?"

"That his last sou and his last bottle of wine are mine, any time, anywhere, Lieutenant."

"That is fortunate," Maillebois said, smiling with both arrogance and tolerance. "Cherbacheff is reporting to this company, arriving on the night train. He has been active on the way down. I have telegraph reports. Shift your schedule so as to meet the train. He will be happy to shake hands with an old friend, with such a very close pal. He will not feel alone in a strange city."

"Understood, Lieutenant."

"There is a small matter, somewhat embarrassing to mention." Maillebois lifted one hand quietly, with a cold, amused smile. "He has misbehaved rather badly at every station on the way south, and he must be asked to spend the night in the lockup until an investigation clears him. Or the reverse. Oh, trifling incidents, such as breakage of government property, insults to officials and civilians, a cuff or two distributed at random."

"For an arrest, would it not be better—"

"Enough, Kenney." Maillebois tapped the table smartly. "To be serious: Cherbacheff is a reckless, violent man. He is aware that he will be placed under arrest when he lands here. He is the type to resist arrest, to make a public scandal. If he sees you, we may avoid that. I have great admiration for him as a soldier, regret the job of handling him at the end of one of his sprees. I have no choice. By selecting you I am doing him a favor."

"Understood, Lieutenant."

"Use force as a last resort. You may leave." Maillebois hesitated and added, "Two veterans such as you are should get along."

Kenney saluted and left the office moodily. It had not seemed possible that he could be mentioned in the same breath with Cherbacheff in point of age. Nevertheless, to a young man fresh from school, such as Maillebois, there might be small difference between a man of thirty-seven, with ten years of Legion behind him, and one of thirty-two serving through his seventh year. Again, it might be another manifestation of Maillebois's reported tactlessness.

The sergeant passed a large, muscular hand over his cheeks; his tough fingers felt the grit of sand and the creases of his hard, tanned skin near the mouth and eyes. As a matter of fact he was a veteran, had served in various armies one half of his life. He had run away from home at sixteen to enlist in the Canadian army for the World War. Later he had been a second lieutenant in the A.E.F. in France and still later a full fledged lieutenant with the Polish forces. After vain attempts to settle down, he had drifted until he had enlisted in the Legion.

In contrast with many others who made a mystery of their origin, whether such mystery was needed or not, Kenney did not conceal his past. He was now a Legionnaire because he had been born a professional soldier, an adventurer, as other men are born poets, musicians, painters or thieves. He was hiding from no one, from nothing. Serving under his real name, he received mail from his family regularly. Occasional drafts which were turned into a number of francs at the local branch of the Banque de l'Afrique du Nord proved that he had not enlisted for the soup bucket.

Kenney had met Cherbacheff three years before. They had served in the Riff and the Middle Atlas with the same section and had been inseparable. Cherbacheff was a Russian, born in Siberia, and had been a captain in the Imperial Guard, a major in Wrangel's White Army in Crimea. Where Kenney had plodded slowly in the Legion and held his gains, Cherbacheff, brilliant, with a solid military education and considerable field experience, had won swift promotion and been demoted as rapidly.

Many things there were in his friend's character of which Kenney did not approve. Cherbacheff, while not dishonest, could not be trusted with money. After two or three drinks his fortune belonged to all, and anything he could lay his hands on belonged to him. But he was a charming comrade when sober, and so superbly brave in action that all forgave him his outbursts. Kenney, like the majority of those who knew him, was under the sway of the Russian's mighty power of fascination.

He admired him for his recklessness, admired him for his grace of movement, for the long, supple fingers which plucked the strings of a guitar or broke a man's arm with equal ease.

"WHAT did Maillebois want with you?" one of the noncoms asked him when he reached the group before the Battalion Office.

"Said he wanted me to become a captain in three months," the sergeant explained. "Realizes that I am a smart guy, that I am being wasted messing about with you squareheads. He calls me officer material, that's all."

"Yes, he does!"

"Sure. By the way, who's on duty at the station when the train pulls in tonight? You, Haspel? You're not. I am. Ask the lieutenant for confirmation."

All understood at once and laughed.

"You've drawn Cherbacheff? They've been wiring battalion headquarters from every station along the line. Better take along a first aid kit. You'll need it before you tame him. Say, remem-

ber the time he broke a guy's leg in Sidi bel Abbes?"

Kenney shrugged but did not answer.

After the five o'clock meal the Legionnaires streamed from the barracks to the town, along the tree lined avenues. The cafés were ready to receive them, lights ablaze, fresh bottles massed on shelves behind the zinc counters. The cinema theater engulfed its quota of khaki clad, blue sashed soldiers. The terraces overflowed. The two pastry shops did a rushing business catering to the younger German privates.

Krederville belonged to the Legionnaires that night. There were other units garrisoned in the region: Algerian and Senegalese infantry, detachments of engineers and artillerymen, a squadron of native cavalry. But bitter experience had taught the authorities not to turn these loose on the streets when Legionnaires had drawn their pay and were at liberty.

Kenney piloted his patrol from cafés to bars, peered into the establishments. He did not expect trouble until after nine o'clock, when the liquor absorbed would start to take effect. He preceded his eight armed soldiers, chin strap buckled snugly under his chin, questioning a man here and there, asking for passes.

By 8:30 the Legionnaires had wearied of shows, of newspapers, of refined concoctions served them in European cafés, and longed for lustier pastimes. They straggled in small bands toward the reserved quarter, perhaps a mile distant, on the fringe of the Arab town. There they would be served stronger drinks, thick, red wine and tepid beer; they would dance on tiled floors, under the painted plaster arches of Moorish Edens, to the strains of accordions and automatic pianos.

The limited leave men trotted toward the barracks shortly after nine, and those on pass until midnight celebrated their longer freedom in earnest, as if they had been unwilling to disport themselves before their less fortunate comrades. Kenney marched his patrol into the narrow, roughly cobbled streets of the reserved quarter. He was not supposed to enter any establishment save on request of the owner, or to quiet an uproar.

But, here as elsewhere in the world, the proprietors wished to be on friendly terms with the forces of law and order and brought wine and beer to the men on duty. Although this was against strict regulations, Kenney closed his eyes to his men's actions and accepted several drinks himself. He had discovered that the major part of a patrol leader's task was to keep his followers in good spirits. A thirsting Legionnaire became a truculent man; and on pay night diplomats were needed.

"La patrouille! À la garde! La patrouille!"

The first emergency call came at 9:15. Kenney arrested two Legionnaires, who, gripped by an inexplicable, if violent, desire to hear smashing glass, were demolishing the reserve stock of a café. The culprits were grasped and hustled out in a trampling of heavy boots, a clattering of broken bottles, a howling of curses and drunken challenges.

Within five minutes the guilty soldiers, shaken and slapped into soberness and calm, were staggering toward the barracks, while the patrolmen resumed their pacing, walking awkwardly, purloined flasks distending their trousers pockets. And the native owner was wondering whether she had gained or lost by calling in Legionnaires to fight Legionnaires, fire to fight fire.

There were fist fights and clamors. Fortunately, as the encounters occurred between Legionnaires, no guns or knives came into action. Cuffs, kicks, an occasional blow with a carbine butt ended the rows. Men were thrown out into the streets, swaying, with bruised faces and bleeding noses.

At eleven the patrols met in the central square, and Kenney informed the other sergeants that he was leaving for the station. When a train was due a

group of armed men was always dispatched to the depot. Railroad cars hold a peculiar lure for men who are homesick and very drunk.

REACHING the small, graceful building of Moorish-like architecture, agleam with red, green and blue tiles, Kenney posted soldiers with bayoneted rifles at the gates. Then he passed through the waiting room to the platform. The train was late, not at all an unusual thing on the Sahara-Mediterranean Line, and the headlight of the locomotive did not appear until almost midnight.

Kenney made for the third class carriages, striving to find Cherbacheff as soon as possible. A Legion officer, bound south from leave, recognized the sergeant and hailed him.

"Pssst! Oh, Kenney! You appear annoyed, my friend. What's wrong?"

"I have orders to pick up a corporal, Captain. Supposed to be on this train."

"Cherbacheff? He's on this train," the officer assured. "He had a fierce row with some civilians back yonder. Say, I must warn you, old man, he's drunk—drunk as a Pole!"

Kenney made for the carriage indicated; and the sight of his khaki uniform, of the numeral and badge on his collar, seemed to infuriate the occupants.

"Apaches! Bandits! Tramps!"

"Easy, easy," Kenney urged, laughing. "See anything of a Legionnaire?"

"A Legionnaire? A corporal?" An indignant old lady, an Algerian-Spaniard wearing a black shawl over her hair, explained what had happened. "A big, dark, savage fellow? He was here. And it is a shame the way he behaved! Pushed us about to get room, put his feet on the seats, called us all evil names."

"That's the fellow, madame."

"Well, then, you can go and look for him, young man. Just as we were pulling in, about five hundred yards from the station, he opened the door and leaped out. A good Christian would have broken his neck. But Satan protects his own. The worthless fellow landed on his feet, turned long enough to swear at us, and walked away."

Kenney mumbled vague apologies and left.

He did not know whether he was more annoyed than amused. Cherbacheff, no matter how drunk, had known that he would be arrested the moment he reached Krederville. And he had chanced a leap from the moving train to obtain a night's liberty in town before the sojourn in jail which he had richly deserved. The Russian was well acquainted with Krederville, having been stationed there for several months at one time, and probably was making his way across country to the reserved quarter.

When the train had slid into the darkness toward the south, the sergeant gathered the men of his patrol and doubled back to the native town.

KENNEY believed he knew where to locate the Russian. Cherbacheff had often spoken of L'Ancien Soleil d'Afrique—the Old African Sun—an establishment situated at No. 22 Lizzard Street. But he was aware also that the quest would be difficult because the streets were now deserted. A twelve o'clock closing rule was in effect: Customers had been sent away, lights turned low and shutters put up.

When he rounded the corner Kenney saw with satisfaction that the Old African Sun was still lighted, the big lantern throwing a luminous, crimson patch on the whitewashed wall. And he became certain that Cherbacheff had sought refuge there. He rapped on the massive door with his knuckles. When no answer came, he pounded upon it with a carbine butt. The blows echoed lingeringly within.

When the thumping increased, a small shutter slid open and the wrinkled, saf-

fron face of an elderly Moorish woman appeared behind the iron grille.

"Closed for the night. Late, very late, too late." She spoke in awkward French. "Tomorrow morning, eight o'clock. Don't bother people. Go away."

"Don't you know me, Kheira?"

"Know nobody after closing time."

"I want to see Cherbacheff—Michel."

"Try next door. Maybe he there."

Kenney argued for some time longer, but as he had no right to force entrance on mere suspicion, he was about to turn away. Then he heard a well remembered voice. Cherbacheff's soft, singing French, once heard, could be identified anywhere, any time.

"Open for my friend, old girl!"

"Against police orders—"

"The devil with the police! Open!"

"No!"

There followed a scuffle within, Kheira's voice protesting in loud squeals. Then the bolts were slid back with a rasping of metal and the door was drawn wide open.

Cherbacheff stood against the oblong of light, and his slim legs, the enormous shoulders forming a T above his small waist, were outlined sharply. The lantern's glow glistened on his crisp, curly black hair and threw half of his swarthy face, with the long nose and cruel mouth, into full view. He had removed his tunic and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt above his elbows; a cigaret dangled from his lips. At once his long arms reached out and drew Kenney into a tight, affectionate clasp.

"Dear friend! My dear friend! Enter." Cherbacheff saw the Legionnaires standing silently behind Kenney, seemed to understand and laughed a resounding odd laugh. "You, too, my friends, may enter, all of you. Cherbacheff will buy you drinks."

And the whole patrol filed in behind Kenney. But while the sergeant followed Cherbacheff to the bar in an angle of the room, the privates grounded arms and waited near the door.

The Russian looked at them with a faint smile.

"Imposing," he decided.

"I'm on duty," Kenney explained.

"So I note. Aren't you afraid to keep those youngsters up so late? Give them a drink and send them away."

"Not due back until one, and you know it," Kenney pointed out. "Listen, you and I will have one drink; you'll get dressed and come back with us. Maybe I better tell you right away that you are under arrest."

"Of course—" Cherbacheff nodded—"I've been very drunk."

His dark pupils were dilated and seemed to dart little greenish flames. His nostrils quivered; but otherwise he behaved and spoke as a sober man. For the Russian never reeled, never failed to walk straight or stand erect. While other men were brought to mental and physical collapse by alcohol, Cherbacheff merely was aroused to demoniacal strength and spirit.

He poured a moderate quantity of brandy into Kenney's glass, lifted the bottle to his lips and drained it with a single long pull.

"Here's luck to you, friend! It is good to see you again." He touched Kenney's stripes lightly. "You get them slowly, but they stick. Each man according to his likes and ability."

"Your good health, Cherbacheff." Having drunk, Kenney indicated the Russian's coat and belt hanging from hooks in a corner and gestured with a thumb over one shoulder toward the door. "Let's go."

"I'm staying here for the night." Cherbacheff rested an elbow on the bar. "I shall report in the morning."

"Orders—" Kenney persisted.

"Carry them out, then."

THE sergeant glanced at the few lingering customers—idle natives and Spanish teamsters allowed to remain after closing time on condition they would stay until day. He wished to warn the Rus-

sian that it would not be decent to quarrel before these disreputable, coarse men, hoping to touch his pride.

"They're watching us."

"I'm worthy of being watched. If you're tired, go away." Cherbacheff peered into Kenney's eyes intently. "I suppose that is friendship. We spent eight months together in an outpost. We were closer than brothers. A life for a life, death for death. Now you arrest me!"

"Not unless I have to. You'll accompany me, that's all."

"Tomorrow morning."

"Tonight."

"No."

"You resist?"

"Why not?" Cherbacheff laughed heartily and flexed his arms. "I'm Cherbacheff—once an officer. I'm drunk, I refuse to obey orders. Corporal today, sergeant yesterday, private tomorrow. I had a coffin for a cradle and have seen men die like flies. I hate men and despise women. I'm Cherbacheff who has no friends—and I resist!"

"Have some sense," Kenney pleaded.

"Why? Who sent you here? Maillebois? I knew it. That's the way he gets his fun. He knew it would annoy one or the other of us—with a possibility of tormenting both. Sooner or later he'll pit us against each other because we are friends, because he likes to play with men's feelings according to regulations. He's done it to me; he's done it to others. Let him have his way from the start. Come on."

"Why hurt those fellows?"

"You compliment me! Eight of them, nine counting you."

Kenney, who had seen that light in Cherbacheff's eyes before, saw that it would be hopeless to argue longer. When the Russian was drunk he knew no friend and could not reason. Something must be done, and Kenney was not at all sure that he could handle the corporal alone. Moreover, he could not risk a beating before his men.

Upon a sign from him, the Legionnaires took the bottles from their pockets, stood them up against the wall with their rifles and came forward reluctantly. For one or two knew Cherbacheff by reputation and the others sensed their fear. The tall man's smile of sheer confidence somewhat unnerved them. They had come to the Legion to fight; but this would be a café row, without glory, yet with the chance of injury and none of reward.

They cheered up when they saw Kenney quietly place himself between Cherbacheff and the bottles lined on the bar. Hand to hand, the odds were overwhelmingly in their favor. After all, being eight against one, what had they to fear?

Cherbacheff grinned, slipped into a corner. His shirt was open at the throat, and the approaching men noted the gathering muscles, the tensing of the sinews on the lean forearms. He seemed formidably strong and tough, and it was obvious that the prospect of a fight against odds was much to his taste at this stage of drunkenness.

"Come, little ones, come."

"Grab his legs and throw him," Kenney suggested.

Normally, he would have participated in the first rush. But he still hesitated and was content with taking care that no hard objects came into action.

The Legionnaires closed in quickly, in a trampling of boots. Cherbacheff's hands flashed out, there were resounding impacts, and the two leading men staggered back. They grinned sheepishly, one of them through bleeding lips. All were amazed, frightened at their opponent's power.

"Get in there and watch out for kicks," Kenney said.

CHERBACHEFF hurdled a table and faced about with an uplifted chair.

Kenney saw one of his men seated on the floor, holding his stomach, trying to grin. He was very pale, perhaps

severely hurt. A stocky, tow headed young German, with a bleeding ear and a nose that was swelling rapidly, reached back and picked up a full bottle.

"Drop that, you!" Kenney snapped. "Leave him alone, boys." He stepped toward Cherbacheff, who dropped the chair as he approached. "We'll have to hurt you if you don't give in. I can't ask those lads to get knocked about any longer."

"Go ahead!"

Kenney nodded, motioned his men to fall back against the wall and circled the table. Cherbacheff laughed.

"It will be amusing to fight you, Raoul."

"I want to reason, not to fight. This is a job, not play."

"Oh?" Cherbacheff struck the sergeant full on the chest, and the patrol chief kept his balance only with an effort. Try as he would, he could not keep pain from showing on his face. One of his men slid back the bolt of his rifle.

"Cut—that—out—" Kenney managed to pant.

"Let him shoot me, let him!" Cherbacheff shouted. "Why not? That's what Maillebois wishes. He hates me because I was what he is trying to be. Come on, Kenney, do his dirty work!"

The sergeant again saw the futility of coping with this powerful drunkard on even terms. At best, he risked grave injury, which would mean serious charges against his mad friend. He must resort to trickery.

"Easy, Michel," he pleaded softly, reaching out to grasp the other's right hand tightly in his left. It was done in a gentle, friendly gesture. "Come quietly. I don't want any one hurt. You'll only be sorry in the morning."

"Let go," Cherbacheff grumbled, pulling at his right hand and pushing the left against Kenney's face.

Still clutching with his left hand, Kenney brought his right palm beneath Cherbacheff's arm, above the elbow, jerked quickly. And as the Russian spun about, the sergeant caught him from behind, one arm under the chin, and flung him over his head. The Russian dropped on the tiles, sprawled, and Kenney leaped forward.

"Get a rope, get belts. Tie him up."

"I give up," Cherbacheff said quietly. "I believe my shoulder is fractured."

He rose, very white, quite sobered by the pain. Kenney fingered the injured shoulder, felt the broken bones lifting the tissues. He tried to speak, but faltered, overcome by grief. Cherbacheff, seeing his worry, laughed.

"My fault altogether. We compromise. Neither this place nor the lockup. It's the hospital, Kenney."

"I'll take you there. Come on, Legionnaires."

WHEN Cherbacheff was discharged from the military hospital some weeks later, Kenney met him.

The accident had not proved wholly unfortunate for the Russian. The long delay had abated the resentment of civilians whom he had offended on the train journey. Their charges had been dropped. Cherbacheff's sole punishment was demotion from corporal to second class Legionnaire.

After his countless misfortunes of the past—the loss of homeland, wealth and social situation through the Red Revolution in Russia—this did not affect the man greatly.

But it made friendship with Kenney subject to restrictions. Too close association off duty between sergeants and privates is not favored in the Foreign Legion. Nevertheless, as the relationship dated back to a period when both had been sergeants, the American risked no open reproof for being seen in his company. They stopped at a café terrace on the way to the barracks from the hospital, and Cherbacheff talked.

Kenney listened in astonishment, for the Russian had changed. He declared that he had made a mess of things thus far, and was about to reform. He hoped

that with good behavior he could become a sergeant again in six months, and perhaps an officer within a year. Since joining the Legion, he had had eleven citations for valor in action. Once he had obtained a sub-lieutenancy, he stated, he would become naturalized French and would transfer to a regiment garrisoned in France.

"Leave the Legion for the line infantry?" Kenney wondered.

"Yes."

"Why? A calm country is no place for you."

"France would be better for a woman, a refined woman."

"Joking?" Kenney asked.

"No. I intend to get married and settle down."

"To whom?"

"To Miss Baldra, Madeleine Baldra."

Kenney laughed. For a private in the Legion to aspire to Miss Baldra's hand was more than amusing. Her father was the wealthiest man in the region.

"I love her," Cherbacheff insisted.

"Granted. But from that to marriage in due and legal form—"

"I know what you think. Her origin is not all that could be wished for. I admit it is—well, base. But neither am I what I was. I am nothing but a Legionnaire."

Kenney saw that Cherbacheff swept wide of the real cause for his disapproval and skepticism. It had never occurred to the Russian that his proposal of marriage could be anything save flattering to the Baldras. He thought little of money, his own or any one's else, and had a very definite creed that he came from a superior race, for his father had been some sort of princeling in Siberia, with the power of a feudal lord over several thousand people.

The sergeant pointed out that so far as the girl and her people were concerned, Cherbacheff was simply a Legionnaire with a rotten reputation for drinking and carousing and that Baldra had aspirations toward an important marriage for his only daughter. Cherbacheff laughed. He explained that he knew the girl cared for him. He had met her when she had come to visit the hospital with the ladies of the Red Cross. Soon she had seen that he was not a common fellow, had shown him special attentions.

Kenney attempted irony. He reminded him that Miss Baldra rode in a luxurious car, spent half of each year in Paris and the Riviera and that half the unmarried officers in town were courting her. He told Cherbacheff that he was thirty-eight, the girl twenty. To which the Russian retorted that he loved the young girl and that she loved him. He had papers to prove his birth and was willing to wait until he was an officer once more before marrying.

"In fact, I expect you to call on Baldra this afternoon and present my request," he concluded.

"You're raving mad," Kenney said slowly.

But Cherbacheff could not be convinced. Kenney was afraid to refuse to serve as an emissary for his friend—afraid that the Russian would go in person and cause much trouble if he were offended or deemed himself offended by a refusal.

Captain Dugard, who commanded the company, granted Kenney leave of absence for the afternoon without question. The sergeant put on his dress uniform, replaced the faded ribbons he wore with the complete badges of his decorations. He found a pair of clean white gloves.

AS THE Baldra estate was five miles out of town, and the road was dusty, Kenney hired a taxicab at the depot and started out. He felt ridiculous, embarrassed, and rehearsed his speech in a low voice. The more he repeated it, the sillier it became.

He was not impressed by Baldra. He had heard his story often. Francisco

Baldra had come from Spain to Algeria as a field laborer. He had acquired a little money, sent for his wife, and they had opened a café in Krederville, at that time a frontier outpost. During the Great War Baldra had obtained government contracts to feed troops, had branched out into sundry enterprises and had amassed a large fortune almost overnight. Sudden success had killed his wife, wearied by many years of hard work. Baldra had gone to France on a vacation and had remarried—a flashy, beautiful young woman. His daughter had been brought up in luxury.

Like all men in Krederville, Kenney admired Madeleine Baldra. She was a beautiful young girl with jet black hair and soft, dark eyes, an oval face as pure and touching as an angel's, and she was reputed, moreover, to be the best dressed woman in Southern Algeria. Six months of Cherbacheff's actual pay would not have purchased a pair of her silk stockings.

Of course, the Russian's cause might not be altogether hopeless. Cherbacheff was one of the handsomest men he had ever seen and showed few traces of his age despite numberless excesses. His great strength, his beauty of features, the feline grace of his body, might have attracted the young girl. Then there was the undeniable glamor of his past, his conversation, his achievements in Russia, his glorious ancestors.

When the white arcades and the red roofs of the buildings appeared between the poplar trees, the sergeant took the white gloves from his pocket and drew them over his tanned hands.

When his taxi halted inside the masonry enclosure behind a line of motor cars, Kenney discovered, with increasing anguish, that Cherbacheff's insistence upon immediate action had caused him to arrive unannounced during a reception. The place swarmed with civilians in white flannels, officers in white uniforms glittering with gold braid and brass buttons. His arrival in dress uniform attracted much curiosity. A man wearing Baldra's livery came to meet him and took his card to Baldra.

As Kenney paced in the yard, waiting, a hand rested on his shoulder. He turned to face Lieutenant Maillebois, who appeared younger, less harsh, in tennis flannels.

"Looking for me, Kenney?"

"No, Lieutenant."

"What are you here for?"

"By permission of the captain, Lieutenant, on personal business with Mr. Baldra."

"You don't tell me—" Maillebois drawled.

Kenney removed his képi as a young girl joined Maillebois, slipping her hand beneath his arm with a most friendly gesture. The wide, flashing eyes, the full, red lips lifted on even, almond-white teeth, the lithe body in the white blouse and short skirt, formed a picture which might have held attention in a much more sophisticated center than this small Algerian town.

Maillebois seemed about to turn away, but she spoke.

"Introduce us."

"This is Sergeant Kenney, an American, Madeleine," Maillebois said shortly.

"I'm Madeleine Baldra," the girl corrected the young officer's obvious slackness with much charm. "I'm so happy to meet you, Sergeant. I have heard about you—"

"He will tell you that Legionnaires are not endowed with all the picturesque virtues you attribute to them."

"Alfred always says—"

"No professional secrets, Madeleine," Maillebois cut short, without levity.

Kenney had murmured a vague acknowledgment. This girl was a flirt, and his errand struck him as foolish. Maillebois startled him with a seemingly chance remark—

"White gloves, Kenney? For a wedding?"

"Not for mine, Lieutenant, in any case."

The officer considered him with cold, distant amusement in his eyes. Kenney sensed that he knew more than he revealed, and that he and the girl shared some secret. The conversation was cut short by the return of the servant, who stated that Sergeant Kenney, Knight of the Legion of Honor, would be received by his master immediately.

HE WAS ushered into a rather small room, beautifully furnished as a combination office and library. The furniture was smooth, shining mahogany, with modernistic statuary in white marble. During a brief wait he had time to see a large photograph in a black frame of Baldra, his first wife and Madeleine as a baby. Then Baldra entered—a very large, obese, dark man of fifty-five, who, despite the best efforts of an excellent tailor and the artistic work of a fine barber, preserved an aspect of rugged, rough hewn simplicity, and looked as if he spent his leisure hours rolling under beds. He wore the ribbon of Agricultural Merit in the lapel of his afternoon coat.

To Kenney's astonishment the man showed neither amusement nor anger when he was informed of Cherbacheff's desires. He expressed worry, however, that the Russian had been misled by a flirtation intended merely as a pastime. Then Baldra stepped out to question his daughter. Kenney heard his voice, then the young woman's laugh. The Legion sergeant felt the blood flushing his face. Whatever one might do, it was not decent to laugh at such a man as Cherbacheff.

Baldra returned and explained with some embarrassment that his daughter refused to take the proposal seriously. As Kenney was about to leave, after a short word of farewell, he halted him.

"I know such men as Cherbacheff. They were met oftener in the past in the Legion. Everything gone save pride—evil, unquenched pride. Despair is bad for such chaps. Diplomacy must be used. I do not dare strike off all his hope at one blow. I have seen tragedies occur for less. Mr. Kenney, will you do me a great favor?"

"Of course."

"Inform your friend that his proposal is under consideration, and that if he remains sober, steady, for three months, he can renew it. He can not behave well for three months, of course, and will supply us with motives for delays. Above all, do not tell him Madeleine laughed. You like the man much, do you not?"

"You know what a friend means in the Legion," Kenney said.

"Then let me inform you, as one who once sold drink to Legionnaires before you were born, that your friend's liberty and life and my daughter's safety are in your hands. Worse than the lout who climbs is the gentleman who falls."

Kenney shook hands, voiced his thanks for the kind reception granted him, and left, stuffing the white gloves into his pocket. Maillebois saw him, cut short his game of tennis and leaped over the net to come after him. His face was flushed, his hands quivered.

"What's this ridiculous affair, Kenney?"

"What, Lieutenant?"

"That sot, Cherbacheff, sending you here to—" The officer shrugged angrily. "It's too preposterous even to repeat. That business of sending you here wearing white gloves, that contemptible nonsense."

"Did she tell you?" Kenney asked.

"She? Miss Baldra told me, yes! I am surprised that you lent yourself to this comedy. After all, you are a Legionnaire. Nevertheless, you impressed me as a gentleman, or at least a man with a sense of proportion. That worthless tramp, a drunkard, a man who can not be—"

"A Legionnaire with eleven citations, Lieutenant."

"What have citations to do with this?"

"The man has worth, Lieutenant."

"Are you trying to give me a lesson, Sergeant?"

"I'm reminding you that Cherbacheff is one of your Legionnaires, Lieutenant." Kenney stiffened to attention.

"I shall not forget this, you know!"

"As you wish, Lieutenant. May I be bold enough to make a suggestion, or rather, to ask a favor?"

"I'd like to know what you expect from me, really!"

"Don't mention anything of this near the barracks, Lieutenant."

"I'll do my best." Maillebois relaxed into a sarcastic smile. "But it is really too good a story not to relate. Cherbacheff aspiring to Miss Baldra's hand!"

"Fifteen years ago it would have been a better story, Lieutenant. Cherbacheff was then a nobleman, led a squadron of cavalry under fire, while—"

"Kenney, be careful what you say."

"I am, Lieutenant. While Baldra's child played in the barroom of her father's café."

Maillebois twisted the racket in his hands nervously.

"You may leave, Sergeant," he said after a startled pause.

CHERBACHEFF manifested intense joy at the meager hope held out to him. Kenney for the first time understood that his friend took the matter seriously; for Cherbacheff must indeed be in love to grow emotional with gratitude concerning a message from Baldra, whom he scorned as a pompous parvenu.

"Of course," Kenney mused, "Cherbacheff thinks a good deal of himself. But sooner or later he will see all that is incongruous when he marches along the road with the company and the girl he aspires to marry goes whirling by in a motor car worth two hundred thousand francs, almost enough money to keep the whole battalion drunk a fortnight."

Madeleine Baldra was not more cruel than most girls of her age. She was heedless, loved amusement and had forgotten, in all probability, the childhood experiences which might have taught her care. Perhaps she found it flattering to have a man like Cherbacheff, with a glamorous background and a savage reputation, behave like a schoolboy where she was concerned.

Cherbacheff deemed himself honor bound not to seek to speak with her until his period of probation was over. When they chanced to meet, he saluted her respectfully from a distance. She would reply with a smile, a nod, often with a pretty little gesture of the hand.

Kenney saw before very long that she purposely sought to meet the Russian when she was with friends, probably to point him out. She came often to the drill field, some distance from the barracks, and watched the sections deploying, reforming. The people with her laughed when she spoke, and the sergeant was aware that she was telling them of Cherbacheff, of his love, of his pretending to be her equal.

This enraged Kenney. The women did not matter; he knew them too well not to be aware that they could not fail to admire the magnificent stature, the virile beauty of his friend. But the men, outsiders, dressed as for the tropics, manifestly conscious that they were in exotic surroundings, irked him beyond control when they exchanged jokes as they looked at the Legionnaire.

The sergeant felt that this was unjust. In birth, in education and intelligence, Cherabcheff was superior to most; and when it came to courage and physical strength, comparison became ridiculous. When they laughed at him they laughed at the whole Legion. And the Legion was a sacred thing to Kenney. For the sergeant knew that these tourists from France were safe because such men as they laughed at had fought, toiled, suffered and died.

The feeling of solidarity is so powerful in the corps that all Legionnaires comprehended this without words. So

one afternoon, when Kenney was in charge of two sections on the drill field, a few of the gentlemen watching were caught by an unexpected shift of positions and rolled about for several yards. The episode was detrimental to their garments and to their pride.

"Sorry," Kenney addressed them, "but this is not the place for spectators."

Lieutenant Maillebois knew enough of Legionnaires to feel that the incident had been planned. The sweeping ranks progressing at the double could have halted or parted.

"You are beginning to get on my nerves," he told the sergeant. "You gave that order on purpose."

"I do not deny it, Lieutenant."

"Four days' confinement to quarters!" the officer snapped.

Captain Dugard reduced the punishment to only two days, but added a warning. He could not, as an officer, encourage the Legionnaires to tumble civilians about. Kenney, who had expected a worse punishment, was amused. But what rankled was Cherbacheff's opinion of the episode.

"That's what gives us a rotten reputation," the Russian said with the candor of the freshly reformed. "How can outsiders think us anything but brutal mercenaries and unmannerly louts?"

At that time he had not been intoxicated for almost a month, achieving the impossible. He drank nothing stronger than red wine, and there simply was not enough red wine to get him drunk. His organs were hardened to fiery fluids and it took the potent fumes of brandy, aniset or contraband absinth to affect him.

All was well until news of Cherbacheff's bizarre ambition leaked out. Kenney had known it would be a matter of time. Gossip circulates rapidly in any small town. He never ascertained whether Maillebois told the story at the officers' club, to be overheard and repeated by orderlies, or whether the servants in civilian households spread it. But the whole battalion was informed within three weeks.

The Russian's acquaintances knew him too well to tease him openly. Cherbacheff walked about in absolute ignorance that he was the target of ridicule. Kenney heard much chaffing, but hoped that Madeleine Baldra would leave town before the Russian became aware of what was going on.

UNFORTUNATELY a trio of Russians arrived from the Sahara, where they were employed as chauffeurs by the transport company. They all had been officers in the emperor's armies, officers with Denikine, Wrangel, Kolchack. They had drawn several months' pay and were in town on leave, resolved to drink and forget.

They hired a room in one of the smaller, cheaper hotels of Krederville for the celebration of one of their national or religious holidays, Kenney was not sure which. He was invited by Cherbacheff, with two other Legion sergeants, a large, taciturn German, Haspel, and a Rumanian who had been with a Russian staff in his homeland between 1915 and 1918.

The dinner was excellent and the wines well chosen. The first discord arose when Cherbacheff refused to taste liquors after coffee was served. The other Russians, quite elated by numerout drinks, protested.

"What's the matter, Michel? Ill? Gloomy?"

"Neither. I shall be a fool no longer. We Russians drink too much."

"I'm a fool, I suppose, because I drink," the German sergeant, Haspel, spoke suddenly. His face was flushed and he was quarrelsome as always when tipsy. "But not as big a fool as Cherbacheff! He keeps sober for a girl who laughs at him."

"Shut up," Kenney urged. "Shut up and drink!"

"Sure, I'll drink. I am a squarehead, a stupid German, a commoner. But I

am very intelligent, I think, for I would not be such a big fool as to be laughed at by a Spanish wench, no matter how much money her old man had!"

One of the Russians, a tall, slender, refined man of forty-five, treated with respect by the others although he was at present a mechanic, conversed with Cherbacheff in Russian. He shifted to French to ask explanations from the others. Then he threw his head back and laughed.

"It is bitter to be pitied, worse to be laughed at. But if the time has come, it has come. Let us drink! Waiter, champagne!"

"You Russians, with your big ideas and your big words, are all fools," Haspel resumed. "You are brave, you are intelligent, but you are licked in war and laughed at in peace!" He grunted as Kenney's boot scraped his shins. "Leave me alone, will you? I'm sick and tired of seeing a Legionnaire make a fool of himself over a dirty Spanish wench.".

Cherbacheff reached out, drained a tumbler of brandy.

"We'll talk of that again, Haspel."

"Right now!" Haspel clamored eagerly, lumbering to his feet and unfastening the tunic bearing his stripes. "Every lousy civilian in town laughs at Legionnaires because of you. You! Know what she calls you? Her tame bear."

Kenney was just in time to knock a bottle from Cherbacheff's hand. In five seconds the room was a turmoil of smashing furniture and cracking glassware, as a dozen men struggled. At last Cherbacheff was pushed back into a corner. He glared at Haspel, whose face was bruised and bleeding, but who laughed sarcastically, panting—

"Tame bear, tame bear, tame bear!"

"Let me go," Cherbacheff pleaded, tears running down his face. "If he tells the truth, why should I strike him? Haspel, if I have struck you unjustly, I beg your pardon. Are you certain she said that?"

"Her chauffeur heard her tell the whole story to that little dandy who rides with her mornings. You know, the slob who paints pictures and wears baggy clothes."

"What story?"

"How, when you were in the hospital, Maillebois told her what a conceited fool you were, thought yourself superior to everybody. How she bet him you'd fall in love with her. How you made Kenney put on white gloves and go to ask her old man to marry her, marry her to you—"

Cherbacheff shook himself free, then stood as if stunned in the center of the floor. The others stared at him, atrociously embarrassed. They had seen many men suffer, many men die, but this particular type of torture was unbearable to behold. For it could know no relief, no end.

"Is that true, Kenney?"

"It is," the sergeant admitted.

It was best to be cruel and cut to the quick at once, now that the harm had been done. Perhaps the very hurt would heal.

"Yes, Michel. You were wrong. Her father was kind, but she laughed. The best thing is to forget her."

Cherbacheff recovered surface calm with astonishing speed. He dried his eyes, straightened and laughed loudly. He swept the room with a glance.

"Much fuss over little," he granted. "Have this fixed and let's go on. I shall drink now. Thank you, Haspel!"

THE frightened waiters were coaxed back. They swept the room, set up new tables, brought new chairs and more bottles. The gathering became cheerful and animated once more. Cherbacheff drained a quart of brandy and started on a second. Spacing the tumblers were cups of champagne. His capacity was amazing, legendary even in a battalion which numbered many veterans who were not afraid of a few quarts.

Haspel was resentful, thinking that he had been attacked unjustly, ashamed that he bore more traces than his opponent of the brief exchange of blows. His large head was lowered over his glass, and he peered at Cherbacheff from beneath his sandy brows, waiting for another opportunity to wound his pride. The Russian gave him a chance all too soon.

"To the love that was, to the love to come," he toasted, lifting his glass. "To the most beautiful woman in the world, lost today, and to the even more beautiful woman to be found and loved tomorrow!"

All laughed and drank, with the exception of Haspel, who set his glass back on the table untouched.

"A better toast, I know."

"Let's hear it, let's have it!" several voices challenged.

"To the beautiful one that is not lost to all! And to our handsome lieutenant, Maillebois, who knows what he wants and gets it!"

"Good toast," Cherbacheff admitted, lowering his empty glass. "But why Maillebois?"

"You should guess!"

"Can it be that he is engaged to my—ex-fiancée?"

"Maillebois? Engaged? Doesn't need to be. His father has sacks of money, and he's just killing time with her while down here. She sends him notes all the time, and he reads them to his pals at mess. Says the little hick has ambition."

"That's enough about her," Kenney said. "That isn't interesting."

"It is to me," Cherbacheff protested. "Haspel, you're a fine fellow. I bet that Maillebois started all this joking about me, eh?"

"She asks him how you are, and he tells her what a good little Legionnaire you've become. That you put water in your wine, and that all the native girls are broken hearted. That makes her laugh. Her chauffeur tells it around the town."

Cherbacheff grew very pale; his eyes seemed opaque, like green glass. But he went on drinking without further comments. Before long Haspel fell asleep, his head cradled on his bent arms. The Russians sent for more brandy, more champagne, for fresh bottles of chartreuse and benedictine.

"I've drunk enough," Cherbacheff announced suddenly.

Before any one could stop him, he had reached the door and was gone. The others pushed Kenney back into his chair.

"He's all right. Needs to be alone, that's all."

So the sergeant did not leave until an hour later. The fresh air soon sobered him completely, and he assisted Haspel to his room in the barracks, saw the Rumanian sergeant to bed, then walked across the deserted yard toward his own quarters. He stopped to speak with the sergeant of the guard to find out if Cherbacheff had reported.

"Saw nothing of him," he was told.

"I'll look in at the Old African Sun," Kenney suggested.

"Not there," a man seated in a corner of the guardroom informed him. "I was in the dump until closing time. Old Kheira wouldn't let him in after hours, now that he's queered himself by staying away so long."

"Where can he be?"

"Search me," the other sergeant replied with a grin. "Maybe he went to see his girl. Big party on tonight, dinner and dance. Fireworks in the gardens afterward. Must have cost Baldra a lot of money."

Kenney went to the washroom, where he held his head under a spouting tap to cool his brain and dissipate the lingering fumes of alcohol. He found a taxi and started for the Baldra estate. He stopped a few hundred feet from the main gate, for the party was over and people were leaving. There was no sign of trouble, no unusual noises. Therefore Cherbacheff had not been there.

"Take me back," Kenney ordered the driver.

As he dismissed the taxi on the main square before the Town Hall he recognized Lieutenant Maillebois walking across the pool of light formed by the moonlit cement, in and out of the long shadows thrown by the palm trees. The officer was whistling, had pushed his képi back on his head, and appeared very happy. His presence brought another possibility to mind: Cherbacheff was waiting for him before his home, perhaps.

Kenney lifted his wrist to glance at the luminous dial of his watch. It was 2:30, and he had overstayed his leave by thirty minutes already. Therefore, he decided not to be seen by his superior if it could be avoided. He followed him at a distance, muffling his steps. His suspicions were confirmed when an unmistakable silhouette materialized from within the doorway of the house in which Maillebois resided. Cherbacheff!

KENNEY heard the Legionnaire greet the officer in a calm, polite voice and hoped that he would not need to interfere. Talking seldom caused much harm, if indulged in privately. The deserted street, lined with locked doors and shuttered windows, was private enough. The sergeant stepped into a doorway and waited.

"I'll talk to you in the morning, at the company's office," he heard Maillebois say briskly.

"We'll talk here and now, Maillebois."

"Lieutenant, if you please."

"I said Maillebois. I am one man talking to another, at present. Like it or not, that is so."

"You're drunk. You'll hear from me."

"You'll answer one question."

"To get rid of you, perhaps."

"Do you intend to marry Miss Baldra?"

"You're hardly the person to whom I should speak of my plans, old chap. Will you go to bed and sleep it off, like a good fellow?"

"That isn't an answer."

"I can scarcely discuss a lady with a man of your type."

"I beg your pardon, but—"

"You were once an officer. That seems to have been a mistake. Stop playing the gentleman, and sleep off your drunkenness. Step aside, Legionnaire."

"You try to get away from me, you touch that door and—"

"My dear chap!" Maillebois said softly. And he grasped the handle of the door with his left hand.

Cherbacheff leaped forward. Kenney did not clearly see what happened. Something thudded; Cherbacheff reeled back. He slithered to the ground under another blow from the handle of a quirt in the officer's hand. Maillebois leaned down, hauled him into the light of a street lamp and looked up when Kenney's shadow fell across the sprawled body.

"Kenney? I thought you weren't far off. You're a trifle late to help him." Maillebois chuckled harshly. "But you should muzzle him and keep him on a chain, old man. Although he is not the mighty fellow I was led to think by popular reports."

"Drunk," Kenney pointed out. "Is he hurt?"

"No. A bit stunned." Maillebois straightened. "Will I seem unreasonable if I mention your absence from quarters at this time? So far as I am personally concerned it doesn't matter. But regulations are regulations. Will you be so good as to report yourself and friend to the officer of the day?"

"For overstaying leave?"

"That's it. And you will testify that I struck in self-defense in case this lout complains?"

"He's a Legionnaire, Lieutenant."

"A last word." Maillebois opened the door and paused. "I have had enough of this. If you insist on being

friendly with privates, a companion for disorderly characters, I shall take some action."

"As you wish, Lieutenant."

The door closed. Kenney dragged Cherbacheff erect. The Russian was not hurt but very humiliated. He had walked into Maillebois like a fool. Even with bare hands the young officer, who had been a gymnastics instructor in France, was not to be taken lightly. They reached the barracks without further trouble, and Kenney reported himself and his friend.

Cherbacheff drew down eight days in prison, and Kenney eight days of rigorous arrest. During that week, alone in his room, he had considerable time in which to think. Cherbacheff had dragged him into too much trouble. From now on he would have to carry responsibility on his own shoulders without Kenney's help.

"LIEUTENANT wants to see you at once," Kenney's orderly informed him when he returned from the drill field on the first afternoon following his release.

"He does? What for?"

"Maybe it's about Cherbacheff, Sergeant."

"What happened to Cherbacheff?"

"He's in solitary confinement. A patrol brought him into the barracks at three when he was presumed to be policing the yard." The orderly shrugged and continued, "He was pretty badly beaten up, too. Both eyes blackened, and you couldn't tell his nose from a hunk of raw beef."

"What's he done this time?" Kenney wondered as he doubled to the company's office, hooking up the collar of his tunic as he ran. "And what have I done to be called in?"

To his astonishment and pleasure, Maillebois seemed less angry than worried. He greeted Kenney politely, cleared the room of scribes and shut the door.

"Perhaps I've been a bit sharp at times. Will you pass the sponge over the past and help me, man to man?"

Kenney realized what it cost Maillebois to utter such words.

"Right, Lieutenant."

"I am not asking you to lie, but a few omissions would be no great crime, especially as they would help no one and harm no innocent persons. The investigators will summon you for questioning, and I desire to keep Miss Baldra's name out of this scandal as much as possible."

"Understood, Lieutenant. What happened?"

"What didn't happen?" Maillebois said wearily.

His assurance had vanished, and he wiped his forehead constantly as he spoke. What he had believed a game had turned out to be a very serious affair. Shortly after the afternoon siesta Cherbacheff had been taken to the yard with other Legionnaires to clean up refuse. Although he had finished his prison sentence, he was still under arrest and technically a prisoner.

Passing the gate, he had dropped the handles of the wheelbarrow he shoved before him and darted to the avenue outside. The two men on guard had pursued him a few yards, then allowed him to go, thinking that he was going to a nearby café for a drink and would be back to take his punishment. Instead, Cherbacheff, in sandals and fatigue uniform, had arrived at the Baldra estate some time later and clamored to see Mr. Baldra.

Baldra had received him. He had threatened and stormed, accused the Algerian-Spaniard of encouraging his daughter to compromise herself with a man who would never marry her. Baldra had tried to quiet him because servants were listening, and Cherbacheff had handled him roughly, breaking furniture and *objets d'art.* Madame Baldra had telephoned to the police, and the police, after sending two men, had telephoned to the barracks.

Before the agents of law and order

arrived, Cherbacheff had beaten the servants and terrorized house guests. When he saw the white braid of the mounted cops, he had gone stark mad. Hesitating to make use of guns because of the presence of many innocent people who might have been struck by stray bullets, the two middle aged, rather obese gendarmes had been bowled over, bruised, lacerated by a sort of human whirlwind. Luckily for them, the arrival of the Legion patrol, rushed to the scene of the conflict in a motor truck after frantic phone calls, had caused the Russian to retreat.

Cherbacheff had climbed over the rear wall of the gardens and fled across the fields.

His capture had resembled a major field operation, with nine men seeking one. Exhibiting maniacal agility and strength, Cherbacheff had broken out of one trap after another, until felled from behind by the swing of a steel shod butt. It was estimated that he had damaged property worth thousands of francs, aside from sending nine men to the hospital with more or less battered bodies.

"My name may be mixed up in all this," Maillebois explained. "My people won't like it."

Kenney nodded. He understood perfectly that if the lieutenant's name were connected publicly with Madeleine Baldra's, he would be more or less obligated to her. And he could not help feeling scorn for the man who had been so willing to create trouble but quaked when he had to pay for his sport.

THE papers all over Algeria printed reports of the affair. Maillebois's name was not mentioned, and it was rumored in the battalion that his family had spent much money to prevent his connection with the Baldra family from becoming public. Reporters came into town to witness Cherbacheff's trial.

Normally, for disturbing the peace of the community, for fleeing from guards, for striking superiors, insulting and assaulting police officers during the discharge of their duty, Cherbacheff would have been condemned to several years of hard labor. But the general attention granted the case influenced the court-martial, and it dropped all charges save those of a strictly military character.

Kenney was questioned; but in deference to Baldra's family no embarrassing questions were asked of him. The prosecution kept to details such as date and time of day.

The Russian faced his judges defiantly, laughed much, shrugged. This attitude angered the major presiding, a middle aged officer.

"A little humility might count in your favor, Cherbacheff!"

"I ask no favors, Major, nor mercy. I was aware of the consequences of my deeds, as I am now aware of your motives for leniency." Cherbacheff threw his head back; his laughter filled the room. "You are not dealing with an ignorant peasant! I was an officer—and am still an officer—on the rolls of the Imperial Russian army."

"Enough!" The major pounded the table with his fists. "I do not believe you were ever either a gentleman or an officer. You have not been a good Legionnaire. You are brave, admitted—but bravery is within the gift of any man. You do not know what discipline means, therefore could never have been a chief."

"Quite enough, Major," Cherbacheff said gently. He lifted his head in a gesture peculiar to him, like a horse rattling its bit.

He was sentenced, after long deliberation, to thirty days in prison, fifteen of them in solitary confinement. Regimental headquarters added thirty more. Divisional headquarters another thirty. And as the Russian entered his cell, a glittering motor car bore Baldra and his family out of town, bound north to Oran, to board a steamer for France.

Some three months later Kenney was on night duty in the guardroom when a policeman appeared, bearing a message

communicated by the telegraph office to the civil authorities.

Signaled to the attention of all town police stations, of the gendarmerie, of all Foreign Legion centers, all military outposts and civilian officials in locations lacking armed forces: Arrest and hold Legionnaire Cherbacheff, Michel.

Age: Thirty-eight. Height: One meter eighty-five centimeters. Corporation: Muscular. Hair: Black. Eyes: Black. Nose: Large. Mouth: Ordinary. Forehead: High. Chin: Strong and clean shaven. Particular distinguishing marks: Saber scars right brow to cheek, left shoulder, left forearm. Bayonet scar below right nipple. Two bullet scars in right thigh. Speaks French, German, Russian, Arabic. Is a good rider, and may seek employment agricultural establishments tending horses.

Charged with simple assault, insubordination, absence without leave with intention to desert. Leaped from compartment of train while being taken north under guard, at a point near kilometric marker 956, north of Krederville station. Witnesses report he landed safely and was last seen walking in the general direction of the Moroccan frontier at a good pace.

Sergeant in charge prisoners' detail reports pursuit was impossible without risk of grave injury at the start, and that fugitive had vanished when train halted in answer to emergency call.

Great care must be used in making arrest. Cherbacheff, Michel, is considered a dangerous man and is likely to be armed. Report all suspects to nearest police station, gendarmerie and Legion post, and communicate with regimental headquarters at Sidi bel Abbes.

The incidents of Cherbacheff's flight from the railroad to the Moroccan border, his adventure before he joined the Ait Hammou tribe in the hills northwest of Bou-Denib, were never known fully. But within six months the name of Mikkal el Moskou was uttered wherever desert men gathered, and the French government became aware of a new factor.

Although Cherbacheff, by becoming El Moskou, could be termed a deserter, a traitor, a renegade, still he had been a Legionnaire and now proved a splendid chieftain; consequently, his exploits were greeted with open pride by his former comrades. To have known him became a distinction, and even men who had never seen him claimed to have been members of patrols he had fought during his many sprees in the reserved quarters of a dozen garrison towns. Postal cards and letters he had written in the past were exhibited, almost invariably followed by the statement—

"Can't say it openly, but he wants me to join him."

Veteran soldiers bound by discipline and duty were set to dreaming like schoolboys, pictured themselves leading daring assaults in the desert at the head of burnoused raiders.

El Moskou's first attack struck a warning note. At the head of a handful of warriors he ambushed and massacred a detachment of native cavalry. The blow was timed superbly and carried out with deadly precision. The raiders escaped without trouble, taking away thirty-odd horses and mules, twenty-three carbines, several thousand cartridges and leaving behind twenty-one slain. The corpses were found mutilated, as is the rule in the Sahara, and it was evident that the new leader made no effort to convert his followers to humane ideas.

As is the rule in such cases, the government issued a statement that Legionnaire Cherbacheff was dead, killed by a patrol in the hills of the border, and that El Moskou was a myth, or at best a new name for some veteran raiding chieftain. This was done so that his example would not be followed by the more impressionable and reckless Legionnaires.

No one was deceived. The blow had been too well prepared, taking into account the passage overhead of two scout planes from the field at Colomb-Béchar. This was made clear when the pilots reported sighting the detachment some thirty minutes before the attack and receiving from its chief a signal that all was well.

For several weeks the military authorities refused to dignify the new menace with visible preparations and

maintained the same garrisons in outposts as previously. But the wiping out of an infantry patrol within thirty miles of Ashanat caused the rapid transfer of additional troops southward. In this instance the victims had been Senegalese Tirailleurs, negro soldiers from West Africa, and it was claimed that the survivors had been taken away and sold as slaves. At four thousand francs a slave, the raiders had netted a neat profit.

Dugard's company at Krederville was ordered to prepare for hasty departure. The Legionnaires were not eager to participate in operations against El Moskou, for the new chieftain seemed to spare Legion members. A lieutenant of the mounted company reported that he had picked up a letter found in the path of his detachment, secured beneath a large stone. The message, signed by Cherbacheff, informed the officer that he could have fired upon his former friend and killed off many with impunity. The Russian added that he had been content to maneuver about, to lure the section into a precarious spot, to prove that those who had called him a poor leader had been mistaken.

"They'll never get him unless the Legion is set after him," Legionnaires declared. "He's too smart for the French."

"He'll soon cash in on his loot and beat it," others opined.

They were wrong. Cherbacheff reappeared, this time to ambush an official party composed of officers. He killed five on the spot and captured the highest in rank. The manner of this unlucky man's death was described in several fashions, each one more gruesome than the others. Before the printing ink was dry on the newspapers reporting the outrage, Dugard's company was entraining for the Sahara.

REACHING Colomb-Béchar, it was split up into sections which were dispatched to occupy blockhouses in replacement of native units deemed too timid for the task to come. Maillebois's section was sent to Post Mechaye, south of the Shekkyat Pass.

The place was a quadrangle of walls on a naked plateau—a dreary, sun beaten dump within a barbed wire enclosure. The officer who commanded the section of Algerian troopers stationed there for months declared himself happy to leave.

The Legionnaires cleaned out the barracks, settled themselves as comfortably as possible, and there remained nothing to be done save await developments.

Kenney did not suffer much, as Saharan life was an old story to him. But Maillebois, who had not lived in the desert before, soon became depressed.

His one consolation was that Post Mechaye was connected with the nearest station of troops, Post Larbya, by a telephone line. Several times a day Maillebois could converse at length with the lieutenant in charge there, a young chap of the same promotion from the military school.

Adjutant Stappers, second in command, and Kenney, senior sergeant, took charge of sports and amusements. Maillebois was so demoralized that he could not do anything with conviction. Choirs were formed, one of Germans, one of Russians, and other available talent discovered. For Legionnaires, who possess much philosophy and patience, the routine soon became pleasing.

With the arrival of strong Legion elements in the region, El Moskou's activities ended quickly. The Native Intelligence Service reported that he had taken his band northwest, beyond Midelt, and that he might be expected to operate somewhere near Beni-Mellal.

Weeks passed, and vigilance on the desert fringe lessened perceptibly. Before long the old careless routine was reestablished and fatigue parties were sent out casually, with but few armed guards.

Months elapsed.

More than a year had gone by since Cherbacheff had deserted, and El Moskou had shown no sign of activity in the neighborhood of the Morocco-Al-

gerian frontier in several months. The operations on a large scale which the government had feared he would initiate had not occurred. It was patent that the Russian had given his full measure, that he was simply a skilled raiding chieftain, lacking ambition or ability for greater deeds.

Early in January rumors circulated that the section would leave Post Mechaye to go back to Krederville. Many of the men made application for Asiatic service.

On the morning of All Kings' Day, which is celebrated by many Frenchmen, Maillebois sent for Kenney. Their relations had not become cordial, but within the narrow confines of the outpost the officer had watched himself.

"How would you like a change, Kenney?"

"Fine, Lieutenant."

"A party of civilians, crossing the Sahara by automobile, has stopped at the Post of Larbya. My friend telephoned me that he was sending a car for me. The noncommissioned men and the chauffeurs are having a big dinner also, and you might like to join them. It's only forty kilometers away, less than an hour's ride. Thought you might be glad to come along. That will give me company. Adjutant Stappers will take charge."

It is difficult to make clear what a large gathering may mean to men isolated in the Sahara. Kenney was tempted. He understood the motive for Maillebois's invitation. If the Legionnaires might talk about the officer's unauthorized trip, they would keep silent if Kenney were along, for the sergeant was popular.

"We might get into trouble for leaving the post with but one experienced chief, Lieutenant," Kenney pointed out. "There's a rule against leaving the post, and another against single cars traveling unescorted in the Sahara bearing army men."

"I would be the one blamed, and I am willing to chance it," Maillebois retorted. "It would take six hundred riflemen to storm this place, and where will they come from? The planes would have signaled them long ago."

"The planes never spotted Cherbacheff, Lieutenant."

"That name again?" Maillebois smiled, shrugged. "Really, it's an obsession with you."

"He might appear suddenly."

"I'm knocking wood, Kenney." Maillebois struck the table with his knuckles. "That should satisfy you! Come—by the time any outsider learns of the trip, we'll be back here, safely. Cherbacheff is clever, but he is not gifted with supernatural powers. For that's what you fear, that he's after me?"

"He's stubborn, Lieutenant." Kenney lifted his hand in surrender. "I suppose you're right. I am too superstitious."

WHERE the caravans took one hundred and forty days to cross the Sahara from Colomb-Béchar to Timbuktu, motor cars cover the distance in less than eight days. And the forty kilometers between Mechaye and Larbya, which once would have consumed a full day of riding, could be done in forty-five minutes. This miracle, operated in the space of a decade, has given even experienced Saharans the illusion that speed is synonymous with safety.

At eleven o'clock the car announced by telephone slid to a stop before the gate. It was a touring machine, with a powerful motor, solid and compact. The tonneau was empty and a civilian chauffeur was behind the wheel. Save for the repeating carbine within reach of his right hand, there was nothing to suggest that he drove in a very dangerous zone. Heedless of the sun, he wore a ragged cloth cap, pulled over his hair, and greasy overalls.

Adjutant Stappers escorted Maillebois and Kenney to the car.

"Call me up at once if anything happens," the officer said.

"I have fifty rifles here, Lieutenant." Stappers grinned, his thick yellow mustache lifting on either side of his red nose. "Guess this post will be where you leave it tonight."

Maillebois nodded and addressed the chauffeur—

"Ill take the wheel, old man."

"I regret, Lieutenant. Can't be done."

"Why not?" Maillebois smiled with visible irritation. "I have driven cars since I was ten. Certainly I would not hurt your bus."

"Never can tell," the chauffeur drawled. "This is my job, and I'm not going to lose it. Further, my boss gave me orders never to let a stranger drive."

"But—"

"Sorry," the civilian repeated.

Maillebois climbed into the back seat, and Kenney sat at his side. They shook hands with Stappers, waited until the gate had closed behind him, then prepared for the trip. A white cloak was draped over their knees and they placed cotton veils over their lips and nostrils to keep out flying sand.

"Ready—"

The chauffeur shifted the gears; the car leaped forward. The fifteen kilometers to the hills were covered in ten minutes, then the driver had to slow down, for the road became very rough through the Shekkyat Pass, strewn with boulders and pitted with holes. The lieutenant and Kenney, clinging to the sides of the car, laughed as they jolted along.

The chauffeur turned often to shout information.

"Good stretch ahead! Rotten spot! Must slow down—loose sand!"

In the middle of the pass he cut down to thirty kilometers to avoid the soft spots in which the car might have become mired. His experienced eyes picked the right path, identified the soil, as he ran the wheels on his own tracks made on the trip up. Sixty yards to right and left reared steep, pebbly slopes, making sharp, jagged outlines against the luminous sky.

Kenney stared at the crests uneasily. The professional soldier acquires a fear of narrow places favorable for ambush, in which he may be fired upon without a fair chance to defend his skin. The chauffeur noticed his worry and laughed.

"Eh, I was over this way not an hour ago. Nothing happened. This road's safe as the boulevards."

HE HAD not ceased speaking when the front tire blew out, and the car lurched. The driver's first instinct was to put on the brakes. Then the sharp, slapping report of a rifle resounding very near gave warning that a bullet had caused the damage. The chauffeur was a resolute, quick witted man. He knew that even on one stripped rim he could cover several miles before the spokes smashed, and that men, afoot or mounted, could not catch up with the machine before the spare wheel had been adjusted.

Maillebois and Kenney had dropped to the bottom of the car; they waited with automatic pistols ready. The same thought occurred to both that firing from a moving car at distant, dimly discerned, moving silhouettes with pistols was not likely to get results. So they saved their cartridges. But the officer rose and reached for the chauffeur's carbine, a weapon holding sixteen shots, an American gun called *settasha* by the natives.

The civilian darted one hand to clutch at the weapon. Some dim instinct of self-preservation, unreasonable but powerful, urged him to keep the gun for his own use. There followed an oddly comic scene in the tragedy. Maillebois shouted explanations, the chauffeur drove with one hand and clung to his carbine with the other.

Bullets sought the car, the missiles rasped on the metal, and glittering, smooth streaks appeared where the paint was scraped away by flying lead.

The chauffeur was hit. His head snapped back, his mouth opened. In a

spasm of pain, he wrenched the wheel. The battered rim struck a stone. The spokes shattered.

The machine seemed about to turn over, righted itself, then the motor died suddenly. In a last, automatic gesture, the chauffeur's feet had pressed on the brakes, lifted from the gas feed. While Kenney shoved the body aside and tried to slide behind the wheel, Maillebois tore the carbine from the dead man's hand and opened fire.

Lead was pattering into the radiator.

"No use," Maillebois said, holding the gun to his shoulder. "She's stalled. Couldn't roll a hundred yards if you got her going."

His shots rattled, then he groped into the side-pockets for ammunition. Kenney peered at the crests. No one was in sight, but a small, white cloth fluttered, held from behind cover.

"Strange," Maillebois mused aloud. He laughed. "Might as well quit, Kenney. We're in plain sight; they're under cover." He tossed the gun away and waved his handkerchief. "If we ever get out of this, Kenney, I'll trust your premonitions."

In answer to the signal a man appeared, walking down the slope. Others followed, spaced widely, crouching, ready to dodge. Kenney at once knew the leader to be Cherbacheff. In a minute thirty-odd Moroccans surrounded the car—skinny, tall, half nude men with unkempt beards and faded rags wound about their swarthy skulls. The Russian spoke to them and they made no hostile move.

"Get out of it," Cherbacheff ordered. "Drop your guns and follow me."

The two Legionnaires left the car, were led up the slope, down again into a ravine where more men were waiting with two saddled horses.

"I figured on you and the chauffeur," Cherbacheff explained. "Sorry to hurry you, but we must get away. This car will be reported missing within thirty minutes, and the planes from Béchar will show up in an hour and a half. My men will conceal the wreck a bit, but the observers may see something to learn what happened. Come on."

The band started out. Before long Kenney had to yield his mount to one of the natives wounded by Maillebois. The slender warriors trotted tirelessly, and Kenney understood the phenomenal mobility of the raiders as he tried to keep pace with them. These men were capable of covering seventy-five to eighty kilometers a day, on foot. Cherbacheff, who was stripped as they were, appeared to run with the same ease.

After an hour of travel the little troop entered another ravine where other men were waiting, grouped around small fires. As Cherbacheff hailed them, they threw sand over the flames, and the wind soon dispelled the lingering smoke. Kenney admired the calm manner in which they took precautions, figuring the limit of safety to the last second.

Brown camel's hair cloaks were stretched overhead, pinned to the rock wall, held down to the ground with heavy stones. Men and horses were concealed beneath these, which, from the air, could not be distinguished from the surroundings. It was simple, most effective camouflage.

CHERBACHEFF squatted beside his prisoners.

"Can't do anything until the planes have passed over. We can talk a bit." He nodded to Maillebois. "I'm glad to have you here, Lieutenant."

"Holding us for ransom?" the officer questioned calmly.

"No. Wouldn't sell you for your weight in gold."

"You compliment me," Maillebois said with cool irony. "Am I to be murdered?"

"No. You'll do me the honor to fight me."

"And should I refuse?"

"I know you will not refuse. Why waste words?"

"Right!" Maillebois nodded. "In the event I beat you?"

"You are free."

"Thank you, Cherbacheff," Maillebois said. "You are a gentleman, in your own way."

"Thank you for not doubting my word."

"Don't mention it, old chap." Maillebois smiled. "Tell me, how did you time this attack?"

"Tapped your wire." Cherbacheff indicated a small case of mahogany. "Tools and apparatus in that box. Have been listening several hours each day, for weeks. Knew you'd visit your friend some time, at Christmas, at New Year, and you were but a few days late."

"Tapped our wire? Fancy that, in the Sahara!" Maillebois mused. "You've been underestimated, Cherbacheff."

"That's my grievance, Lieutenant. I was not presumed to be officer material, although once an officer. Have I proved otherwise?"

"You're a rather good partisan leader," Maillebois admitted.

"Good enough to catch you," Cherbacheff pointed out.

He lifted his hand for silence. All could hear the faint drone of a motor, then of another.

"The planes. They'll look about here for an hour or so, then try elsewhere. This has happened many times. Even should they spot your car under the camouflage, it will be at least six hours before troops reach the pass. The Béchar armored car group is down south, near Adrar, hundreds of kilometers away. Too far to be employed against us today."

Cherbacheff was so certain that the planes would not return that day that he ordered the camouflage removed.

"BEFORE going further with our business," the Russian spoke to Maillebois, "will you tell Kenney why I singled you out for hatred? He is such a placid chap that he may not comprehend very well."

"Why not?" Maillebois smiled, nodding. "I personify three things that caused you suffering—officers who underestimated your ability, a society which laughed at your ambition to lift yourself into it—"

"The third may be more accurate. Speak."

"I personified youth, Cherbacheff. You're not a young man any more, and what rankled was that even with equal prestige, equal fortune, I would have been preferred."

"Jealousy?" The Russian shrugged. "Maybe. I had not thought of that. In reality, I shall inform you that what I hate in you is myself. I have played and laughed, in the past, at women whom other men worshiped. You made a fool of a girl who made a fool of me at your instigation. Did you intend to marry her?"

"Not in the least," Maillebois said calmly.

"What did you lose on your bet that Madeleine could not make an ass of me?"

"A box of cigarets against a pair of gloves."

The lieutenant had recovered his poise completely. Kenney felt a certain admiration for the young man. Maillebois was young, had deliberately wrecked another man's morale to amuse himself. But he was brave, and did not try to justify his deed. He was about to pay dearly for a flirtation, but he was willing to pay.

Cherbacheff picked up a pistol and indicated a pebble some distance away. He shattered it with a single shot.

"I shoot as well as you do, Maillebois. Our chances would be even and luck alone would decide. And it would be so quickly over with. Not at all satisfying to men who hate each other, eh?"

"Right," Maillebois agreed.

"We have neither foils, swords nor sabers. To fight with knives like a brace of apaches would be extremely vulgar. You are proud of your strength; I know mine. We start with bare hands,

and when the advantage is clear, one of my men will hand the winner a knife."

The officer paled, but nodded.

"Good idea. But will your men obey as readily for me as for you?"

"Yes." Cherbacheff looked at the sun. "We have an hour. The heat has abated. I'd advise you to strip a bit."

While Maillebois undressed to the waist, Cherbacheff turned to Kenney.

"You'll forgive me if I take precautions, Raoul?"

"How can I help it?"

"You're hot headed at times, and it may become exciting. The slightest intervention might affect the result. You'll be tied up."

Kenney was fastened solidly, propped against a boulder. Maillebois nodded to him comfortingly and addressed Cherbacheff—

"Kenney goes free, whatever happens?"

"Naturally. He's my witness that I did not murder you."

Maillebois shrugged.

"In that case, I am ready."

The natives, probably informed of their chief's plan in advance, crowded forward and settled themselves quietly. One of them held an unsheathed, curved knife on his lap.

"Come on," the Russian invited impatiently.

Maillebois glanced at the sergeant, lifted one brow in a quizzical, fatalistic wink, then faced his opponent. He was at a disadvantage, for Cherbacheff had looked forward to this moment for months, while he was caught unprepared. But if he felt fear, he hid it very well.

Save for the difference in ages, the two men were matched. Cherbacheff was the taller by an inch and quite as wide; but from the waist down the officer was sturdier, thicker. His pink torso, while less perfectly muscled than that of the Russian, was trim, strong. In contrast with the renegade's lustrous, curly black hair, Maillebois's seemed very light.

Both took deep breaths, alert for the first move.

"Come on—" Cherbacheff said.

They were three feet apart, and for several seconds made no move beyond the tentative forward jerk of the hands and a tensing of their bodies. Both were smiling, not the smirks of pent up rage or hatred, but with enjoyment. Maillebois appeared to have caught the other's lust for strife.

He waited for the eager Russian to rush, and slid to one side. Cherbacheff clutched at his waist, brought him to the ground. Maillebois had foreseen this and was ready. Bending his legs, he kicked out with booted feet. His heels pounded three, four times on the other's skull and shoulders, then slipping, brought the first smear of blood from a gashed ear.

"*Sahahit, sahahit!*" a shrill cry rose from the natives. While this method of combat was new to them, they appreciated the craftiness of the Frenchman.

Cherbacheff's groping left hand reached upward, caught a flying ankle. Slowly he dragged himself closer to Maillebois, until they were locked face to face, writhing on the ground. Here the lieutenant made a mistake; instead of breaking clear and using his fists while his opponent was still dazed he continued to wrestle and was at a distinct disadvantage.

The Russian threw him repeatedly, and upon the hard packed sand the impacts shook the young man severely. Kenney saw that the renegade was playing for time to clear his head, and knew that should Maillebois concentrate upon hitting he would win.

But his interest as a spectator was so intense, his aroused sense of fair competition so strong, that he repressed his longing to shout advice. Mauled, breathless, dripping sweat, the officer broke free. One of his eyes bled, for Cherbacheff had gouged him. He shook his head, snorted.

When Cherbacheff leaped at him again, he mechanically brought both

fists into his stomach. The blows smacked meatily, and the native spectators groaned and swayed. Then a half-hook, half-uppercut dropped the Russian. Maillebois kicked him hard in the ribs.

The minutes that followed were wild and confused. They punched and kicked. They clutched, fell and rolled over and over. Cherbacheff laughed shrilly. The refined young officer, swept by insane rage, cursed.

"Salopard, cochon!"

Their clawing nails left long, oozing scratches on shoulders and backs. Maillebois butted; Cherbacheff used his knees. Neither man was a good boxer, but both were courageous and strong.

They would separate, grin, close in again. The officer, being heavier, invariably drove the Russian before his attack until Cherbacheff, braced on his wiry cavalryman's legs, stopped him short. At times the fighters were so confused with their black shadows under the intense downpour of sunset light that it became difficult to discern anything.

The end came suddenly.

Cherbacheff, knocked down by a hard punch, seemed to bounce from the sand and his whole body struck Maillebois with a single impact. The officer fell in his turn. The Russian dropped upon him, twisted and wrenched. After that, Maillebois was still, face in the sand, legs asprawl.

"El flissa," Cherbacheff called.

The naked blade whirled in the light and the Russian caught it.

"Stop that, Michel, stop—"

Cherbacheff did not seem to hear. He lifted Maillebois' head and slipped the blade under the chin. It was a simple gesture, did not last a second. Then the Russian sank to his knees beside the corpse.

"El ma!" he cried. "Water!"

One of his men ran forward, held a water skin to his lips. Kenney saw his flanks heave, distend with pleasure as he sucked in the fluid. Then Cherbacheff stood, looking wildly at Kenney, and threw his head back.

He laughed.

KENNEY stood before the gathering of officers lined behind the long table in the Honor Room, at Sidi bel Abbes. On the walls were spread mementos of the many campaigns in Europe, Africa, Asia and America, in which the famous corps had taken part—lacquered pagoda fans from the Tonkin, long barreled rifles with gold and silver ornaments from Morocco, the spears taken from Mexican lancers. This room was a shrine wherein were kept the physical emblems of what composed the Legion's morale.

"Your story is probably true," Colonel de Tellor said. "Nevertheless, I don't think we can avoid a court-martial."

The sergeant was accused of complicity in the murder of Lieutenant Maillebois. He had nothing but his unsupported word to prove that he had been tied, unable to help. His known friendship with Cherbacheff counted against him. It was said, rightly, that the sergeant had quarreled with Maillebois several times. And since few would believe that the raiders had tapped the telephone wire, the majority thought that Kenney had contrived to supply advance information to his former comrade.

"All agree that it is suspicious for you to emerge without a scratch when your chief was brutally murdered. A loyal man would have interfered at the cost of his life."

"Lieutenant Maillebois surrendered in the car, Colonel. I would have fought had he ordered me. I could not disobey. I was tied during the fight. It was a fair combat."

"Sorry, Kenney," the colonel rose. "You have town liberty, on parole."

"Agreed, Colonel."

Kenney left the room.

Outside, an impulse came to him to

desert. He could reach Oran in a few hours, had enough money to bribe his way to Spain or the Riff. He decided against it, knowing that in a murder case he could be brought back. In the event of flight, he was not a deserter from the Legion but a fugitive from common law.

Popular feeling was strong against him, against Cherbacheff. And he understood, when he scanned the papers, that he could not hope for acquittal. He had no proof of his innocence. Even without proof of guilt, he was sure to get a long prison sentence. And he waited for court-martial.

Two days later he read an item in the Oran paper.

> Colomb-Béchar, February 2nd. Our correspondent informs us that Cherbacheff, Michel, deserter from the First Foreign Regiment of Infantry, known throughout the Sahara as El Moskou, surrendered himself today to the officer in charge of the native intelligence office. He stated that, being the only creditable witness in the case of Sergeant Kenney, he had decided to attend the trial. The Russian denied that he committed a civil crime, and stated that he would resume his liberty and activities as soon as he had cleared his friend. This bizarre episode adds a chapter to the long list of phenomenal acts performed by Legionnaires, and will not startle those familiar with the corps.

The colonel summoned Kenney within an hour. He informed him that Cherbacheff's surrender and sworn statement freed him automatically. The Russian had brought with him the equipment used in tapping the telephone line, and had affidavits from several of his followers, stamped by the Kaid of Tafilalet, valid in legal matters. The mob, being given a victim, was no longer interested in Kenney.

"You're transferred to Morocco by special decision," the colonel concluded. "In compensation for your trouble, you'll find the stripes of adjutant before long. I have arranged that you shall not be called upon to testify against your friend at the trial. Your sworn statement shall be enough. By the way, Cherbacheff will be at the prison in Oran by tomorrow. You have permission to go up for a day, and here is a pass to allow you to visit him. Not strictly regular, but it will do. I thought you might like a last interview. You're not likely to see him again, and he's done you a good turn. He's a good friend."

Kenney had expected a bitter moment when he parted from Cherbacheff. But he was relieved to find the Russian cheerful, optimistic. Before they shook hands for the last time, the prisoner memorized Kenney's address in the United States.

"This is just another episode in my life," he said. "I can not escape from here. They watch me too closely; and I've had enough of Africa, anyway. But they won't execute me. I'll get a life sentence, that's all." Cherbacheff laughed cheerfully. "Which means that I shall be sent to Guiana. Men less strong and less clever than I am have escaped from there. That uneducated, ignorant cabinet-maker chap, Dieudonné, for instance. I shall reach Brazil or Dutch Guiana, and from there make my way to North America. When are you going back?"

"My reenlistment expires next year. I shall go home for a few months, in any case."

"That'll make it just right," Cherbacheff nodded approvingly. "And we'll have a good time together once again." The Russian paused in deep thought. "There must be something for me to do in your country, eh?"

"Surely," Kenney agreed.

And he found himself worried about Cherbacheff's behavior in his home town. For that was the Russian's way: One felt somehow that he would get through any obstacles, and laugh—laugh as he laughed when Kenney walked down the gloomy passage away from Cherbacheff's cell.

The Dark Wind

By S. B. H. HURST

A LITTLE cottage of the rambling fishing village on the sand dunes; in the one bed a young woman, desperately sick. Standing by the bed a big, powerful young man, her husband. Sitting there, taking her pulse, the old village doctor . . .

Presently the doctor stood up. He beckoned gently to the young man. They went to the door, then outside. The wind, rising to a gale, flowed heavily past, like a river growing stronger.

"Bill," said the doctor, "you know she's in a bad way. It's no use trying to hide it from you."

"It's all over the village," said the young man, his chest heaving. "And a dark wind blowing and making up."

"Yes," said the old doctor. The wind took his great beard and tossed it against his face. "Yes, Bill, this Winter of 1883 is one of the worst the world has known. I began to practise medicine the year the queen was crowned, but never did I see anything like this. There is not a woman in the village free to come to nurse your wife. Sickness everywhere—like the old plague of London you may have heard about."

"What is it, Doctor?"

"They call it influenza, but that's all we can do—just give it a name and pray to God," said the old man solemnly. "You must do your own nursing, William. Every house in the village has been struck by this sickness. You must not leave your wife for a minute. Remember that! Do what I told you about the medicine I left—but don't leave her alone a minute. In this sickness they get hysterical and go out of their heads—and to leave them alone is torture. Fear comes to them. Do your best, William. I will come again in the morning."

He went down the seashell bordered path, through the gate of driftwood, and out among the rushes of the dunes, from which the sand was blowing in the gale-like spray from the tops of waves.

Bill leaned against the cabin. A dark wind growing in force, and in his home a shipwreck—his wife dying. The sea birds were flying inland. The heavy clouds were flying low. And a cold that froze the marrow. Bill looked at the snow lying between the dunes, at the sky and the raging sea.

"He said for me not to leave her a minute," he muttered, ashamed of his

doing so.

Then he went inside and lighted the candle, the only illumination they had. It showed an old clock, a faded carpet, some pictures on the walls, a few deal chairs and a table; and, in the bed, the dying woman. She was lying very quiet now.

The dark came quickly. The gale was increasing savagely.

Bill looked at the white face on the pillow. He had faced death and danger all his life, but this was too much for him. He felt so helpless. Even the doctor could do nothing.

The candle flickered, for the gale was forcing itself into the cabin. A dark wind . . . Why did they call it a dark wind? All his life, since he was a small boy, he had heard that term—a *dark wind.* But no man seemed able to explain it. It was not merely a gale without moon or stars. No, there was something uncanny about the dark wind. It was *felt* rather than understood. A wind of disaster that came howling upon the village, like a dark river, like— Bill shook his tired head and adjusted the covers on the bed.

The young wife moved and moaned. Bill tried to get her to swallow the medicine, but she pushed the spoon away and the stuff spilled over the bed cover. How the wind did howl! In all his life, spent on that bleak coast, Bill had never heard such a gale. It was so strong that the rushes on the dunes could be heard shivering—and that with the cabin door fast shut. Rushes screaming like trees!

A dark wind! So went the night. The clock made its usual preliminary noises, then deliberately struck eleven.

Thud!

Bill stiffened by the bedside.

Thud!

Again that dull noise coming down the wind. That herald of death and pain —the minute gun at sea!

Some ship in distress in that awful gale. Bill trembled. The lifeboat would go out. Since he became a man he had never failed to muster among those daring, unpaid heroes who manned the lifeboat—

Thud!

But he could not go tonight. He could not leave his dying wife. He wondered whether there were enough well men in the village to man the boat. *Thud!* How that minute gun reached his spine!

The woman moaned and tossed in delirium. Once again Bill tried to give her the medicine. This time she swallowed a few drops.

Thud!

Yes, a ship aground on the Stanna, that bad sand. Breaking up, likely, in the terrible sea.

BILL'S keen senses detected a new noise in the gale. Yes, the feet of a man running. Ah, the garden gate creaked differently from its wind blown sound. Bill got to his feet. As the heavy knocking came upon the door he opened it.

"Come in!" he shouted, for the gale tore at his voice and threatened to carry the cabin door away. "Come in, Ted Rivett!"

Ted came in and shut the door. He was a middle aged man, and had been for years the captain of the lifeboat.

"There's a ship on the Stanna, Bill. We got to go! I can muster a crew, if you'll make one of them!"

"Ted—" Bill faltered. He pointed to the white face on the bed. "How can I go?"

Ted nodded.

"There's maybe fifteen lives we might save," he said.

"But I can't go and leave her—to die, maybe, in the night all alone. The doctor said I must not leave her. You can see—"

"I see, Bill. No, a man can't go and leave his wife to die alone in the night."

Their weather-beaten faces met in the understanding of pain.

"But we must take the boat out," said Ted. "Even if short handed, we must do our best. We can't leave fifteen men

to die out there in that cold and storm when we have a stout boat here."

"I can't go!" was all Bill could say.

Then he knelt by the bed, taking the frail hands in his.

"I'll be going, Bill," said Ted.

The girl stirred feebly. She seemed to have come up from some deep place of coma—to speak.

"Wait," she said.

"Eh?" asked the astounded Ted.

"Bill," she went on. She raised a wasted hand and pointed to the door. "Go, Bill, and God's will be done."

"But—" Bill got to his feet—"but, dear, I can't go and leave you here alone in the night. The doctor said—"

"Bill—" her voice was hardly a sound —"maybe I'm dying. I think so. I heard the doctor. But there's men dying on that ship on the Stanna. Go in the boat. Save them!"

Bill was sobbing.

"How can I go? God! I will have to put the candle out, lest it burn down and set the place afire. How can I leave you here in the dark and all alone—to die?"

"There's fifteen men, at least, on that ship, Bill. Go."

"I won't leave you!"

"Bill, go! Put out the candle and go, husband!"

"But—"

"Kiss me, Bill, and go to your duty. I'm asking you to, Bill! It's likely the last thing I'll ever ask of you. Go!"

She sank back, exhausted, on the pillow.

"But, dear?"

There was no answer. Bill looked at Ted, his strong body pulsing in agony. Suddenly he bent and kissed his wife. Then he put on his oilskins and blew out the candle. Ted opened the door and the gale flung itself at them like a mad animal.

Under the lee of the cottage Bill sobbed out—

"Maybe I'll see her again when the sea gives up its dead!"

Thud!

Ted slapped the younger man on the back.

"Bill, a man must be a man—though, God help us, it's hard! Run!"

So they ran through the storm to where the men who could be gathered were launching the lifeboat.

The gale snarled, the sea ravened. Twice, thrice, they tried to get the boat afloat. No men, no women, watched, for sickness and death held the villagers home. Again the great waves washed the boat back on the beach. Again they tried. Panting, they worked—and what kindly gods the sea holds pushed with them. The boat gained headway—past the tiny breakwater—afloat.

The men rowed desperately to save lives—the heroic human spirit! If they failed, if their boat swamped, then there would be women without husbands in the village, and the children's daily bread missing. If they won, they would save lives. And that would be all their reward. A strange race to a latter day understanding. They worked and risked their lives because it seemed their duty so to do—and they were never paid a penny for doing this.

Thud!

Again the minute gun. The men of the lifeboat dug their oars into the raging seas and pulled. What skill of oarsmanship was needed to handle an oar in that sea!

The dark wind pulsed and tore upon them like some prehistoric river loosened from the bowels of eternity. And on every straining oar, Death, like a raven, sat mocking their efforts. It did not seem possible that even the most skilfully handled boat could live in such a sea.

Aft, like a god of the storm, Ted Rivett steered the boat. The icy spray cut like flying glass. The wind laughed like a fiend. And the Stanna, upon which the wrecked ship was breaking up, was an eight-mile pull dead to windward.

Thud!

There was no word in the boat. No

need for Ted the captain to call on his men for effort. They were giving all they had, and would go on doing so.

How the minutes sped. The lifeboat had struggled a mile against wind and sea and tide. Bill, panting, his great strength thrust into his oar as if he and the oar were one, felt his body becoming an automaton; his mind no longer felt the strain. The howling gale, the tempestuous seas, the boat, the crew of the lifeboat—all these were great things outside Bill; things which he seemed to be watching as through a glass darkly. Not that he analyzed his feelings this way; no, he was aware of this but content to accept it. For his mind had drifted back to a Springtime of several years before, when he courted and won Mary his wife.

And with this it seemed that she was sitting on the thwart by his side, and that her little hands were beside his upon the oar, pulling with him, helping him and the boat toward the wreck.

It was pleasant, very pleasant, for a moment or so. And then it came to the man what this meant. Mary was dead! With that he came back to the boat and reality as from a dream. Mary was dead. He swallowed hard, and his chest ached. Mary was dead . . . The sea and the cold and the dread dark wind—all these were real again. Mary was dead.

Ted was shouting—

"Ain't heard the gun for a long spell."

"Maybe run out of powder," yelled a man forward of Bill.

"Likely breaking up," shouted Ted. "But we be doing well, men!"

Ted steered, still a god of the storm, coaxing and holding the lifeboat—a boat tossed and harried by the seas—soothing her, pointing her toward where men faced death. And the men, unsung heroes of a saga beyond the words of any writer, thrust their souls and laboring bodies into that same splendid direction.

There was no sound of the minute gun, no grim thud coming down the wind. Only a strange silence in all that awful noise, a silence of men amid the vicious howlings of the element.

"Maybe she's gone?"

Bill shouted this. Seemingly his tortured lungs and riven heart had to find expression in words.

"Maybe! God help them!" answered Ted Rivett.

"She—must — have broken — broken up!"

This from the man at the bow oar. Bill had the strange feeling that this shipmate was talking from a mile behind him.

"Nothing could stand that pounding on the Stanna." Ted gave this opinion in broken shreds of talk. A word as he bore down to starboard on the steering oar, another as he steadied his helm, and, again, another word as he came up to port.

A WAVERING red flame broke out far ahead.

"A tar barrel," shouted the men in the lifeboat.

Bill did not turn his head to look. A burning tar barrel. A signal of distress. Yes, that meant she was breaking up; no danger of setting fire to her; explaining why the minute gun had ceased—this for the space of a second occupied Bill's brain. He did not feel very interested. He could not. He was pulling at his oar with all his strength, as if in a race. It was a race—a race with death. But in Bill's mind was no reaction to this heroic stress. No; for again the elemental fight in which he was involved seemed far away, outside of him, as, again, he saw it all through a glass darkly. Again he felt the nearness of his wife's body. He could not see her, but he felt that she was there, sitting beside him, her little hands upon the oar, helping.

He could not understand, except that she was dead. In some dim way this seemed clear. But he could not understand. He was just a rough, strong, hard working fisherman. He had heard of such things. On that hard coast strange things happened. No one understood them. It was just his turn

to have this happen to him. His throat felt dry, his heart raced, his soul felt dead. He gritted his teeth and put all he had into his oar. Yet he still felt that his wife was pulling with him.

"I been thinking too much about her lying there alone, dying," he sobbed.

"There's men aboard her yet!" sang out Ted Rivett.

"Can see their figgers coming atween us and the burning tar barrel!" shouted another man jubilantly.

With this Bill came back to reality again. Again the heavy oar, the sweat and salt water on the loom of it, the blade far out from the boat, the seas that tried to tear it from his grip, the cruel dark wind bearing down on all, like a giant, unseen hand—and the ship ahead toward which they were straining. And, also, his knowledge of that coast. For by the Stanna the tide made first, like a millrace. Bill thought of that tide. The day of the month. Yes, and the hour of the night, or rather, morning. Could they make the ship against that tide?

"A bad tide, likely," Bill shouted to Ted.

"A hell of a tide around the gut of the sand, I'm thinking." Ted's reply came in fragments, as the wind allowed his voice to be heard.

The burning tar barrel, a pillar of fire by night, to guide what rescuers might come, as yet unseen, unknown to the sailors on the wreck, who did not know help was coming—the burning tar now flamed mast high and beckoned. The wind threw its flame and smoke hither and yon until it seemed like a living thing in an agony of desperate signaling.

And, like the shadows of Pluto's cave, the dim figures of men about the fire. Moving, waiting, helpless—for their boats had been carried away by the sea —shipwrecked sailors waiting for, but hoping against, death.

The lifeboat ceased to gain headway. She was held by wind and tide like a lost planet between two powerful suns. Her men strained like giants, but their efforts were as futile as the struggles of brave men against an implacable fate.

The devil of the dark wind, the rush of the deep sea and the moon driven swirl of the tide made human effort impotent.

And this was an added agony to the sailors on the wreck, who at last had seen the lifeboat making its heroic struggle.

Ted reached down and lifted the lantern, the boat's only source of light. He waved it to show he would keep on trying, that he would stand by whatever happened. Not by the letdown of a single drop of toil did the men of the lifeboat cease rowing.

But they knew that the wrecked ship could not last. The pounding she had been taking for hours had proved her a staunch, well built bark, but now, with that awful tide adding to the violence of the wind and sea, it was obvious that she could not last much longer. She would break up before the swirl around the gut of the sand let down enough to allow the lifeboat to get alongside. This seemed impossible to avert.

The flame and smoke of the burning barrel of tar moved among what masts and spars still stood on the wreck in weird, uncanny shapes. Belchings of flame in the wild gusts of the wind. The figures of the sailors, shouting, praying, calm or panic-struck as their individual souls directed. Rather like a corner of hell filled with bemused spirits crying for aid to a cosmos that watched and listened impotently.

"We can't gain a fathom!" This almost despairing cry from Ted.

The men of the lifeboat pulled and labored, but their craft might as well have been chained to a rock.

"Ah!"

This the chorus of the gallant rescuers. They saw the wreck move and seemingly turn upon itself, like a ship of cards falling. They had seen this happen before upon that awful Stanna sand. The burning pillar of tar rocked and swayed with more vehemence than ever the gale

had made it. The wreck was breaking up!

"Ah! She's going! God help 'em! Watch, men, watch. Pick up what we can!"

THEN, on a sudden, darkness. The wreck had gone to pieces, and the illuminating barrel of tar had sunk, hissing, into the deep. A vast darkness through which pulsed the rigor of the cruel dark wind. And a cold that numbed.

Men in that icy water. Scattered men. And only one tide-torn boat to aid them. But in that boat were men—*seamen*. The lifeboat did not now need to buck the tide, indeed, the tide now became useful. She, with the canny, splendid Ted handling her, and her crew working as one man, darted hither and there, much like a great bird saving its young that had been thrown from the nest by the tree's falling. Here was a man. They got him. Another—almost flailed by the heavy oars, but saved by a strong grip. Another—the wreck's captain, this one—dragged over the stern by Ted himself. Another here! There!

The lifeboatmen, shouting, peering through the murk with keen, trained eyes, and darting their boat to the rescue . . . A great deed! A fine show of skill and bravery. They got them all. Every man cast into the boiling sea when the wreck broke up was picked up, shivering, dazed, hurt maybe, but safe.

"We'll turn for home," sang out Ted.

Not a sign of heroics or self-congratulation. It was their job. They were not paid to do it, but it was their job. They turned the lifeboat homeward. They talked not at all. They were tired, worn out, as if they were turning homeward at sunset, after a day's fishing.

And now the gale and tide were with them. The lifeboat could almost go home unaided. Except that Ted still had to steer her cannily, for she was low in the water with fourteen men they had saved.

But on that homeward voyage there was no sign of any sun. In the throb of that dark wind it seemed that the sun had left the world forever—leaving only a dark Winter morning torn by a tempest. Very cold it was.

And the fourteen men saved were perishing with that cold. They were wet to the skin. The lifeboatmen did what they could—giving up their jackets and oilskins to cover the rescued, yet two of them died from exposure long before the boat began to head in for the tiny breakwater. A faint dawn made the Winter scene seem the more Wintry, just as the beginning of light showed how rough the sea was, how stern the storm. Vague shadows of the sand dunes as the boat coasted along. Dim outlines of the cottages of the villages. Lights in almost every window, where some one watched one who was sick. With, still, that dark wind blowing. Yet it was obvious now that it had done its worst, that its rage was abating.

The lifeboat house became dimly visible, just above the shadowy little breakwater across which the waves were breaking heavily. Then, looming like a strange giant, the old windmill which had ground the grain for that village for more than two hundred years.

BUT no crowd was on the shore to welcome its heroes home. Usually every man, woman and child in the village was there waiting in the wild wind. The women with their hearts in their throats lest a man of the lifeboat be lost or hurt. Now only three old men, dodderingly doing their best to help the lifeboat to its carriage, to run it up into the house, to help the rescued men ashore. These last would be taken to the black beamed tavern, and the Distressed Seamen's Act would care for them.

And the old men croakingly talking of other gales, when they were young men.

"Well," growled Ted, "it might have been worse."

"Eh?" from the old men.

"It might have snowed; then we couldn't have found the wreck!"

They got the boat into the boat house and shut the doors. Then every man went his own way.

By this time it was day, wan day of bleak Winter on the heel of a gale. Bill watched his mates go their ways. He dreaded to go his. What had happened in his home since he had put out the candle and left her alone in the dark?

"Curse the wreck!" he cried as he began to walk across the dunes. "I never should have left her. Coward I was, bothering with some strangers on that wreck and leaving my own wife to die in the dark alone!"

He began to run, the while his grief and weariness weighed down upon him like a world of pain.

"But she bade me go!"

He sought to find comfort in this memory.

"We saved fourteen men—two died. But—her in the dark, all alone. Swine I was, even if she made me go. I never should have let her send me. Now—now!"

He stumbled over a small hillock. He got to his feet and went on.

"O God, what is all the world, what is all the ships at sea and the men aboard of them, compared to the woman a man loves? And I went—and left her. O God, look down and damn my filthy soul!"

He flung open the gate. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. He could go no farther . . .

"It was the same as murdering her to leave her," he groaned. "For the doctor made me the order not to leave her alone."

The cottage door opened, and the old doctor stood there in the doorway, the wind playing havoc with his vast beard.

"Ye disobeyed orders," said the old man severely. "Come here! Don't stand there at the gate."

Bill obeyed. The doctor took his arm, pulled him into the cottage.

"I heard you went in the boat, so I came here," said the doctor.

Bill shivered. His eyes tried to become accustomed to the dim light of the room, for the candle was not lighted.

"She is sleeping," said the doctor very quietly. "See you don't waken her and —she will get well!"

Bill's chest was heaving. He could not speak. He made as if to go to the bed. The doctor held him.

"Take it easy," said the doctor. "You have no need to get fussed or worry."

"I left her all alone." Bill was near sobbing.

The doctor shook him gently.

"Maybe that saved her," he said.

"What?" gasped Bill.

"Thinking of you, in a way, gave her a sweat—and the fever broke," said the doctor.

"Thinking of me?" asked Bill.

"Aye, it was this way," said the doctor. "Her mind was full of you, and you rowing hard there in the boat. Just thinking of you, you see, before she slipped off into delirium. She was delirious when I got here—but deep in her mind, although she was unconscious of it all, was the picture of you out there in the storm, rowing."

"Rowing, Doctor? Picture of me rowing? How do you know that?"

"Because she was rowing, too—like she might have been trying to help you. Her little hands was going up and down the counterpane like she had an imaginary oar in her hands. And that exercise, as I see it, started the sweat. The sweat broke the fever, and now she will get well!"

"The sweat?" asked Bill.

"Just that—simple enough," said the doctor. "Feed her lots of milk and eggs and she'll be as right as a trivet in a couple of weeks."

"The sweat?" said Bill again.

"Yes, you big lummox! What's wrong with you? You're tired, Bill. Get off your wet clothes. Go on, now. I must be off. Got forty other patients to see this morning."

The SAGA *of the* SIXSHOOTER

(*III—Cap-and-Ball*)

By CARL ELMO FREEMAN

BY 1840 the cap-and-ball system was accepted as the very last word in firearms. Henry Derringer of Philadelphia had specialized in dueling pistols of the muzzle loading, cap-and-ball type, the most accurate weapons of their kind ever produced. He now produced a .52 caliber pocket pistol with a very short barrel, shooting a half-ounce slug of lead. It could not be shot with any more accuracy than you can throw a wet cob, but it was very popular. It was the man-killer's pet pistol. And since that time every short pocket pistol has been called a Derringer, regardless of who made it.

Ethan Allen patented a percussion double-action pistol in which the whole operation of turning the cylinder, cocking and tripping the hammer could be done with one pull of the trigger. In the beginning his output was almost entirely long barreled, more of a pocket rifle, but later he manufactured pocket pistols and pepperboxes.

Samuel Colt had turned out some excellent sixshooters which had been snapped up by Army officers. The heavier, or Walker, model had been adopted by the Texas Rangers. Captain McCullosh's Rangers gave battle with these guns under General Taylor at Monterey in 1846, and Taylor at once demanded them for his men. He sent Captain Walker East to get the guns. But Colt had in the meantime gone bankrupt, and neither he nor Walker could find a Walker Colt in the East to use as a model. So Colt designed one from memory, and contracted with Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, to make them.

Whitney had made thousands of the old flintlock muskets at his armory in Whitneyville. He soon filled the contract for 1000 sixshooters. The guns were long barreled, .44 caliber and weighed twice as much as our modern military .45 automatic. Colt received $28.00 each for them.

With this money Colt equipped a factory at Hartford, and when another Army order came in he made the guns himself. These were known as the Dragoon model and were manufactured from 1848 to 1850, some of them fitted with shoulder stocks so they could be used as short rifles.

The heirs of Edwin Wesson organized the Massachusetts Arms Company and began making revolvers at Chicopee Falls. Colt brought suit for infringement of his patent and the court restrained the Wesson company from production.

About this time Colt received a commission as lieutenant-colonel in the Connecticut militia; and, from about 1850, all his arms were stamped "Address Col. Sam'l Colt." The first commercial model that Colt made at his new factory in Hartford was a .31 caliber and became known as the "Wells Fargo," as that company used this arm for its messengers.

Sixshooters were now being sent over the Santa Fé trail to the great Southwest. Oregon and California immigrants did not consider themselves properly equipped unless they had a sixshooter in addition to their other arms when crossing the plains. The military escorts guarding wagon trains through the Indian country were armed with the

Dragoon model, issued in pairs to mounted troops and carried in holsters on the saddle.

The most popular cap-and-ball revolver among the plainsmen was the Colt Navy, caliber .36, Model 1851. On the cylinder was engraved a picture said to be an engagement between Texan sailing vessels and Mexican ships. It was smaller than the Dragoon model. This model was the most accurate of all the cap-and-ball sixshooters. Large quantities were bought by the United States Navy in 1852. Wild Bill Hickock carried two of these guns.

In 1855 Colt made his first solid frame revolver. It had the hammer on the side, and the cylinder pin was removable from the rear instead of the front.

About 1858 Remington & Sons brought out a solid frame revolver invented by Fordyce Beals. It was made in .31, .36 and .44 calibers. Because of its solid frame, neat and graceful design, and the fact that it was seldom out of order, it was a very popular gun. Thousands were used by the North during the Civil War. Beals also granted the right to manufacture this revolver to Eli Whitney and Union Arms Co. of New York. The Whitney product was not so nicely balanced as the Remington. But the .36 caliber was bought in large quantities by the Navy. The Union Arms Company made a five-shot revolver toward the end of the war, but it was not very popular.

At St. Louis, Independence, and Rubideau's Landing, on the Missouri, Colt, Remington and Whitney sixshooters were in great demand by wagoners, plainsmen and scouts. But the Freeman revolver, manufactured by Rogers and Spencer in a .44 caliber, seemed to be preferred by steamboat men.

Ethan Allen brought out a revolver with the hammer on the side of the frame like the Colt Model '55. In this gun the nipples for the caps were on the outside rear of the cylinder, instead of in the rear end, and the trigger guard, when released, formed the ramrod. It was made by the firm of Allen & Wheelock, which probably brought out the first double action revolvers made in this country. It was of the pocket type, caliber .31. Later a larger model was developed with a side hammer, something like the Colt Model '55, having a movable trigger guard which worked the rammer.

C. S. Pettingill of New Haven patented a hammerless revolver and arranged with the Brooklyn firm of Raymond & Robitaille to manufacture it. It was made in .36 and .44 calibers, well finished and a good looking gun, but it could not stand rough usage.

The Savage Revolving Arms Company, of Middletown, built a .36 caliber, solid frame revolver similar to the old Colier flintlock revolver. It was known as the H. S. North patent. It had two triggers. One, a ringed affair, cocked the hammer and turned the cylinder, which moved forward and cupped the rear end of the barrel for each shot. The other trigger tripped the hammer. Some of the Northern troops were armed with this gun, but it did not make a hit in the West because it was considered dangerous.

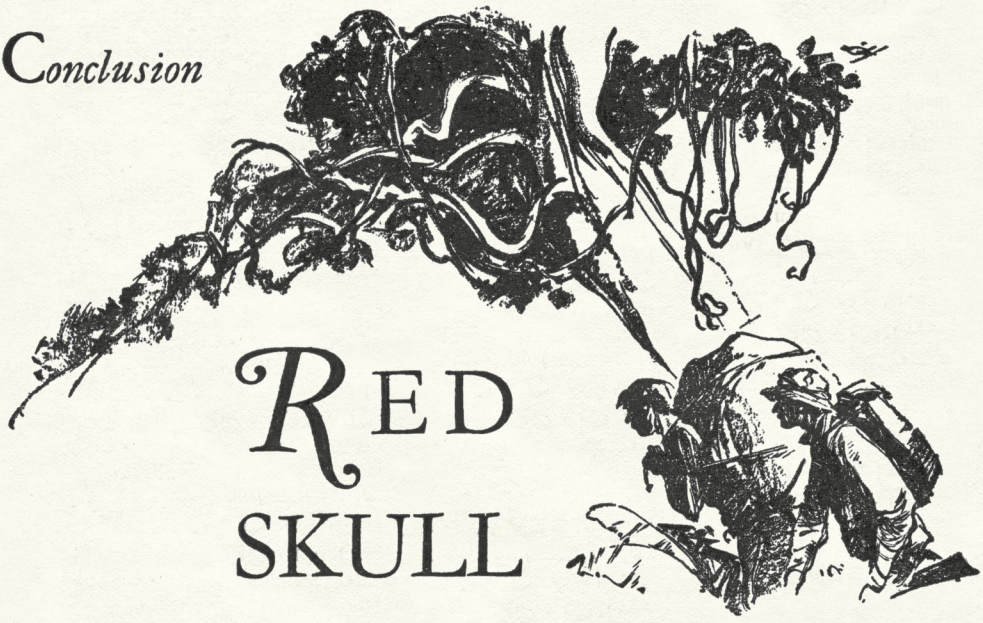
Probably the first "safety" of any practical use was on the Belgian Mangeot et Comblain double action revolver. You could "hammer the hammer" with perfect safety, and this made the gun a favorite with Confederate officers.

The Confederates also favored the Le Mat revolver, double action with a cylinder having ten chambers, built in .36 and .44 calibers, with a large gage, smooth bore barrel under the rifled one, designed to be charged with buckshot.

The Starr revolvers were made at Yonkers, New York, in .36 and .44 calibers, and about 48,000 of these guns were bought for use in the Civil War.

When metallic cartridges came into use thousands of these .44 caliber guns were altered to take .44 Colt cartridge—but no revolver ever attained the popularity of the Colt and Remington sixshooters among men of the West.

Conclusion



RED SKULL

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

The Story Thus Far:

McGREGOR, an ex-Marine, and his partner, Terrill, a scholarly adventurer, set out to sound the mystery surrounding a fabulous stone known as the Red Skull, believed to be the treasure house of a mythical Amazonian tribe called the Blancos Perdidos. Attacked on the trail by their boatmen, only McGregor managed to fight himself clear of their murderous knives. Alone he pushed on through the jungle.

Days later the American came up to his objective; but before night fell, when he could make his dash for the monstrous, man-like mass of stone, he found himself trapped by a band of native warriors. McGregor succeeded in dropping more than a few of his assailants; but finally succumbed to numbers.

A council of elders was hastily called to try the interloper. Standing before the old men, he was amazed to discover his captors to be white men—the language they spoke recognizable as a French patois!

McGregor addressed himself to the old chief—whom he mentally labeled the General—boldly demanding his release. He was told that no man coming to the Red Skull proceeded further. And, to illustrate his meaning, the general had a halfbreed Brazilian, captured a short time before, executed on the great stone.

McGregor was closely watched for his reaction. And, to his further amazement, his contemptuous grin in the general's face brought an answering smile. The old chief then explained that his tribe needed new blood; momentarily expected an attack from Brazilian neighbors. If McGregor would agree to drill his men in the use of firearms, procure them guns, he would be permitted to become one of the Blancos Perdidos by taking a warrior as a blood brother.

The American agreed, selecting a stalwart native known as Timothy. After the ceremony of adoption, Timothy explained that this tribe were the remnants of a party of French settlers, all that was left of a strong party sent for colonization from France centuries before. He also told McGregor that the Red Skull was indeed a treasure house.

The American then began to drill his warriors, using antiquated blunderbusses—brought by the original colonists—for arms. But as time passed and the general grew imperious in his demands for modern weapons such as McGregor carried, he persuaded Timothy to help him take enough of the treasure from the Skull to purchase arms from Brazilian cattlemen to the south.

Timothy agreed, and the brothers went that night to the Skull. But from the eminence they saw something that sent them creeping through the tall grass of the savanna a short time later: the glow of a camp-fire—raiders headed for the Skull.

Coming up to the party of outlanders, McGregor and Timothy attacked swiftly. Timothy rushed in and swept the standard of rifles into a nearby pool. McGregor hurled the six-foot spear that put the sentinel out of the fight.

Timothy swung up his war ax and crashed it down on an enemy's skull; then, swiftly sidestepping, he seized a gun from the man's nerveless hand.

THAT sidestep saved his life. Another rifle banged, and the bullet burned his side. Then from behind him hammered rapid reports. McGregor, using the dead sentry's gun, shot down the two remaining riflemen and a third opponent who drew a revolver.

Three men still were on their feet. One dived at a fallen rifle, grasped it, but never fired. A bullet from McGregor's weapon dropped him. The second lunged with a knife at Timothy, who took the blow on his gun barrel. The blade broke. Forthwith Timothy doubled his foe up with a shrewd kick; then, tossing his firearm behind him, again swung his ax . . .

These two had died at almost the same instant. Now, as McGregor ejected the spent shell and Timothy swung up his reddened ax again, the last of the invaders grabbed the revolver on the ground and opened fire at the blond man. Three shots cracked in a fierce flurry—too fierce, too fast, too hurried. All missed, flying to one side. As a fourth cartridge spat, McGregor's rifle banged in retaliation and Timothy's ax swished through air, thrown with furious force. The enemy reeled, staggered, fell, trying to shoot again, but powerless now to pull trigger. The bullet had caught him in the chest, the flying ax had hit his right arm, paralyzing it. As he swayed, the native bounded at him, grabbed up the wooden weapon, swung it down with conclusive sureness.

Wordless, the victors surveyed the small battleground, strode among the nearby trees, circled the pool, paused again among the scattered bodies. Then they glanced at each other with eyes still hard. In the bush they found no skulker, no sign of other men. In the clear space lay only corpses. Their daring raid had won complete success.

"Brother, you're a fighter!" approved McGregor.

Timothy's face shone at the curt praise. But vocally he disclaimed credit.

"A poor one," he deprecated. "I lost guns."

His head moved toward the pool into which he had cast the four rifles.

"Maybe not," differed McGregor.

And, after attentive survey of the black water, he stripped and waded in.

As he had judged, the small hole proved not to be deep; not more than eight feet from surface to lowest bottom. A few minutes of work, swimming, diving, groping in mud, sufficed to recover every weapon. When the last one was ashore Timothy grinned wholeheartedly. Then the comrades busied themselves collecting their other spoils of war.

When those spoils were fully gathered they slapped each other's backs joyously. There were the eight rifles, all of the usual .44 caliber; the one revolver, a .38, once nickelplated, now worn dull gray; three machetes, four knives, of varying lengths and shapes; and, most important, a staggering load of cartridges.

Without attempting exact count, McGregor estimated that each of the invaders had carried approximately three hundred bullets. Thus the captured ammunition aggregated at least two thousand rounds. Excepting perhaps a score of revolver cartridges, all were for the rifles.

Picking up the short gun which had repeatedly missed him, McGregor eyed it contemptuously, then aimed at a tree a few yards away and emptied its cylinder. Bushes at the right shuddered; the tree itself remained unpunctured. The cheap weapon, poorly made and seldom cleaned, was virtually useless except for murder at arm's length. McGregor tossed it into the pool and turned to inspect the rifles and the knives.

These, although worn by service, were well kept and sturdily dependable. Running a thumb along a keen knife edge, then glancing at the lean, wolfish men who had tramped so far with implacable

purpose, McGregor grinned again at Timothy. Only their own fast fighting, coupled with the momentary confusion of the suddenly aroused sleepers, had pulled them through. Given five seconds more, the Brazilians would have brought the surprise attack to a much different end.

NOW Timothy searched the clothing of the slain, finding nothing worth keeping. From two of the corpses he peeled the garments, and from these shirts and trousers he fashioned crude but serviceable packs. With their heavy loot slung on their backs and their wooden weapons once more in hand, the comrades plodded away through the dark tangle, to emerge presently on the broad prairie.

When McGregor had retrieved and relaced his boots they trudged away northward, walking heavily under their burdens, saying nothing, looking ahead with jubilance slowly waning. As the waterhole faded away behind them the vivid memories of the fight also dulled; and their minds, like their legs, reached forward toward their destination. For a long time neither spoke, but as they labored along each frowned with deepening thought. At length, when the top of the Skull loomed black against the stars, they stopped and looked each other straight in the eye.

Now that they had more guns and many bullets, what should they do with them?

To hand them over to the general would only be to evoke trouble. He would gladly seize and store them; then, abetted by the inimical sub-chiefs, would begin to ask questions. The guns were not the kind he wanted, or sufficiently numerous; the cartridges, although many, also were not enough to satisfy him. By the time his inquisition was over both McGregor and Timothy, voluntarily disarmed, would be in worse case than if they never had left their domiciles. The jealous minor chiefs would see to that.

To conceal the captured arms in the Skull and bide their time would result only in their loss. That gloomy rock had its inspectors, who undoubtedly made their inspections thorough. They would find and turn in the weapons, and the discovery would precipitate keen sleuthing to determine how the guns had come there. Dogs might trace the blood brothers, thus condemning them as traitors. No, that would not do.

Yet what else could be done with these burdens, so dangerously won, so laboriously transported, so vitally necessary to the continued existence of all?

"Brother," said McGregor, evenly, "with these guns we could knock out diseased old brains and put healthy new ones in command."

"Brother," responded Timothy, "I know that. And it might be well for all our people. But it must not be done."

"No," admitted the ex-Marine. "Killing commanders can't be done, even if it ought to. Well, then—"

He scowled thoughtfully at the ground. Presently he added:

"For now, we'll put this stuff in my house and get to bed. When we've had a sleep we'll figure out things. One thing I want to dope out a little further is the general. Maybe if I can talk to him alone some time soon I can make him see sense. If I can't—well, we'll see what then. Anyway, we've got the power in our hands now, if we have to use it. And if you get in any trouble about this you come to me quick. Understand?"

"I understand."

Timothy's teeth gleamed in a grin more comprehensive than his words. He understood now, as before, that the lone fighter from another world had come to seize the treasure for himself, but now meant to use it for the good of his new people. Otherwise he would never have guided that alien, blood brother or no, to the secret chamber. Without further words he hitched up his pack and resumed the march.

Across the barrens and through the woods and up to McGregor's door the two trod unchallenged. There Timothy, with a low grunt of relief, gave over his load and walked away. Straight to the water he went, to bathe himself and wash bloodstains from his ax and spear. Then, slipping like a shadow through the doorway of his own tribe house, he barred it anew, found his hammock in the blackness, and was gone in serene sleep.

Inside his own quarters McGregor worked awhile hiding rifles, knives, belts of cartridges in the thick thatch roof. When the job was done he drank deeply from his water jar and forthwith flopped into his hammock. Nothing now mattered except the fact that he was tired out. Tomorrow could take care of itself, and of him and Timothy, and all the other Blancos Perdidos.

CHAPTER XVI

A DREAD VISITOR

DAYS passed, during which McGregor managed to keep on exercising his troop while he covertly studied the general. In those days he became completely convinced that the ancient chief's mind was virtually gone; that it had been deteriorating for some time before the blond Northerner arrived, and that now, attempting to work with new activity, it was instead cracking under the strain.

More and more noticeably his moods grew snappishly irritable, broodingly morose, or menacingly despotic. The queer, flitting glimmers of eccentric amusement which he had hitherto shown were no longer visible. His face grew harder, his eyes colder, his attitude grimmer toward all men.

Observing this deepening malevolence, the drill sergeant felt that the oldster was subconsciously aware of his waning mental power, but fighting fiercely within himself to maintain his grip; moreover, that his determination to hold his control might soon lead him to give another exhibition of terrorism and order one or several of his own subjects hurled from the Skull. First of these object lessons might be the adopted member who had not yet produced rifles; second, perhaps, his blood brother Timothy, whose almost open rebellion against previous sacrifice of one of his men might now be rankling in the dark old memory.

McGregor, he repeatedly asked, in the presence of his cold faced sub-commanders:

"Where are the guns you must get? The men are ready for them now. Where are they?"

To which McGregor, stonily surveying all listeners, parried:

"They will come. The men are not yet ready for gun firing. They need more drill."

The sub-chiefs sneered with their eyes. The general peered piercingly at the wooden faced instructor, then dismissed him for another day. Each time the outlander went with jaw set a little tighter. His previous intention of talking to the general alone and trying to make him see sense was impossible of fulfillment. These days the patriarch was never alone; the sub-chiefs, each greedy for the supreme power which soon would be somebody's, assiduously surrounded him. Even if they had not, the fanatical autocrat would not now have listened to reason.

Timothy, who came to his brother's headquarters each afternoon, showed increasing signs of strain. During the morning drills he carried on with his usual outward stolidity. But when he was within the walls which blocked all eyes except McGregor's, he asked always the same question—

"What do we do with these guns, brother?"

"I don't know yet," came the same reply. "When I do I'll tell you."

At which Timothy stared solemnly at the thatch, then at the ground, meditating. To McGregor, watching, it was clear that Timothy recognized the in-

creasing danger to them both, yet was not ready to adopt the obvious defense of armed revolt. Since he himself did not yet feel inclined to use the secreted guns in that way, he did not mention that subject. Between the two were long silences. As day succeeded day, however, the Northerner eyed his comrade with puzzled concern. Anxiety, or something else, was working a noticeable change in the sturdy fellow who had always been so calmly sure of himself.

His eyes, hitherto quick and clear, now were heavily dull. His bearded cheeks seemed growing hollow. His movements were alternately lethargic and nervously quick. On the fifth day he did not stay for the usual quiet hour of companionship. He came, but spoke briefly and then turned away. Gaze glassy, he said:

"Brother, you are wise to wait. This matter is not in our hands. What is to be will be. Soon."

With that he began walking away. For a second McGregor felt a queer chill. Timothy, whose grandfather had foreseen calamity, now was seeing something in his turn. And that grandfather's vision had come when he was slowly dying. Was Timothy—

He seized the departing one, held him motionless, stared hard at him. Timothy's lips curled in a faint smile.

"Let me go," he bade, flat toned. "I have a little fever. The other night I caught it when we were out. Fighting, swimming—hot, cold. And the night air is bad for one. Let me go!"

With sudden violence he threw off the restraining clutch, then stalked back to his tribe house. When he disappeared McGregor stood frowning, slowly turned back and sat down, feeling uneasy. He could do nothing to rout that fever. The medicine man of Timothy's house was good at such ailments. So he waited, pondered over the cryptic prophecy, and at length, with the procrastination which had imperceptibly grown on him in this southern land, left its solution to tomorrow.

The morrow had not yet dawned when he started from sleep to hear a dull knocking at his door, which he had recently kept closed. Throwing it open, he looked down into the haggard face of Timothy—Timothy, crouching miserably on bent legs which now would not hold him erect. As he stared, the specter muttered—

"Brother—I am sick."

With which he fell.

McGREGOR stepped swiftly forth, grabbed him, bore him inside, dropped him in the hammock, snatched his electric torch. When the bright ray flashed into the sick man's face he grimaced, shut his eyes, and retched. McGregor stood stunned, suddenly weak, as if simultaneously hit on the head and kicked in the stomach. On the sick man's pale visage were small red spots.

The light moved involuntarily to the native's arms. There, on the wrist, were more of the same sinister eruptions.

Smallpox!

For a combative moment McGregor refused to believe the dread evidence; tried to convince himself that the disease was measles, a bad heat rash, or something even less serious. But his brain could not be hoodwinked; it had seen that sort of thing before, and knew what it knew. Moreover, it swiftly constructed a sequence of recent events which formed undeniable proof.

That other night, down at the waterhole, one of the slain invaders had had spots on his face; spots few, small, dull on his dead visage, seeming mere pimples, hardly noticed and immediately forgotten by the exultant conquerors. And, as ill luck would have it, the clothing with which Timothy improvised his pack had been taken at random from that man's corpse, which happened to lie nearest. Thereafter, while he marched back northward, sweating freely under his load, that clothing had been pressed hard against his back. Since then he had been steadily growing sick;

but, stubbornly resistant, had carried on, refusing to give way to what he considered to be merely a "little fever" caused by catching cold.

Perhaps he had been partly right. Both cold and fever might have been caught on that night march. But the disease now gripping him was the one which had entered his open pores from the infected garments of the dead Brazilian. That Brazilian had, unnoticed by his companions, begun to develop the telltale eruptions characteristic of variola. His clothes, soaked with bodily excretions, were full of poison.

And now, although that fellow and all his mates lay dead, the poison they had unwittingly brought was insidiously working the destruction they had meant to consummate by bullet and knife. McGregor's tight mouth grew still thinner. In past years he had seen the loathsome havoc wrought among primitive people by this devastating disease.

For himself he had no fears. Thanks to modern Army inoculation, he was immune to both smallpox and typhoid. But during these intervening days Timothy had come into close contact with many of his people, who in turn had worked or rested alongside others. Women had intimately handled children. And men, women, children had freely visited other houses, unconsciously spreading infection. Soon, very soon, an invisible demon of death would ravage the settlement—a demon against which there was no defense.

Timothy retched once more, then looked dully at his brother. Weakly he asked—

"Can you cure me?"

"No," bluntly answered McGregor. "Can't your medicine man do it?"

A faint grimace was the reply. If the doctor of his house had been able to conquer this malady Timothy would not have come crawling to this refuge. After a silent moment he requested—

"Shoot me."

"Huh?"

"Shoot me. I shall be killed soon. You do it, brother. Do it now."

McGregor stared, face darkening, mind assimilating the prediction. Although Timothy did not yet know just what ailed him, he knew he was seriously ill; he also knew, somehow, that his illness was infectious. And by the merciless custom of this place any bringer of pestilence was to be slain as soon as discovered. If he were destroyed soon enough to forestall epidemic, the ruthless practise would be sensible. Sensible or senseless, the unwritten law would be swiftly served against this stalwart sergeant—unless somebody blocked its execution.

"The medicine man knows," added Timothy. "I called him in tonight. He left me quickly. But I saw in his eyes what he knew. This fever of mine will spread. I am a dead man. So make me dead quickly. I do not—like to—wait."

He gagged again, clenched his teeth, lay wordless, only his sick eyes speaking.

"Blah!" snapped McGregor. "He's a damn fool, and you're another! All you've got is a bad cold and the measles! Measles is a little boy's sickness. I can't stop it, but you'll come out of it if you've got any guts. All you've got to do is stay quiet. And nobody's going to bother you. This is *my* house. See?"

He stood over the sick man now, barking as if at drill. The wan face in the hammock brightened.

"You used to be a white man!" McGregor went on. "Are you turning yellow now, just because you feel rotten? You can lick this thing in a few days by just using sense!"

"Do you think so?" eagerly queried Timothy.

"I know so! Now quit talking like a baby and go to sleep!"

The blue eyes beat masterfully down into the gray ones. The redly bearded mouth set harder, and the corded throat swallowed. In the sick face the faint light of fighting hope still shone. Then it faded.

"I hope you are right," muttered Tim-

othy. "But they will kill me. It is the custom."

"Oh, yeah?" snarled McGregor. "Let 'em try it! See this?"

With two strides he yanked from the thatch a rifle. With a forceful clatter he opened and shut the gun, ejecting a cartridge, showing another yellow shell sliding into the barrel. Then, reaching to the light which now lay on his table, he snapped it off.

"You shut up and sleep it off!" he roughly concluded.

No words answered. In the darkness sounded a long sigh, thankful as that of a dying swimmer grasping solid support. Thereafter Timothy was trustfully silent. And McGregor, hard jawed, sat on the doorsill and kept guard.

CHAPTER XVII

INSURGENT

NOT until McGregor's flare of protective pugnacity grew cooler did he think of a less belligerent way of keeping Timothy alive; a way which perhaps might also benefit the entire community. Then, after sober consideration, he rejected it.

That way would be to transport the sufferer to the Skull and hide him somewhere therein. Nobody would ever think of seeking him there. In fact, any search for him would hardly be extensive or persistent; nobody would desire close contact with the plague smitten pariah who apparently had staggered away to die alone in some bush on the barrens. And his isolation over there might help to check the spread of his disease here. Meanwhile the Northerner could manage to visit him secretly each night and—

But there McGregor shook his head. Such isolation would really do the settlement no good now; the epidemic must be already implanted in its first victims. Moreover, Timothy himself could live only if constantly supported and heartened by his blood brother. There was no medicine for him. He must win his fight by innate strength of body and mind. Shut up over yonder in that grisly catacomb, surrounded by signs of death, deprived of his comrade's forceful encouragement when his resolution flagged, lonely and miserable, he would have far less power to pull through.

No! He would stay here! With that conclusive determination McGregor again eyed the hulking houses and tightened his grip on his gun. He was tired of marking time here, anyway; tired of bluffing old fossils; he was yearning for straight talk.

The opportunity came soon. In a space between two houses grew three figures which quietly approached him. After keenly eyeing them and seeing no others behind them, he set his gun inside and stood up. Empty handed, he awaited a conflict of wills.

The three were the medicine man of Timothy's house, the austere chief of that house, and the great chief of all. The watcher guessed that the medicine man had reported to his commander, both then had reported to the general, and all three had gravely discussed the dire development. The fact that the sick man was no obscure private, but a well liked platoon leader, had complicated the matter and somewhat deterred the usual defensive action. Even now the executioners were trying to conduct the affair with secrecy and thus, perhaps, prevent panic. But their lethal intention was evident. The house chief, walking with resolute tread, bore in one wiry hand a long bladed spear.

Several paces from the open doorway they halted, regarding McGregor, whose watchful presence there rendered questions concerning Timothy unnecessary. Coldly the general bade—

"Send him out."

"No!"

The three glowered. The house chief slightly raised the spear point. The medicine man muttered something. The general repeated, more sharply:

"Send him out! At once!"

"I said no!" McGregor's tone was bleak but controlled. "He is my brother. This is my house. He stays here till he is well."

A pause. That answer seemed to strike a faintly responsive chord in the two chiefs. But the medicine man, resenting contradiction of his diagnosis, grunted:

"Well? He dies!"

"Why? Because you say so?" jeered McGregor. "He'll be alive long after you're dead."

The medicine man started a snarling retort. But the general, with an angry hiss, cut him short.

"Silence! Who commands here?" he demanded. Then, to McGregor, "What is that you say? Can you make the man well?"

"He will get well!" asserted McGregor. "He has a fever, but he will live."

Another silence. The chiefs stood somewhat uncertain. Plainly they both wished the prediction might prove true. But then the medicine man growled in an undertone:

"He lies. The man dies. And so do we all, unless we act at once."

THE low, confidential tone and the stubborn surety of the pronouncement visibly influenced the hesitant commanders. Their backs stiffened. Before the general could speak, however, McGregor responded:

"I say he will get well. But you're partly right. You'd better do something quick—and that's to get out of here! Away out!"

He swung an arm toward the wide wilderness outside. As the others frowned at him he admitted:

"This fever is catching. Some of you have caught it already. It's no use to kill Timothy now. Those that are going to get sick will be sick. Some that aren't as strong as he is may die. But if you start now and keep going you'll leave most of the sickness behind. Let the sick ones drop out. You keep marching until—

"Well, listen! Up north are the mountains. Plenty of water, plenty of animals, shade and clean air. March there! By the time you're there you'll have no more sickness. Rest up and then come back. I'll be here. So will Timothy—a good fighter—well and strong again. And so we'll all be strong men together. The weak ones will all be dead. See?"

They saw. From the chiefs welled an involuntary grunt of approval. The plan, which had suddenly dawned on McGregor's mind and forthwith came out of his mouth, was good. Ruthless elimination of weaklings to save the strong was also good. They could instinctively appreciate that. But the medicine man, professionally fast of thought, saw more in a second than they did. And now he voiced one long, drawling, but eloquent syllable—

"Aaaaaaah!"

In that one protracted sound were several variant tones which spoke more plainly than many words. As the chiefs interpreted them they again grew rigid. Translated into speech, these inflections meant:

"Oh, yes? Pretty smooth! We go on a long hike and kill ourselves off, and the first ones to cave in are you old chiefs. You can't stand the pace long. And while we're out this foreigner grabs our treasure and gets away with it. That's his big idea, and Timothy's in with him. Spear them both, quick. If there's any sickness afterward I'll handle it!"

All that, and more, was in that one suggestive noise. The general frowned. The house chief again lifted his spear. McGregor's jaw tightened. Still full of his impromptu plan, he was slower than the suspicious elders to catch all the wordless inferences, but he got enough. Instantly he abandoned parley for precipitate action.

Snatching forth his rifle, he fired.

Three times he shot, working trigger and lever with swift speed, but keeping

the muzzle elevated. The first bullet flew over the head of the spear holder; the other two missiles darted above the crowns of the doctor and the general. The vivid flashes lighted up faces shocked witless. The thunderous explosions startled awake every man, woman, child in the village.

With a final clatter of the breech bolt McGregor strode at the stunned trio. Disregarding the sub-chief, who had dropped his spear, and the doctor, who had thrown a forearm across his eyes, he grabbed the general by a thin shoulder. Crisply he announced:

"I'm taking command now, old-timer. You're through—unless you trail along with me. Between us we may save this place. Until it's saved I'm boss. Now what d'you say? Yes or no?"

The dazed old eyes stared into his own, lowered to the magically produced gun which had just roared its power, slowly veered to right and left, came back. The silent sub-chief stood frozen, not daring to reach for his fallen weapon. The arrogant medicine man, fearfully lowering his arm and finding his vision still undestroyed, gave a gasp and fled. In the houses raved a muffled clamor of warriors shouting as they seized weapons preparatory to rushing forth. McGregor's masterful grasp tightened.

"Yes or no?" he demanded. "Talk quick!"

"Yes." The old man straightened decisively.

"Good! But no tricks! Understand?"

"I understand." The general glanced again at the gun, and across his pinched face went a shadowy smile.

"All right. Stand by! And you, there, heave that spear out of sight!"

The sub-chief obeyed.

"About face!"

The three formed a line, McGregor in the middle, the two unarmed elders at right and left. And thus the erupting warriors found them.

As doors swung violently open and men leaped out, blindly but resolutely seeking the invisible enemies who had attacked with gunfire, McGregor barked:

"Here! To me! Assemble! Here!"

Automatically the confused mass of men converged toward the familiar voice of command.

"Halt! Attention!"

Breathing fast, the warriors stood puzzled by the absence of enemies and the outwardly calm poise of the authoritative trio.

FOR a moment McGregor felt like ordering them to prepare immediately for the march to the mountains which seemed their only salvation. But swiftly he realized that before any such exodus could get under way the order would be countermanded; that the obstinate sub-chiefs, gathering in speedy conclave, would sway the weakening general back to inflexible adherence to the ancestral habits and habitat. Wherefore he declared:

"There's no fight against men. There's a fight against sickness. We've just discovered it. Timothy's sick. You all know Timothy."

He paused. A low mutter answered. Yes, all knew Timothy—and liked him well.

"How Timothy got sick nobody knows," craftily continued McGregor. "But we've moved him into my house. Here he's away from you all. And I'll take care of him. He's my brother. So it's my job to get him well. I'll do it!"

Another murmur, louder than before, full of approval. The isolation of the sick man, the determined devotion of his adopted kinsman, evoked appreciation from sensible heads and clannish hearts. At once the talker went on:

"You must do the same. If others get sick, do all you can to help. Take care of them. And take care of yourselves. Keep clean. Have your food cooked outside. Fight this thing to a finish, and keep everybody alive. Never give up! Fight!"

Once more came the inarticulate response, now a deep rumble of resolution. For a moment McGregor was quiet, letting it all sink in. Then he turned smartly toward the sphinx-like commander-in-chief at his right. He asked—

"Is there anything more, General?"

The general seized the cue.

"That is all," he gruffly replied.

"Very good. Dismissed!"

The intent array stood a second more, then dissolved, moving away in virtual silence, each mind still digesting the whole sudden occurrence and bracing itself for the emergency. Only the sub-chiefs and the medicine men of the hitherto healthful houses lingered behind, looking toward their ruler. The general snatched again at a chance to assert his authority.

"Go!" he snapped.

They went. As they drew away McGregor again looked the patriarch squarely in the eye.

"I've got something more to say to you," he announced. "To both of you. In the armory."

"Very well," crisply assented the general. "We go."

And the three marched stolidly forward. Into the general's own tribe house they went, and into the supreme chamber where were held staff councils —and where stood the guns. There on the long table burned a clay lamp fed by palm oil. And there McGregor strode straight to his own Springfield and Colt, slung the one over a shoulder and the other at his thigh, and stuffed their cartons of cartridges into pockets and shirt. Then, again gripping the rifle he had brought, he faced the elders.

"That's what I had to say," he coolly told them. "Understand?"

A narrow stare by the general and a deep scowl by the sub-chief grew into gradual comprehension of much unsaid. That the dominant insurgent meant to hold his power was plain. But it was also increasingly plain that he meant to exert that power only for the good of all the clan. He was saving Timothy; he had done what he could to save all others by arousing their fighting spirit; he had also saved the dignity of these two chiefs, who, thus far, were the only commanders to know just what had recently taken place.

There was the medicine man, of course; but he could be quickly silenced by his overlords. The warriors all were obviously in the Northerner's hands at present, thanks to his terse harangue and his adroit entanglements of the dazed elders in his scheme. Therefore the only possible course now was to back his play. If they did not—he held the guns and would use them. Yes, they quite understood.

Under the general's shaggy brows grew a steady glow. To McGregor's amazement, he quietly said:

"I see. And I am glad."

"Huh?"

"I saved you for use in fighting. The fight is different than I expected. But my judgment was good. You fight now for us all. Good! Now get out and fight!"

As McGregor stared, the general wheeled fiercely on the wordless house chief.

"And if you tell anything of this," he menaced, "you die between dark and dawn!"

The narrow visage of the silent subordinate grew tighter. After a tense pause he made one short sound through his nose. Plain as words, that sound said that he needed no threats; he would do his best. After one more glance at both, the blond rebel wheeled and strode out. As he went he smiled.

Rallied by the exigency, the tottering general was once more himself; once more clear headed, quick brained, sanely determined, mustering every force for the forthcoming fight. During that battle he would use every last reserve. After that . . .

The Northerner's smile vanished. Somberly he swung back toward Timothy, where he lay fighting his bitter black battle with death.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SURVIVORS

THE plague was gone. Glumly the survivors moved about their ravaged settlement, their minds still burdened with the recent horror. Among them, directing the communal life with compact unison of plan, walked the general and two sergeants, McGregor and Timothy.

In the worst of the smallpox epidemic more than one bitter sub-chief and malignant medicine man had whispered that they were to blame for it and must be killed in accordance with the ancient custom. And, if Timothy had not recovered, or if any spots had appeared on the Northerner's face, the malevolent advice probably would have been acted on.

McGregor, although now master of guns, went weaponless—so far as any one knew. His pistol was always inside his shirt, under his belt, at the left side. But no man struck at him or Timothy. Any who might have done so were restrained by the apparent honesty of his assertion that Timothy would recover, by the adroitly implanted idea that Timothy must have caught the illness from some one else within the settlement, and by the continual backing of both by Timothy's house chief and the grand commander.

Once forced by McGregor to play his game, these two had no choice but to go on with it. Moreover, as the fearsome fight progressed, they were more and more willing to do so. As luck would have it, the plague which smote down other chiefs left them untouched. And soon the general was proudly asserting to his taciturn subordinate:

"I knew it! He came to us under the protection of the great brown cat, and I read the sign rightly; and now we who walk with him walk safely. So we shall continue to walk. Eh?"

The other grunted, for once giving an agreeable sound. Whereafter the two not only supported the blond man's decisions but frequently anticipated them and gave him many a helpful hint. Never once did they let him down. Nor did he, visibly or covertly, deny them whole souled support. On the contrary, he treated them at all times with soldierly respect which soon became unfeigned. Sane or not, they were now battling with a grim tenacity wholly admirable.

Meanwhile the odious demon born of a dead enemy wrought devastation in the defenseless home of the Lost Whites. Oddly, its first appearance after marking Timothy was in a house other than his, and the victim was a sickly, ugly, elderly woman with whom he was known to have had no contact. She was promptly killed with a bludgeon. The next was a child in another house, and the third was the chief of still another. Thereafter, with equally illogical sequence but with swift acceleration, the malady swept through all domiciles like an erratic devil running amok, striking at random.

With satanic malice it cut down every medicine man and almost every house chief. All were old, and consequently deficient in physical resistance. But the people whom they had so long dominated did not now think of that; and as one after another of them collapsed and expired their subjects wavered between dumb despondency and desperate madness.

Among them, by day and night, walked McGregor, giving them the only prescription he knew—words urging them to fight on and never quit. And each morning, by his command, men worked at building pyres and burning the dead. Up into the clean air and the bright sky rolled funereal clouds of smoke. Down on the ground, wafted from every house, crawled the stench of lingering pestilence.

At last it was over. And last of all to go upward in smoke was the tonguetied chief of Timothy's house. Through all the protracted horror he had bleakly

carried on, striving to save not only the man he had first sought to destroy but all others of his tribe. Now, at the end, he suddenly died—but not from smallpox. Between sunset and sunrise his overtaxed strength failed. As his dour old body crumbled in the morning flames, Timothy and McGregor and the general soberly watched and silently paid tribute to his departed soul. Rigid, unquestioning, uncomplaining, fighting to the end, he had been a good soldier.

AND now, with the holocaust burned out, the three who had witnessed that final departure walked slowly among the pitiable remnants of their clan. Called to assembly, those who still lived stood outside their respective houses, dull eyed, loose limbed, downhearted, apathetically awaiting the next command.

During the seemingly endless emergency no new sub-chiefs had been appointed; any such appointees might die at any moment, with bad moral effect on all. So now the only rulers were the general, who seemed destined to live forever, and the two whom his presumably divine prescience had led him to save. At present the spent fighters cared little who ruled them. And, as the surviving commanders counted their remaining force, they felt that three rulers were more than enough.

Of the erstwhile strong tribe there now existed only twenty-seven men, five women, no children. And of this handful fully half were so exhausted that they evidently maintained a steady front only by fixed will. When the general gave a silent signal of dismissal these sank to a squat and looked listlessly at the ground. The others moved sluggishly, aimlessly, in various directions, not yet able to relax entirely from long nerve strain. To them the driving McGregor gave no further words of encouragement. The time for exhortation was passed. Now their great need was quiet mental adjustment and physical rest.

Toward his own doorway the general stalked, with his two nominal sergeants ambling wordless behind him. At the entrance he paused, gaze swinging about the semicircle of round houses. Until recently those habitations had been packed with life. Now all the Lost Whites could be domiciled in one such house, with room to spare.

"It would be best, General," quietly proposed McGregor, "to make a clean sweep here. Burn these old shells. Build one new house, a small one. Then—"

"No!"

The refusal was hard as a pistol shot. The bushy white brows were drawn far down.

"But they are useless and unclean," reminded the blond man.

"We shall clean them and use them."

"For what?"

"For people! We shall grow again."

The two eyed him sidewise, glanced at each other, held their tongues. This clan grow again—from what? From five women? Their gaze went to those five—all dull, dumpy creatures who, although they had borne children, had been by no means prolific. Regeneration of the race from them would be very slow, if even possible. Moreover, their offspring would undoubtedly be stupid. And there was no other source of new life, unless—

"Come here!" ordered the oldster, turning toward his council chamber.

They followed him. Inside the dim sanctum he turned to face McGregor.

"Where," he demanded, "did you get that rifle?"

For the time of several slow breaths the drillmaster stood unresponsive. In all the time since he had astounded the chiefs by snatching that unsuspected weapon from nowhere to protect Timothy, no man had questioned him. Although all the startled warriors had vaguely perceived that he held a gun during his crisp talk to them, all had assumed that it was his own, restored to him by the general.

During the ensuing reign of terror the

general himself had withheld any mention of that unexplained miracle. Therefore, even yet, only McGregor and Timothy knew the real source of both rifle and plague. Also, they alone knew that in McGregor's roof were other guns and many cartridges. And now, meeting the old man's searching stare, they remained reticent.

"You told me to get guns," was McGregor's evasive reply. "So I did."

"How many?"

"Enough."

"With bullets?"

"Yes."

Across the sharp old face flitted a peculiar smile, instantly gone. Without further probing for details the patriarch gave orders.

"With those guns you now will get women. Make your plans now. Then report to me. That is all."

The two stood staring. Presently McGregor objected:

"You'll have to explain that. I don't get it."

"No? It is simple. We need women. Many women. White women. They must be white. Go get them! Kill their men! Bring them here! Do you see now?"

Studying him, the Northerner slowly nodded, then smiled.

"Oh, sure, I see now," he acquiesced. "All right. But we can't move out just yet. The men need rest. When they're right we'll talk things over again, hey? And before then I'll figure things out. Right now we're all tired. So let's take it easy. Come on, brother."

The two walked away, faces sobering as their backs were turned, eyes again meeting sidewise. Now that the long battle against disease was ended, the overworn old mind had cracked again, seeking the future in the past.

Once this dying tribe had been reinvigorated by fresh white blood providentially found in the wilderness. Therefore it now would be similarly revived by a like murder of white men and the taking of their women. And the white man brought here under the protection of the brown cat would go and miraculously find these new victims, just as he had produced from nothing the guns and bullets he had been compelled to get. So the ancient houses which this blundering white man now wished to destroy would again be speedily populated. Yes, it was all very simple to the general.

As the brothers receded toward the daylight McGregor, still regarding Timothy, slightly shook his head. Timothy responded by a barely perceptible twitch of one shoulder. They strode on without a backward glance. But the general, keenly watching, had discerned both those faint gestures. And now, as the two strong men controlling the guns vanished through the doorway, the obdurate oldster suddenly sagged as if hit by an invisible club.

CHAPTER XIX

A CAT POUNCES

NIGHT. Stars and a half moon. On earth, silence. At the devastated settlement, the utter oblivion of exhausted men and women.

Beyond the barred doorway of the erstwhile prison, McGregor and Timothy profoundly slept. Gathered in the house of the general, the other survivors lay equally unconscious. All but the general himself. In his otherwise empty room of conference he sat alone.

On the council table the night lamp was burning low. Near it lay the only serviceable firearm within his reach—the one taken from the *mestizo* last trapped in the Skull.

Three times he had gone to the barred stronghold of McGregor and Timothy, carrying the loaded rifle; then, after regarding its tough door and walking around its thick walls, had come back as noiselessly as he had gone. When McGregor barred the entrance that night he had used good judgment.

But now, once more arising, the patriarch let the gun lie untouched and

moved with purpose. Swiftly he strode into his own sleeping quarters, behind a bark door close at hand. When he came out he was a changed creature.

On him now was his tight puma hide. In his skinny fist was a long spear. In the triangular frame of brown catskin his unwinking brown eyes regarded the guttering lamp, turned aside, fixed on a full one ready on a shelf. To that shelf he walked, and from it he pulled the clay vessel. He turned away; turned back; grasped also a bit of stone and a sliver of steel; then went forth. As the outer door closed behind him the abandoned table lamp flickered once more, then died. In all the house now ruled complete gloom.

Outside, he swung sharply to the right. Along the path to the prairie he marched, and across the open land to the Red Skull. Inside the lower cavern he paused long enough to strike a light from his stone and steel. When the lamp burned brightly he went on. Surely he passed the pitfall and the overhanging grate, and up the tortuous grade to the treasure chamber he climbed. Inside it, he stood for long minutes, holding the light high, slowly surveying the hereditary treasure of his people. At length he swung back and descended. Nothing was gone. Therefore nobody had been here while the epidemic raged. So far, so good.

Down below he turned to the large hall of skulls. There he stood much longer, contemplating the tiers of dead men's heads, the stone table of ceremonial dissection, the blank entrances to caverns wherein had taken place—he alone knew just what. If, as he meditated, there came to him any doubt as to the wisdom of sacrificing so many live men for so dead a mass of gold and stones, he gave no sign of such misgiving. On the contrary, his eyes grew still harder, his face narrower, his lank muscles stiffer, his grip on the spear tighter. At length he whirled and marched out, steps mechanical, cold eyes fixed.

Reaching the moonlight again, he tossed the lamp aside to fall and break on the hard ground. Spear balanced in his low carried right fist, he trudged straight ahead, never once glancing behind or aside. Behind were only dead things; aside was only an ancestral settlement almost dead. But before him, perhaps far, perhaps near, was new life.

And now, while young men slept, he was going to find and bring back new life to them. They thought him crazy, he knew now; merely a worn-out crackbrain whose delusions should be humored and slyly shrugged off. But they were the crazy ones. He knew what he knew. And what he sought was somewhere beyond—somewhere over the vaguely moonlit horizon.

Steadily he plodded on across the barrens, forging ahead with springless gait which gradually shortened, yet never hesitated; a weird, lank shape in the pallid night, his inflexible eyes a-gleam, his spear swinging forward and back, his puma tail lightly dragging behind. At length he came to a thick belt of trees fringing a narrow creek; and, as he reached that dense tangle, a heavy cloud crept over the high moon, swallowing its light. Waiting, he involuntarily sank down on his haunches. His head drooped. His spear slipped softly from his hand, to lie forgotten on the ground. As the slow cloud continued to smother the moon he dozed, still on his feet, but huddled forward and increasingly unaware of anything.

In the darkness something noiselessly stole along the edge of the woods; a powerful, predatory thing which often paused, looked, listened, silently sniffed the air. All at once that thing halted short, staring at the hunched shape beyond. Wide eyes and nostrils distended still more, studying that drooping figure, breathing its scent. The crouching mystery looked like a puma—a sick one, evidently, doubled over on itself, virtually defenseless. Its smell, though, was that of a man. Yet if it was a man he must be weak. And in either case—

The prowler sank lower, then leaped.

With a gasping moan the prey fell forward, kicked convulsively, went limp. And as the moon escaped from the cloud the destroyer gave a muffled, gloating snarl and dragged its victim into the black concealment of the thick verdure.

That killer, wary but ferocious hater of pumas and of men, was a jaguar. Now, if ever, had been the time for the spotless brown cat of the Blancos Perdidos to walk with the ancient chief and guard him against the spotted one. But neither now nor later did that fierce friend arrive to avenge the murder. So, forsaken by the traditional ally of his erstwhile stalwart clan, the last of the hard old panther men vanished forever.

CHAPTER XX

THE SPOILERS

TIMOTHY was glum.

"It is all my fault, brother," he soberly declared. "I ought never to have led you that night to the treasure. The spirits were angered. They put on me a curse of sickness. Then, because you saved me, they destroyed my tribe. Now they have swallowed our last chief. I am to blame for—"

"Blah! Shut up!" said McGregor. "You poor fish, why would the spirits let you and me lick eight armed men that night if they were sore at us? And why didn't they make me sick too?"

"They wanted those men killed, so they let us do it. They did not make you sick because they could not. You were not born under their power, and you are too strong for them. But I am a traitor to them and my people, so—"

"Blah!" the other again broke in. "Snap out of it! You're the only sensible man in the whole outfit. And the only spirit that counts is the one in a man's own guts. And the boys we've got left are the ones that had that kind of a spirit, and they're the kind we want. We're the chiefs here now. I'm sorry about the general, and I wish we knew what got him. But we know he was cracked, buddy, and—well, he must be dead now, and better off than if he was still staggering along. And now he's gone we're all better off without him."

The blunt truth heartened Timothy, yet left him still solemn. His gaze dwelt on the general's house, outside which all surviving warriors lounged at the base of the shady wall, apathetic, doing nothing but breathe the fresh morning air. McGregor's eyes rested on the same scene, and his expression grew reflectively grave.

Everybody missed the general. In the past two days there had been active searches and meditative conjectures. Except for the shattered lamp outside the entrance to the Skull, there had been no trace.

On the hard floor of the tunnel, in the small cavern of gold and the large one of skulls, was no sign. On the baked earth stretching far away outside were no distinguishable footprints. And if there were any scent, it could not be followed by dogs. During the recent epidemic all dogs had disappeared—suddenly slain by men virtually mad from strain, snatched by night prowling cats; or, obeying some ancient instinct, fleeing from this welter of disease, never to return.

For some time the blood brothers stared somberly at the hitherto dominant tribe house and the handful of men lolling along it. Then said Timothy, his tone once more practical:

"Much of what you say may be true. But it is also true that men may be destroyed by spirits. And there is an evil spirit in the tongues of women."

"Huh?" The other scowled at him.

"We are, as you have said, the chiefs here now. But never before have a subordinate like me and a stranger like you been chiefs. And there are whisperings by the stupid women yonder. The men say nothing, but they listen and think. I have heard one woman's whisper and seen thoughts in several men's eyes."

He stopped, looking straight ahead. McGregor's sidewise gaze contracted,

hardened, chilled to blue steel. The people whom he had saved now were beginning to suspect him and his comrade of putting the general out of the way. The malicious accusations of dying sub-chiefs and medicine men remained in the minds of these few survivors, to be revived by heedless women. He and Timothy were partners in a murderous plot to get the gold of the Skull for their own use. So the bitter old men now dead had said, and so the slowly reviving men now were beginning to believe. They did not yet wish to believe it, but, with nothing to do but listen to whispers and follow up that train of thought—

"Huh!" repeated McGregor. "Thanks, Tim! My mistake. I've been giving them too much rest. Now I'll sweat that stuff out of them before it goes any further. Trail along!"

WITH that he barked harsh orders. The men jerked heads toward him, then arose —but not so snappily as when the general had ruled. On their feet, they obeyed his further commands. But again their response was somewhat sluggish. Jaw growing harder, McGregor waited. At length all were in line, armed with rifles, standing at attention. Those rifles, as before, were empty. Not yet had McGregor produced cartridges.

Another gruff growl. The shrunken army shouldered arms, right faced, marched away in single file. As it started away McGregor touched Timothy's elbow. They stepped back into the little cabin wherein the Northerner, although now supreme commander, still lived. From the thatch he drew a loaded rifle and a full bandoleer, which he handed to his comrade. From a wall peg he lifted his Springfield, web belt crammed with clips; and field glasses.

"After we give them a good workout we'll start target practise," he announced. "Two or three shots apiece. Enough to let them get the feel of it. I'll start it with some exhibition stuff. It'll do us all good."

They swung after the short column, Timothy's solemn face now alight. He himself had never fired a gun, and was eager to try his skill. So would all the others be. The war-like work would banish from all male minds the creeping miasma of suspicion breathed from female tongues. And, McGregor knew, his own exhibition of deadly accuracy, followed by their inability to match it, would make them realize anew his fighting prowess. Yes, the forthcoming action would do everybody good. Already the men were stepping more resiliently, glad to be once more at soldierly exercise.

In the bygone days they had marched in long platoon column. Now they comprised hardly more than three squads.

With no stated objective, the line had instinctively started for the dominant Red Skull; and now the chiefs did not change the route. All hands might as well go there as anywhere; better, perhaps, than elsewhere, since they could utilize its western shade. The early sun still was low, but by the time the shooting started it would be higher and hotter, and any shadow then would be welcome.

Stride by stride they advanced. The great grim rock came nearer, towered higher, staring into the empty south. Or was the south still empty? Gradually in McGregor grew an odd desire to look that way also, to use the binoculars which he had brought for spotting shots to search the wide terrain. By the time he reached the Skull the urge had become irresistible. Swerving the column into the shade, he commanded:

"Halt! Fall out! Rest!"

The small platoon gladly obeyed. The march had been fast, and the tireless stamina of previous days had not yet refilled bodies and minds demoralized by the plague. Breathing quickly, sweating freely, they promptly squatted. With a glance at Timothy, McGregor swung away along the base of the stone. Timothy, lounging at ease, remained in

control.

Out of sight beyond the curving wall, McGregor turned at the entrance and rapidly walked inward. The light grew dim, deepened into utter dark; but he kept surely on. He knew this tunnel now; had counted paces to the trap, and had no fear of miscalculation. Reaching the deadfall, he skirted it, went on, found the corridor leading upward, and followed it without hesitation. Presently he was out on the lofty shelf, eyes almost shut to withstand the shock of brilliant sunshine after continuous blackness. Then, with vision readjusted, he lifted his glasses and studied the broad expanse.

That study did not last long. At first it naturally swung along the horizon; then, slowing, crept from side to side in nearer view. Soon it paused, resting on something in motion. A bunch of cattle, apparently, was moving along a woody waterway, coming closer. But it was coming somewhat faster than such lazy bovines usually traveled; coming at a trot, hugging the shade, seeming steadily, stealthily purposeful.

Bracing his back against the stone, focusing his glasses more sharply, McGregor peered with concentrated attention. Then his face grew hard as that of the stone Skull. Through his teeth he rasped:

"You yellow bellied snakes! Trying it again, hey? All right, come and get what's coming to you!"

With a fighting grin he whirled and leaped back inside, to run recklessly downward. Striking harsh walls, tearing clothing and skin, yet holding his feet and his speed, he raced toward his shrunken army which had yet to fire its first gun.

The cattle there to the south had no horns. They were not bovine but equine. On the back of each was a rider. Tough horses, tougher horsemen, were stealing along toward the masked community of the Lost Whites. The Brazilian cattlemen, so long dreaded by the general, now were coming to conquer the holders of this far range and loot the legendary treasure. And they outnumbered the present defenders by nearly two to one.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST STAND

EVEN as he bounded earthward through the darkness of the Skull, McGregor made his battle plan. And as he reached his lounging force he yelled instant commands.

For a moment the hearers stared at him as if petrified. This precipitate return and vehement incitement by the chief who had so quietly faded away astounded all listeners. But then, with fierce grins, they leaped up and sprinted homeward. At their head raced Timothy.

McGregor alone remained at the rock. With him remained also an extra rifle, held as surety for the return of a runner. That runner was to bring him his reserve ammunition. Then he could again have his own gun and either stay here or go back, as he wished. McGregor meant to guard this natural fort, which was both the repository of ancient wealth and the last refuge of the Blancos Perdidos.

To send these untried riflemen into battle without his forceful leadership had cost him a sharp pang. But battles are won not by personal qualms but by impersonal headwork. Such headwork had told him many things in one flash of thought.

The stealthy assailants meant to attack the settlement first and clean it out. To do so they had slyly crawled up from the wilderness, camped secretly somewhere near, sneaked onward again to fall on the place early in the day, when light was good and their unsuspecting victims were presumably busy at morning chores. To checkmate that move he now could rush his small force to the Skull, leaving the invaders to assault only empty houses. But

thereby he would give the Brazilians control of the water supply, the food, everything except the virtually impregnable rock; and, surrounding that, they had only to hold their distance and destroy all defenders by patient siege.

Moreover, the Blancos Perdidos, trained since boyhood to combat at short range or close quarters, and not yet accustomed to powder and lead, could hardly be expected to battle successfully in the open. And even if all their old .44 rifles still were accurate (which McGregor doubted) those weapons were essentially bush guns, of heavy caliber but low velocity. Therefore the natives would fight much better in their home woods than elsewhere.

But McGregor, with his far shooting Army .30, could wreak much more havoc out here than in those close confines. There probably would be an enveloping movement by the horsemen. So he remained where, in that case, he could best hit them; also where, if the defenders were forced to flee to the rock, he could cover their retreat.

Much depended on Timothy. But McGregor felt that in this emergency the stalwart fellow would not get rattled; indeed, that under the compulsion of complete command he would act more surely than if habitually awaiting orders from his blond brother. As for the other warriors, the erstwhile drillmaster could only hope that their many monotonous repetitions of sighting and squeezing empty pieces would now stand them in good stead.

Teeth clenched, he now waited alone, fighting down desire to run to his outfit and lead it into combat. Presently he spied a shape emerging from the woods and sprinting toward him—the runner bearing his cartridges. Soon the messenger arrived and dropped at his feet an improvised bag—a shirt, bulging with cartons. As it struck the earth it burst open, revealing not only pasteboard boxes but a short black cylinder. Glancing at that odd shape, McGregor faintly smiled. It was his electric torch, sent by Timothy for use in the black recesses of the Skull if the lone sharpshooter must withdraw thither. Manifestly the native's brain was working fast and overlooking nothing.

"Good!" said McGregor. "Now what will you do? Fight here or there?"

"There!"

"Very well. Here's your gun. Fight like a devil!"

"That I will do!"

With a tigerish flash of teeth and a clutch on the extended rifle the native wheeled and sped back toward his comrades. Watching him, McGregor's eyes shone with approval. Yes, the boys would do their stuff well. They would do no better if he were with them. Thus concluding, he took his own position and waited.

THE wait seemed very long. The position seemed less and less wisely chosen. That position was the mouth of the cave, before which protruded the eroded rock teeth. Up above, on the high shelf where he could use his glasses, he might follow the enemy advance and shoot sooner. But experience told him that such shots would almost certainly be wasted. Bullets fired downward from lofty positions seldom strike moving targets. So he held his post, meanwhile estimating the range, the windage with a wet finger, readjusting sights, kicking toeholds. The most likely sight was eight hundred yards.

Time still dragged along. The expected horsemen did not appear. Suddenly the tense stillness ended. At the west sounded a dull thump. At once it grew into a ragged thudding noise which continued.

Muffled by intervening trees and contrary breeze, it was the noise of guns. Guns with loud mouths, yet without the far reaching penetration of high velocity. Guns which hit hard, yet did not stand steady; they struck, then ducked aside to new coverts whence they could fire again without deadly retaliation. Guns

fighting in bush battle, their blending tone pitched at the same key—the bass key of the jungle .44.

McGregor swore. His hastily conceived strategy manifestly was at fault. Instead of encircling the settlement on horseback and charging in with yells and blazing guns, the riders had picketed their mounts somewhere and sneaked along the creekside on foot, to filter into the forest around the pool and attack in Indian fashion. For a second he wondered how those strangers had found their way so surely; they had advanced on the hidden settlement as if guided by some scout or spy who knew the terrain. But what did that matter? They were there, killing the weakened defenders who were so much fewer than the powerful clan they had expected to find. And he was here, useless as any of these fixed rock teeth among which he stood.

But it was too late now to sway the balance of the battle by running to it. And, although he could not judge its progress from any differentiation in firing—since both offensive and defensive guns sounded the same—he knew the assailants were finding it plenty tough. Their battle plan, although carefully considered, had proved even more faulty than his own snap judgment.

They had expected to surround and surprise a large gang of warriors armed only with arrows and spears; to mow them down with bullets, make the less valiant ones retreat into the defensive tribe houses, burn them out by igniting the thatch roofs, then slaughter them when they again emerged, completely demoralized. Instead they themselves were caught by surprise and blasted by totally unexpected gunfire. So, despite numerical odds, the initial advantage was decidedly with the Blancos Perdidos, who would fight like fiends to hold it. Appreciating all this, the tense McGregor relaxed a trifle and stood his ground.

The irregular thumpings went on, fitfully increasing, diminishing, deepening again in volume. Over the treetops seemed to form a thin grayish haze of smoke. Then the dull reports unmistakably dwindled, becoming occasional.

Keenly watching, McGregor could see none of the defenders breaking cover to run for the rock. Listening keenly, he could hear no yells of triumph. Then his gaze swung more to the south; and he voiced a grating growl of satisfaction. His chance had come.

Out of a belt of woods materialized horses. Horses not running wild, but ridden by men.

They did not swing toward the battleground. Instead they charged straight for the Skull. Whether they were reserves who had failed their advance comrades or deserters from the combat was problematical. In either case they now were bent on capturing and looting the apparently unprotected rock of the treasure. They numbered at least a dozen.

McGregor sank prone, set his elbows, braced his toes, aimed carefully, fired. Nothing happened. Ejecting, locking, aiming a trifle lower, he squeezed again. A puff of dust spurted from the far ground; a horse leaped high, swerved, stumbled, fell headlong.

"Rotten!" gritted McGregor. "A damn ricochet!"

BUT, holding the same sight, he worked bolt and trigger fast. At every bound the galloping animals were eating up the excess yardage. And now at every shot something fell.

Horses and men piled up in a wildly struggling mass. Bunched, hit by unexpected missiles, hardly aware even yet of the thin rifle cracks from downwind, they tumbled in abrupt confusion. But in a few seconds they were up again—those who could get up. And these who did met another clip of cartridges from the invisible but now audible Army rifle.

As the far marksman jammed in a third clip he gritted his teeth even harder. He seemed to be hitting almost nothing. The oncoming force looked

little smaller. And now it was spreading out, instinctively taking intervals, yet charging with seemingly increased speed and determination. That one or two of those chargers were injured, that a man lay behind them, he had no time to notice. Digging his toes in harder, he resumed rapid fire, shifting aim at every slide of the bolt.

Magazine again refilled, the lone fighter picked new targets and let go. Those targets now were much nearer, but much more widely dispersed. Moreover, his sights now were much too high; there had been no time to readjust them. And around him were humming or smacking vengeful slugs loosed in counter-attack. His position at the base of a rock tooth had been detected. At that spot, whence winked his pale flashes of fire, were darting heavy balls. But, fired from backs of leaping horses, all missed their mark, hitting only earth or the Skull. Mouth pulled down, muzzle held low, McGregor rapped out another series of crackling reports.

This time the result was miraculous. Men tumbled fast; more men than he could have knocked over by that hastily scattered string of shots, most of which must have missed. For a split second it seemed that other guns, unheard, must be striking down the riders. Then he guessed that previous hits by his own piece now were taking full effect; that some of those charging battlers had clung on somehow, dying as they rode. He rammed in one more clip.

Shells ready in the hot gun, McGregor leaped erect and fired pointblank. The survivors now were close and converging. Every man for himself, every man now convinced that only one fighter barred the way to the treasure, every man carried on by gang courage and personal avarice, they drew together to ride him down. Yellow faced, yellow toothed, hard eyed, they rode and shot to kill. With a grin the blond alien hammered out bullets which could hardly fail.

Off the rock tooth at his left bounced screaming slugs from the .44's. From his head flew a lock of overlong hair. From his rapidly moving right arm flipped a fragment of torn shirt. Of these narrow misses he knew nothing. He perceived only suddenly reeling men and mad horses charging on. But he knew those men were through. Rifle empty, he dropped it, stepped behind his stone tooth, drew his pistol.

Horses hit that jagged rock, swerved off, tumbled. Men dropped and lay where they fell. Then the swift shock was over. Tensely alert, McGregor scanned the fallen men. All were still.

ONCE more he reloaded the Springfield, then again glanced around, brow furrowing. Out in the open nothing moved. Over at the settlement was no sound, no discernible sign of life. The stillness was ominous. By now somebody should be emerging from that forested battle ground. He failed to realize that his own swift fight against the charging horsemen had lasted hardly two minutes.

That something was wrong, however, he realized more and more. This fight was not yet over. After another searching survey he grabbed up the shirt which served as ammunition bag and retreated into the cave.

A few rods back in the blackness he stopped and squatted, watching outward. For some time his vigilance seemed useless. He saw nothing new, heard nothing but the occasional kick of a wounded horse. Laying down his rifle, he rested his arms, right hand loose on his pistol butt. Then that hand tightened. Across the sunlit ground outside grew a slow shadow.

Very cautiously it moved, gradually lengthening—the shadow of a man with a rifle, creeping from the east, heedless of the sun at his back. Suddenly the creeper made a quick motion, throwing out an arm in signal; then he was still. From the other side of the cave mouth sounded a subdued grunt.

McGregor's eyes glinted. His hunch had been no false alarm. Two men were out there; men who had swerved away from the final close combat, ridden to the rear of the Skull and, after conference, sneaked back on foot to get him—one at each side. Now they had met, and were pondering over his disappearance and their own next move.

The shadowy arm signaled again. The whole shadow moved nearer to the Skull, disappeared against it. Then at the edge of the entrance protruded a sombrero.

Silently McGregor drew his pistol. But he neither fired nor aimed. That hat trick was old stuff. He watched the headgear come farther out; so far that he could see the rifle barrel on which it was so temptingly displayed. Soon it withdrew. After a moment of uncertainty the lurking assassins began hoarse whisperings. These soon ended; then, close against the earth, McGregor could perceive in the gloom the bare heads of his stalkers.

Still he did not shoot. The heads came out only far enough to peer one-eyed into the impenetrable dark, then quickly drew back. Followed more whispers, terminating in an impatient grunt. Caution exhausted, the pair stood up and stepped around the corner. There, though, they halted, rifles up, tight faces once more squinting into the forbidding hole.

On those faces the sun shone bright. Scanning them, McGregor bit back an oath. The visage of one was that of a *mestizo* unknown to him. But the other, the one most dangerous and determined, was that of a man he had forgotten but now instantly remembered—Manuel Ribeiro.

Manuel Ribeiro, the Brazilian whose partner had been hurled from this rock; Manuel Ribeiro, whose life McGregor had saved one sleepy afternoon; and, who, instead of heeding his liberator's warning never to return, had collected a big gang of cattlemen and come back to kill everybody in his way—including the North American.

The sureness of that stealthy force in approaching the settlement was comprehensible now. Ribeiro had been the guide, the leader, the virtual commander. Yet at the end he had double-crossed his outfit, slipping away with personal henchmen to attack his own private goal. And at the end of that desperate dash he had deserted them also, darting aside to save his own hide. And now, at the end of all, he had sneaked around the Skull to shoot that erstwhile friend in the back. His outward frankness on that long gone afternoon, his pleasing personality which made men believe in him, were only an attractive skin on a cold blooded snake.

His last move proved this. Standing there at the cave mouth, ostensibly intrepid, he shot a short question at the *mestizo*. The latter, slower witted, grunted affirmatively, put a hand into a pocket, brought out a box of matches, shook it to prove he had lights. Ribeiro murmured again. The other stepped forward, gun again ready, matches also ready to strike when increasing darkness should necessitate their use. Ribeiro also promptly advanced. But he sidled toward the other. After a few more steps he would be behind the *mestizo*. If the vanished alien really were somewhere ahead and opened fire, the *mestizo* could take the bullets. Even after the living shield died, the schemer could hold it before him and thus back out. Yes, Ribeiro was clever.

Once more McGregor grinned. His pistol came up. Ribeiro's shrewd plan went violently askew. The first shot crashing from the dark tore into his own heart. He was dead before the second and third bullets killed the *mestizo*.

Then McGregor stood up straight, peering steadfastly at that panel of daylight at the mouth of the Skull. It was unbroken now by the sinister shadows of would-be looters; they lay sprawled where death had touched them, victims of the Northern defender's gun . . .

CHAPTER XXII

WILL OF THE GODS

VULTURES were at work. Out in the open they tore with beak and talon at carcasses of horses and corpses of men.

In all the ancient settlement now lived only two men. These, at the doorway of the log jail, squatted side by side. One, a yellow haired Northerner in torn khaki, listened. The other, a reddish bearded Southerner, almost nude except for bandages, somberly talked, telling the tale of the fight.

Arriving at the village after the sprint from the Skull, Timothy had swiftly apportioned cartridges from the hidden belts and stationed his men among the surrounding trees; not on the ground, but up in the branches. He had then given unmistakable orders to the few women, who, usually slow witted but now keyed up by desperate emergency, had quickly comprehended their part and played it well. When the creeping attackers came sifting through the woods, eyes intent on whatever waited beyond, they met no opposition. Over their heads the Lost Whites let them pass to the open space around the pool.

There the women, loudly conversing with one another from different doorways, gave the place an appearance of unguarded life. The invaders did not take time to reason that their conquest looked too easy. They rushed. At once the women sprang back inside the houses and barred the doors. And their men in the trees opened fire on the enemy thus concentrated in the constricted open ground.

At such short range the poorest marksmen could not miss. Shot or shocked, the Brazilians fell dead or stood stunned. Into them poured a withering fire. Then, as they broke for the nearest cover—the cylindrical house walls—the Lost Whites dropped from their branches. With feet on solid ground and sides against solid tree trunks they fired even faster. But—

There Timothy paused in his narrative. McGregor, face eager, waited. The idea of using the women as bait and letting the enemy trap itself had not been his own hasty plan. No, nor even the idea of climbing the trees. His quick commands had been only to deal out ammunition, encircle the settlement, fight like hell. Timothy had thought fast and improved on that hurried battle order. Thus he had made it possible for his inexperienced riflemen to achieve a massacre. But—

But, Timothy now confessed with chagrin, the deadly plan broke down when it should have worked best. With the Brazilians fleeing, with nothing to do but pump lead into fugitives sprinting past within a few feet, the Blancos Perdidos lost their heads. Lifelong training at close combat gripped them anew. Instead of continuing gunfire they jumped at their near foes and struck at them with the steel barrels of their latest bludgeons. Thus they brained a few. But most of the fleeing men dodged the blows; then, flinging themselves behind trees, turned and fought back—with bullets.

Just what occurred thereafter was vague to Timothy. He himself, he contritely admitted, went wild. With his men totally out of control, he ran about and fought every stranger he encountered. Something hit his head. When he regained consciousness all was quiet. And everybody he could find was dead, including the women.

How those women had gotten into the fight he did not know. They had not been called into it. Women never were. But—well, now they were dead, here and there in the woods, with bullet holes through them and wooden weapons in their clenched hands.

So now he alone, of all his people, remained alive; he who, of all, most deserved death. With that dejected statement he ended his report.

The listener eyed him sidewise, smiled faintly, but said nothing. He knew

Timothy had fought like a fiend; his many wounds, luckily not serious, proved that. He knew, too, that the women had perished because they disobeyed orders to stay in their shelters.

For this extermination both the lone native and his adopted brother could blame themselves if they would; for, unwittingly, the one had borne hither a pestilence, the other had turned loose a human snake to bring back other cold blooded killers. For the moment McGregor's face grew even heavier than Timothy's with self-reproach. Then it hardened again and cleared. Both had done what had seemed best. No man could do more.

AND this tragic outcome of their efforts had been predestined. They had been but blind pawns moved in some slow but sure game played by some superior power beyond their ken; a power which, deliberately surveying the vast field between the savage Sierra Pacaraima and the semisavage Rio Amazon, decided that on it the Blancos Perdidos no longer deserved a place, and therefore set about removing them. In so doing, that strange power merely made old moves, repeating past history, with a few momentarily interesting innovations.

This far land, held for unknown centuries by warring aborigines who in turn came to conquer and stayed to settle and die, had at length received virile white men armed with guns. Presently had come a pestilence, wiping out all Indians except those strengthened by the white men's blood. But then the white men had gone virtually native, continuing primitive customs, perpetrating ghastly sacrifices at the grisly Skull, murdering a miserable bunch of other white men found starving, taking their wretched women; and, perhaps worst of all, predicating all these inhumanities on the supposedly sacred duty of keeping their race alive to guard useless gold. Even the cruel aborigines before them had not made gods of yellow dirt and colored crystals.

So now the great power which happened to glance again this way had decided to clean out these decadent whites rotted by gold. Down south was a more virile race of men—Brazilian cattlemen, perhaps yellow, perhaps dirty, perhaps even diseased, but tough, hard, more worthy to hold this distant range than were the once hardy Frenchmen who now had gone to worthless seed. But, to clean the land thoroughly, the destructive gold must be removed before it could cause more misery. Therefore the satirically amused power had brought from afar two men to get it; wiped out one, let the other come on, made him blunder about and fight with body and brain for sheer existence, yet steered him to the predetermined goal.

Slightly impatient near the end, it had knocked over many men by the old moves of pestilence and battle, leaving alive only the one native whose blood had been previously blended with that of the chosen messenger. And now their next work was clearly calling.

Thus it seemed, at least, to McGregor. And to one or two other thoughtful men, now gone, some things had seemed somewhat similar. The inflexible general, almost dead, had yet clearly foreseen the ultimate conquest of the southern riders and had madly schemed to forestall the inevitable. Timothy's grandfather, dying, had known that the treasured gold would bring death to the Blancos Perdidos . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

OUTWARD BOUND

HIGH on the southern slope of the Sierra Pacaraima, a pair of binoculars once more slowly scanned the vast savanna stretching toward the Amazon. Through them looked keen blue eyes, and under them silently sat a muscular body clad in khaki, belted with bullets, booted with

tough leather. Thus this same man had sat here weeks ago. But now he was not alone.

Beside him squatted another muscular man—loosely clothed, scarred, but no longer bandaged. A few yards away stood several wiry horses, contentedly cropping leaves. These were pack animals, laden with heavy, hard packed bags. Two other ponies, recently ridden to the foot of the sierra by the men, now were at liberty to rove masterless on the great prairie. Their recent riders were about to pass over the rugged divide, never to return.

Far out on that dun landscape the Red Skull, now only a pinkish wart to the far gazers, stared as always toward the hazy horizon whence those ultimate masters must come. Whenever they did come they would find the awesome stone to be no longer a treasure rock, or even a death trap, but merely a tomb. The high cavern which had held gold was empty; the lurking trap was sprung; the hovering gate was down, barring the gloomy passageway to the catacomb of human heads.

With a slow sigh of mingled regret and relief McGregor lowered his glasses and passed them to Timothy. Through the magic barrels the native took one long look at his desolated homeland. Then both arose and turned to the laden horses. In the hard cloth sacks was all the gold of the Blancos Perdidos, and even the traditional gems. In later days a lapidary was to confirm McGregor's judgment that these were not diamonds, rubies, sapphires, but worthless crystals. Now, however, with pack beasts readily available, he was overlooking no bets.

"Hep!" he barked.

Again the short train worked upward. Over the crest it trudged, and down the northern slope it began descent. Behind, the prairie of the Lost Whites was gone, blotted out by thick timber.

Down, down, slowly down, stopping only to eat or to sleep through dark nights, the cavalcade wended its way. At length, midway of a cool forenoon, it reached a spot where men had been before. At the right, hardly noticeable, lay a low pile of severed saplings and dead leaves; at the left, almost sunk by mountain rains but still moored by hard fiber rope, waited a dugout canoe.

While Timothy awkwardly but doggedly bailed out the boat McGregor threw aside the withered camouflage of the low heap, unwrapped a tarpaulin, drew forth various things. He moved with sure speed based on forethought. By the time the canoe was once more buoyant the shrunken pile was again covered. On the ground rested a small trunk, some canned food, a slightly rusty rifle and pistol, a web belt with pockets and holster, a few cartons of cartridges.

"Unload the horses," curtly directed McGregor.

Timothy obeyed. Glance often reverting to his new guns, he unroped the treasure sacks and let them drop as if they held only worthless earth. Meanwhile McGregor moved aside and gazed somberly down at an almost imperceptible mound, beaten low by many a heavy shower. He spoke no word. But when at length he turned away he drew a long, deep breath, and his steely eyes looked a little misty.

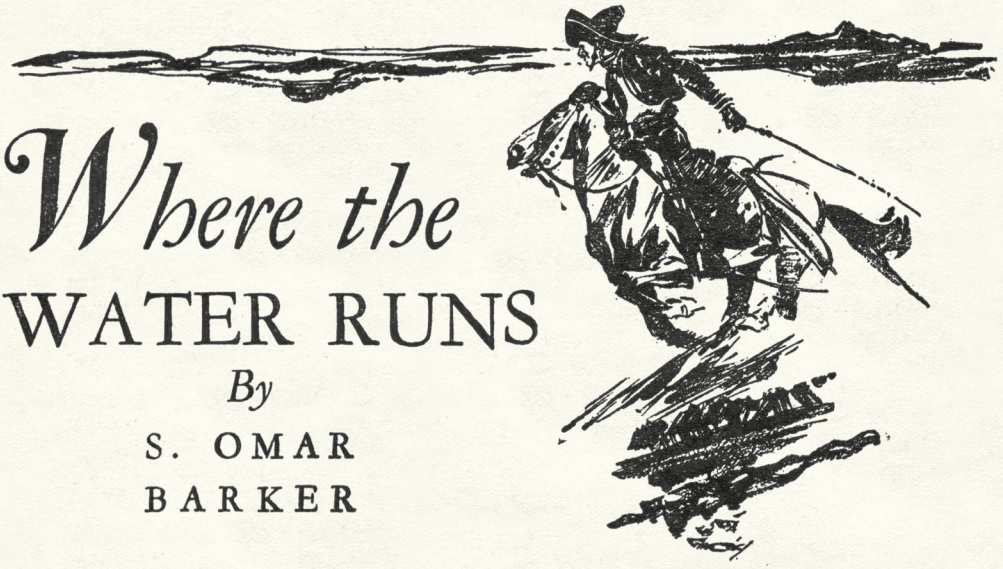
Striding to the canoe, he rapidly stowed aboard the new cargo.

"Well, here's where we shove off," McGregor calmly said. "What's done is done. And now we're going to do plenty more. You've got a lot to learn, fellow, up where we're going. But I'm the lad that can steer you right. And between us we can cover an awful lot of territory before we're too old to travel any more. So let's go!"

"Yes, brother. Let's go."

And, with a quick settling in their places, a cut at the rope, a forceful shove of the guiding paddle, they slid out on the swift water and were gone; gone from death and decay to new life—North.

THE END.



Where the WATER RUNS

By

S. OMAR BARKER

WHEN a man threw his bedroll into the Bent Toadstool wagon and took on as hand for Red Fox Finch he generally knew he wasn't signing up for any Sunday School class. Maybe Finch—in his customary white shirt with black coat and tie, his mane-like hair showing yellow-russet under his Texas Senator black hat—looked like a skypilot, but he wasn't. He was a cattle baron with a capital B—which might as well stand also for a brief description of how he got that way: Bargain, Bamboozle and Beat; but never Bungle.

Red Fox Finch's methods of business didn't worry Mariano Lujan. The slender, natty mountain vaquero drifted into the Bent Toadstool range from his own on an indefinite vacation rendered advisable by a certain error in judgment: Borrowing some fresh beef for his poor old aunt at Santo Niño, he had made the sad mistake of selecting a calf claimed by his political enemy, the newly elected sheriff, and getting caught at it. Caught, but not captured. He might have to be gone quite awhile. Consequently he would need a job. He hit the Bent Toadstool for it. Finch tried him out, found him more than a tophand puncher, shrewdly perceived that the suave Mexican carried no undue burden of respect for the law, and put him on.

So far, so good. Or even better than that, for whatever cowboy duties Mariano could do by daylight he seemed equally capable of performing by night. Despite the fact that Finch's foreman—a hard bitten, sour, rough talking *hombre* known as Sul Smith—held the soft-spoken Mexican in contempt, Mariano calmly smiled, took his orders, cultivated the tiny mustache on his upper lip and held his job.

Even at less pay than was received by any of Finch's other cowboys on the Bent Toadstool ranch Mariano was satisfied.

His own horse, his favorite, the arch necked Tito, a golden *mojino,* unused and loose with the supply remuda, was getting sleek and fat after the shaggy boniness of a hard Winter in the mountains. By the time Mariano's friends would have things quieted down for his return to Santo Niño, Tito would be right up on his toes, a fit charger for the return of a caballero.

WISPY dust streaks, converging like wheel spokes toward a hub, moved over gentle swells and hills as half a dozen pick-ups of cattle strung in toward the gathering ground by the river, driven by as many Bent Toadstool cowboys. Behind his bunch Mariano's high tenor voice rang out in a plaintive Mexican song. On the valley flat, held off from the low dirt precipice of the river bank by a sturdy barbed wire fence, about eight hundred cattle were already milling about.

In from the south came two men in a buckboard, Red Fox Finch in his black coat and hat, with a pink cheeked young man in a gray tweed cap beside him. Red Fox Finch was about to make a sale—another one of his huge, vastly profitable sales of cattle and range.

It was a smart deal and a simple one; so smartly simple, in fact, that Mariano Lujan, himself no slouch at sharp practise, was filled with admiration. Not that Finch had told his punchers all the details; Mariano had merely surmised them from the foreman's orders.

Mariano shoved his pick-up into the herd, loped over to the side of the foreman who was holding them, crooked his lank knee over the saddlehorn and twitched a brown paper smoke quickly into shape. He grinned, then winked toward the wagon where Red Fox Finch and Mr. Charles Lowden, late of England, were climbing out of the buckboard.

"Comes the lamb to slaughter, eh?" he said sociably. "An' look like he waggin' the tail for joy, too, eh?"

"What the hell d'you know about it, sheepherder?" growled Foreman Smith, scowling. "Keep yer trap shut! Here, take my trick an' earn yer beans!"

He turned his big back contemptuously on the Mexican and rode off toward the wagon. Mariano shrugged and turned to the herd.

At the wagon, Finch, with one foot up on the tongue, was making sweeping gestures west and north toward the hills as he talked to the Englishman.

"Four hundred square miles of it, Mr. Lowden, counting what nobody claims and you can just use free if you like; and the farther back from the river you go, the better the grass. Yes, sir! And, of course, on such short notice my men haven't been able to gather anything like all the cattle wearing my brand, either. But that, Mr. Lowden, is just my hard luck. What the tally shows I deliver here is what we'll deal on. Any more you pick up, they're yours. Yes, sir, it's just too much range for me to handle along with my stuff *east* of the river, and to get it into good hands, I'm making you a bargain price."

"My word!" said Mr. Charles Lowden. That was all he said, but his rosy face beamed with enthusiasm. "My word!"

"Yes, sir, and—ah, here is my foreman now! Foreman Smith, Mr. Lowden. Smith, what's the tally?"

The foreman fished a grimy notebook out of his pocket. There were figures in it, but they had been there days before the first cow was gathered, for not one had actually been tallied.

"Lemme see." The foreman scowled. Then he looked up and spoke, this time with some pretense of civility in his surly tone. "Eleven hunderd an' sixty-nine to date, Mr. Finch," he said. "It'll tally around fifteen hunderd, time the rest of the pick-up is in."

"Fifteen hundred!" Red Fox feigned a very pleased surprise. "You see, Mr. Lowden, it's just about as I estimated—fifteen hundred tallied, and anyhow another coupla hundred brush loafers you'll pick up later."

Sul Smith nodded agreement. He even grinned a little as he stepped over to where the *cocinero* was nursing and cursing a smoky fire.

"Two hunderd brush loafers, he says, Dutch, throwed in free. Ain't he generous? If they's half a dozen we ain't combed out I'll eat 'em! Now looky here, Swartz, the bait's done took an' the hook catchin' hold. See to it you

throw a dinner into him that'll keep him purrin'—an' *pronto,* savvy?"

Dutch Swartz gave a snort.

"*Pronto,* is it? Ven de vood I got, it vouldn't burn in hell. *Himmel,* I gif him raw beans mit smoke dressin'! Yoost ve git a wrangler vunce dot ain't too lazy to rustle vood, an' you got to fire him, heh? I vish—"

"Wup now! Jest hold yer applesass, Dutch. You know why I fired Benny. How the hell would the boss do any business with a chuckleheaded tattletale like that fuzz-whiskers around? Besides, I told you to git that Mex to snake you in some wood—"

"Yah!" snorted the cook, wiping his smoke-bleary eyes. "You tell me! You don't tell him! Maybe you scared of him, heh? Vot you t'ink, I'm gonna—"

"Aw, shut up, before I spit in your fire," broke in the foreman. "We got to have some dinner around here. I'll git you some good wood."

His eye turned to the nearby river. Some forty feet out from the low bank, down at the watering-corner V of the fence, a black snag stuck well up out of the water, remnant of a dead pine from somewhere far upstream that had lodged here sometime and stuck. Plainly it was pitch; and plainly, too, the top of it, upheld only by a slender stem where some long ago fire had nearly burned it in two, would break off easily.

Foreman Smith started toward the rope on his saddle, but his eye, measuring the distance, saw that his thirty-five foot manila wouldn't reach the snag. Well, he knew what would. He went to the cluster of bedrolls piled near the wagon, rolled out the smallest one and took from inside of it Mariano Lujan's black rawhide riata, slim, pliant —and close to fifty feet long. With it he stepped down to the river bank.

His first throw missed. The riata dropped into the water, wetting half of its length. The second toss caught; Smith yanked. The snag top broke off and fell into the water with a splash. The stout foreman towed it swiftly to the bank and hauled it out. He heaved the pitch chunk to his shoulder, carelessly coiled the rawhide rope, already beginning to kink from its wetting, and started to the wagon. He got there just as Mariano Lujan came riding in from the herd—supposedly after some matches, actually out of curiosity for another look at Finch's new buyer.

When the vaquero saw his treasured rawhide in a dripping, twisted coil on the foreman's arm he forgot his curiosity. He knew that rope. It was the only rawhide in camp. He had made it himself, at the cost of hours of painstaking labor, working it, oiling it, rubbing it into perfection. And now this *chivo* had got it wet. For a second Mariano saw red. His hand hovered near his gun as he swung down from his horse and stepped toward the foreman. But his voice, when he spoke, was soft—too soft.

"*Chivo!*" he addressed the foreman, "thees riata, j'you take heem from my bed?"

"Sure," Smith said. "An' suppose I did?"

"That," said Mariano, "ees bad. The water has spoil heem. J'you see? He make the keenk now!"

Deftly Mariano took a six-foot doubled length of the wet rawhide.

"J'you see, *chivo?*" he purred. "Now ees no good for nothing except thees!"

With a swift, rattler-like movement the vaquero suddenly lashed the lariat's doubled end smartly across the foreman's face.

With a surprised bellow Sul Smith swung his ax. Mariano hopped like a grasshopper. The ax missed, and the force of its swing sent it flying out of the foreman's hand. But in sidestepping Mariano caught his feet in the riata already twisting into a tangle as the hot sun dried and stiffened it, and before he could recover his balance the big foreman lunged upon him, swung a hoof-like fist that caught Mariano smack in his slim middle and knocked him backward.

ORDINARILY Red Fox Finch would have let them fight it out. But today he had company — important company — possibly squeamish about such things as fists, guns, bullets, knives, and maybe sudden death. Swiftly he stepped between them. His gun was not drawn, but it was handy in its open holster, and at his signal Dutch Swartz pounced upon Mariano and held the groggy Mexican down.

To Finch's astonishment Mr. Charles Lowden, the rosy faced Englishman, stepped swiftly up behind the foreman and extracted his gun from the holster.

"Here, you two," snapped Finch, "cut it out!"

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" said Mr. Lowden. "Really, brawling over a mere rope! Really quite uncalled for, gentlemen. Calm yourself, Mr. Smith. And you, my lad—" he stepped over closer to Mariano—"here! Accept this in the name of peace. It will purchase you a new rope, quite a fancy one, what! I say, Cook, my man, let him up."

He held out toward Mariano a crisp five-dollar bill. For five dollars one might buy an excellent lariat, but not of rawhide like Mariano's. Only skilled, patient fingers and much devoted time could make such a one or restore it, once thoroughly wet, to its proper snake-like suppleness.

With a grunt Dutch Swartz released the vaquero. Without any show of hurry Mariano got to his feet. He brushed himself off carefully. When finally he saw fit to answer Lowden, his hawk-like face was smiling blandly as he refused the bill.

"*Gracias, señor,*" he said. "J'you too mooch kind. But thees beezness, he's no pay for weeth money."

He shrugged, picked up his rawhide and started coiling it.

"Ees nothing. Putty queek I put heem the oil an' putty queek he's good joos' same like new, eh? Excuse, please. I'm go back on the herd."

With the coiled rawhide in one hand he stepped to his horse, swung gracefully up and loped off.

Red Fox Finch pulled his burly foreman off behind the wagon.

"Looky here, Sul," he said quietly, "I don't give a damn what you do to this Mex—later. But we can't have no ruckuses busting open around here right now. So don't you go firing him nor riding him—yet. He knows too much. Might spill the beans. You got to hold off till this deal's over, see—which if it flops on account of your rowing with the Mexican, where the hell's your split coming from? Use your head, man! Coddle him along. 'Course, if you're afraid of him in the meantime, I'll—"

"Afraid of him?" Sul Smith grunted and spat heavily. "Skeered of that little white livered— Why, he ain't got the guts of a snowbird. Sure, I'll lay off of him till your deal's done swum the crick, Finch; but after that—"

AT DINNER neither Mariano nor Sul Smith had much to say. Each seemed as totally unaware of the other's presence as if he were a thousand miles away. When the last swig of coffee had chased Dutch Swartz's prune pie down the last satisfied gullet, Red Fox Finch passed cigars. The cowhands knew it was just a flourish for the special occasion, but they all accepted just the same—except Mariano Lujan.

"Excuse, please," he said politely, and twitched up some of his own tobacco into a slim brown paper smoke.

Finch was not a man to enjoy being refused, but he said nothing. Presently he took Mariano aside.

"Lujan," he said, "that was a dirty trick Smith pulled getting your rope wet. I don't blame you a damn bit for whacking him like you done. And I don't blame you none if you're laying for him neither; but I hope you ain't holding any grudge against me and the outfit on account of it."

Mariano shrugged and smiled.

"In the wolf pack, Señor Feench," he

observed cryptically, "ees always some leetle fighting."

Finch smiled his most confidential smile and put a hand on the vaquero's shoulder.

"Sure," he said. "And I don't mind telling you, Lujan, I don't give a damn what you do to the foreman later. But I don't want no ruckuses busting open around here right now. If this deal goes through without a hitch, you get your split, same as the others; and on the Q. T. I'm raising your wages right now. You're a tophand, Lujan, and I'm counting on you to see us through. Savvy?"

Mariano continued to smile. He rolled a new cigaret.

"Tonight?" he asked.

"He's taking the hook, Lujan," Finch answered. "It looks like by tonight he'll have it swallowed. Confidentially I've done give Smith one hell of a bawling out. You just go ahead and do your part like nothing had happened, and I guarantee he'll lay off of you. Of course, if you're afraid he might—"

"Señor Feench," broke in the vaquero softly, "the mountain wolf, sometimes he's a what you call poosyfoot, but he don't got 'fraids for nothings."

Red Fox Finch prided himself on his canny knowledge of human nature. A few minutes later he talked again to Foreman Smith.

"I bawled hell out of the Mexican, Smith," he said. "He promised to be good."

"He better," said Smith, "or I'll knock the hell out of him ag'in. But promises from a greaser don't amount to a damn. I'll watch him."

But Sul Smith was wrong. Mariano Lujan's promises, expressed or implied, were always kept.

"Good, Smith!" said the boss. "And now snare me out a coupla top horses. Me and the Prince of Wales are off for a little tour to look at the grass."

A puncher had already brought in the remuda. Smith pointed toward the milling horses with an inquiring chin.

"Which 'uns you want?"

"Pick a rocking chair for Lowden. Me, I want a stepper, and good lookin'. Lemme see—" he turned to look over the remuda. "Look! See that yellow *mojino* in there? I'll ride him."

"But that's—"

"But hell!" snapped Finch. "Gimme a rope. I'll ketch him. No harm to let Lowden see I ain't no dude myself. Here, Mr. Lowden, you're soon to be a cowman yourself. Lemme show you how to snake out a bronc."

"Quite," said Charles Lowden, who had been brushing his teeth. "Charmed, sir."

After a little maneuvering Red Fox Finch's loop snapped out and settled neatly over the *mojino's* head.

"Bravo! Bravo!" said Mr. Lowden. "My word!"

But the Englishman was not the only one who saw that neat throw. Mariano Lujan saw it and came up at a gallop, just as Finch was leading the *mojino* out of the rope corral.

"Señor Feench!" exclaimed the Mexican. "Excuse, please, I'm t'eenk more better j'you ketch one other horse!"

"Yeah? What for? This 'un looks good to me."

"But thees ees my horse, my Tito. Nobody gonna ride heem but me myself!"

"The hell they ain't!" Foreman Smith growled threateningly. "Since when you givin' orders around here? The boss ain't goin' to hurt your damn jughead. An' git this through your noodle, Lujan: There ain't no private mounts in this outfit. Now git to hell on about your business!"

Even Red Fox Finch's preacher-like face reddened angrily. This damned touchy Mexican was getting on his nerves. Ordinarily he would put him in his place, and that mighty sudden. But with this big deal on his hands he couldn't afford to risk a row with any of his hands, not even the Mexican.

"I'll handle this, Smith," he said quietly. "I reckon I wouldn't hurt your

horse, Lujan, but if you don't want him rode, O.K!"

With a flourish he flipped the noose off the *mojino's* head and turned him loose.

"And by the way, Lujan," he said as he coiled the rope, "take a shovel, an ax, a hammer and some staples and ride up the river to Dry Split this afternoon and doctor the fence along there. If you need any extra wire jerk it down from the old line along the Dry."

As Mariano turned toward the wagon to get the tools he swore in soft, pungent Spanish.

"*Qué carajo!* Because I am Mexican I am a peon for feex fence, eh?"

But no sour mood ever stayed long with Mariano Lujan. When he rode out of sight a few minutes later, bound on his peon errand, he was singing.

Red Fox Finch, however well he might conceal it, was stubborn. No sooner was Mariano out of sight than he turned loose the second horse he had caught, rebuilt the loop, stepped up and flicked it again over the *mojino's* arched neck.

"You got to humor 'em some, Mr. Lowden," he explained, "but what they don't know don't hurt 'em."

The *mojino* stood quiet for saddling, but as Finch swung up he began prancing. Finch tightened the reins harshly. The spirited horse, unused to any but his own master's light touch, reared and plunged. Finch, with an oath, raked the spur rowels deep into his ribs.

"There's a white man on you now, you jughead!" he snorted. "R'ar and be damned!"

When Finch and the Englishman rode out of sight over a low hill half a mile west of the wagon, Sul Smith noted with pleasure that the boss was still punishing the Mexican's horse unmercifully.

THE fence at Dry Split needed plenty of fixing. The Tusa River, really no more than a creek, curved sharply at this point. Most of the year it was little more than a trickle. Now, however, from June-thawing snow far back at its head in the mountains, it was booming—muddy and cluttered with leafy trash and driftwood. An accumulation of débris in the curve had swung the current sharply back against the west bank and caved it off, fence and all.

Obviously the river had once run almost straight at this point. But the dammed-up drift of some long ago Spring freshet had not only crooked it back westward, but also had completely changed its course.

Mariano Lujan could readily see that once it must have run on southeastward at an angle that left a great wedge of brushy grassland between the old course and the new. After the first hundred yards or so the old channel of the Dry Split dropped down into a great gash with a high, sheer bank on its west side, and thus meandered off into the distance. From the drift dam to this sheer bank ran an old fence, completing an excellent barrier to hold cattle west of the Dry Split Gulch.

Mariano did not know exactly how great an area the old channel circled before it finally met again the present course of Tusa Creek, but he knew there was a lot of fine grass country between the two that constituted Red Fox Finch's finest range. There were cattle on it now, too—probably some three or four hundred, which, for reasons of his own, Finch was not gathering to sell to the Englishman. Just about enough cattle to bring the false tally of those he had gathered up to par with the truth. But why gather them back across the river when one could count their number in the sale anyhow?

Mariano noted this peculiar change in the river's course with interest. The driftwood dam blocking the former channel was now well covered with silty deposit upon which grew rank grass and weeds. Only a little seep came out in the Dry Split beyond it. Plainly every freshet added to its strength with new piles of drift. That was natural

enough, but Mariano could not help wondering just how natural the beginning of the dam had been. When he rode across above it and came down to the drift to chop out some lodged poles for the fence posts he needed, he wondered more than ever, for some of the lower logs showed faint ax marks through their moss.

Mariano noticed, too, that the disturbance he made in prying out the half dozen pieces of drift that he needed muddied the Dry Split seep and seemed to increase its flow a little. With a little help the swollen Tusa might easily cut on through into the old channel again.

Mariano did a good job of fixing the fence west of the water, though he did not need any of the rusted wire strands that still marked the old fence from the driftwood on down to the first high bank west of the old channel. When he got back to the wagon, Red Fox Finch and the Englishman had already returned from their tour and left for town.

Red Fox Finch's smartness had flowered and borne fruit. The big deal was made. Mr. Charles Lowden had bought himself into the cow business, and it looked like a bargain. For $35,000 cash Red Fox Finch had sold him "all cattle in the Bent Toadstool brand ranging west of the Tusa River," together with the right to graze them for a period of six months on any Finch leased range west of the said Tusa River. To himself Finch reserved everything east of the Tusa.

And as an extra, neighborly favor (not in the contract) to the new ranchman, Finch had offered his own wagon outfit and hands to hold the cattle for Mr. Lowden until such time as he could get together an outfit of his own. Gratefully the rosy cheeked Mr. Lowden had accepted. He was, in fact, fairly overwhelmed by Mr. Finch's kindness, for tonight at Tusa the said Mr. Finch was to be host at a big banquet of welcome to the new cattle baron. It was for this that they had been obliged to hurry back to town that afternoon instead of staying overnight at the Bent Toadstool wagon. When Red Fox Finch did things he did them in a big way. Rarely indeed did he overlook any little detail.

Rarely indeed—but sometimes.

Mariano had not been back at the wagon ten minutes before he learned that Finch, after all, had ridden the *mojino*. In another ten minutes Mariano had located the remuda, roped Tito out of it and was looking him over. Tito, although he had been rolling in the sand, was still stiff haired with sweat; and his sides were crusty with dried blood where Finch's spurs had ripped him. If the gashes had been on his own ribs, Mariano could not have been any more angry than he was.

Nevertheless he came back to the wagon with nothing to say.

Sometime around nine o'clock, while Mr. Charles Lowden (minus $35,000) sat rosy faced and glowing as guest of honor at Red Fox Finch's banquet in town, something spooked his herd (still wearing the Bent Toadstool brand, of course) on the west bank of Tusa Creek. In a sudden hoof clacking roar they stampeded. Strangely enough, the fence on the river side was down. In ten minutes not a critter of the entire bunch was left west of the Tusa.

Red Fox Finch's big deal was neatly finished. And to Sul Smith's astonishment, Mariano Lujan did not shirk his share in the dirty work. When the outfit hurried back to break camp and clear out, Mariano was among them, singing one of his favorite Mexican ditties. But ten minutes later, when Sul Smith, still nursing his grudge, bellowed out a harsh call for him in the dark, he got no answer. Mariano was gone.

MR. CHARLES LOWDEN surveyed the sun kissed world of early morning with the fire of pure joy in his bright blue eyes. He had made a fine bargain; Mr. Finch was a fine fellow; it was a fine world, this rangeland in which he was

now established. Beside him in the buckboard rode his first hired cowboy, the whiskered wrangler, Benny Cleaver, whom Sul Smith had recently fired. They were on their way out from town to the camp and herd on the west bank of the Tusa. Red Fox Finch, most regretfully, had been too busy to come along.

"Wonderful, lad, wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Lowden. "If I recall correctly we are almost there. Just around that next mound is the herd. I hope the lads are not getting too impatient for the—er—new markers!"

In the back of the buckboard were new branding irons, fashioned to make a quick, neat CL on cowhide, with bar irons for venting the Bent Toadstool.

The buckboard rounded the next rise. Neither camp nor a single cow was in sight.

"My word! Why—what I mean—my word! Where are my cattle?"

Benny spat.

"Don't take it too hard," he said. "Cows has got legs. Maybe they jest scattered."

But they hadn't. Benny read the tracks easily enough. He noted also that the river bank fence was up now in spite of the trampling tracks across the line of it.

"Mister," he said, "they've done stampeded acrost the river."

"But—but my word! The camp? Mr. Finch's cowboy lads?"

"With Sul Smith bossin' 'em, mister, they ain't no tellin'. But if you ask me, I'd say they's a skunk holed up somewheres around here an' his name begins with a F."

Mr. Lowden sighed.

"Well," he said, "since the cows have crossed the river, we shall jolly well have to bring them back. And since Mr. Finch's cowboy lads have deserted me, let us hurry back to the village and enlist other assistance. I note, at any rate, one favorable item. The flood water seems to be lowering. Come! And if I may suggest it, drive like hell!"

On the outskirts of Tusa they overtook Sul Smith riding in, another of Finch's cowboys with him. Lowden hailed him angrily.

"I say, Smith, my man, where have you been? My cows—they've crossed the river. You must get your lads together at once and gather them back!"

Sul Smith shrugged.

"The hell I must!" he said. "Since when you givin' me my orders? Talk to Finch."

Mr. Lowden came up to Red Fox Finch's porch at a high trot. Finch came out, bleary eyed. The tone of his "howdy" somehow lacked the smooth cordiality of the day before. It was almost insolent. He listened to the Englishman in silence. Finally he broke in.

"Now wait a minute!" he said sharply. "You want my boys to jump over and gather cattle for you east of the river, eh? Well, that'd be smart, wouldn't it? Use my own men to steal my own cattle. No, sir, Lowden, our deal's done made, and I've got other work for my hands. You'll have to hire your own now. And I'm warning you—your purchase lies *west* of the river. Any Toadstool cattle east of it are mine, and the first man you send over there, if he don't get shot, I'll have him pinched and charged with trespass and rustlin'."

"But, my word, I—"

Suddenly the young Englishman stiffened.

"Finch," he said sharply, "I shall call in the sheriff."

"Help yourself, Lowden," said Red Fox calmly. "I'll be here."

When Lowden returned with Sheriff Forster and a deputy, Sul Smith and another Bent Toadstool cowboy were with Finch on the porch.

Sheriff Forster wasted no time in preliminaries. His tone was carefully impersonal.

"Finch," he said, "I understand you refuse this gentleman the right to cross east of the Tusa after his cattle. Is that correct?"

"Not at all, Sheriff," answered Finch blandly. "What I object to is his coming east of the river after *my* cattle."

"You mean—"

"I mean, Sheriff, that I sold Mr. Lowden *only* all cattle in my brand of which he may possess himself *west* of the Tusa River. Here's a copy of the contract."

Sheriff Forster took it, squatted on his heels and read it carefully. He read so intently that he did not even look up as a slender, dark faced vaquero, his boots caked with mud, galloped up, slid from his *mojino* horse and came stiffly up to the edge of the porch, beside Mr. Lowden. For once Mariano wore no gun. He had slipped from a slick log and lost it in a swirl of Tusa River water.

Sheriff Forster stood up and handed the paper back to Finch. Then he turned to the Englishman.

"Mr. Lowden," he said, "I understand several persons tried to warn you not to deal with this man. You should have listened. It looks to me like you've been swindled. But, unfortunately, I see no remedy. You cut yourself off when you signed this contract. It seems to be legally drawn. It reserves, specifically, to Finch all cattle in his brand—unvented—*east* of the Tusa. It don't make no mention of how they might get there. It's crooked, sir, but as far as I can see it's legal. You might take it to court, but until you do, I reckon I can't be of no service to you. And as for you, Finch—"

"Joost one minute, my fr'en's!" Mariano Lujan's suave voice interrupted him. His eyes were fixed sharply on Finch. "Thees very bad beezness! Me, I'm joost one poor Mexican that don't got it too smart myself. But I'm ketch one idea, anyhow. For the first place, I'm teenk, Señor Feench, he's such a nice faller that it break him the heart to hurt anybodies, be it man or maybe one horse. So maybe he's gonna remember that one time thees Tusa River, she run one 'nother way what you call the Dry Split. Maybe it ees thees Dry Split he mean on the contract when he say Tusa River, eh? All the cattles west of heem, eh?"

"Dry Split hell!" said Red Fox Finch in a hard voice. "The contract says Tusa River—where the water runs, you greaser idiot! Besides, what the hell's your nose poking in here for?"

"Excuse, please." Mariano smiled faintly. "You for sure gonna call heem the river where runs the water, Señor Feench? You t'eenk thees way, too, Shereef?"

"I reckon," said the sheriff sharply, "that's about the size of it, Mex, though I don't see no dog of yours in this fight."

MARIANO shrugged and twitched a new cigaret into shape. When he spoke again his voice carried a knife-like sharpness under its suavity.

"The mountain wolf, Señor Shereef," he said, "sometime he make plenty fight but no can see heem, eh? *Bueno!* Where runs the water that's the river, eh? By damn, that's what I'm t'eenk for myself. An' the water, Señor Feench, today she's all run down the Dry Split, joost like long time ago before you change heem, *chivo!* An' Señor Lowden, all the cattles he buy—maybe two, t'ree hunderd more—they still booshin' aroun' on the west side of heem. Putty good bargain he make, thees Señor Lowden, eh?"

"You dirty greaser!"

Finch's roar, as he suddenly realized how came the mud on Mariano's clothes, broke like a clap of thunder. Even as he roared Sul Smith lunged forward, kicking out over the porch edge at the Mexican's face. Quick as a wing flick Mariano dodged, and the big foreman's toe caught Mr. Charles Lowden smack in the ribs. Mariano leaped to the porch.

At Sul Smith's first move Red Fox Finch's hand had dropped to his gun, and now, as Mariano faced him, he yanked it from the holster. But in that broken tenth second between draw-

ing and firing the slash of a doubled end of rawhide rope cut sharply across Finch's eyes. He fired once, twice, but his target had leaped to one side. Before he could see to shoot again the Mexican's boot kicked the gun whirling out of his hand. Swiftly as the slash of a fighting wolf the slim vaquero struck again with his rope. This time it wrapped twice around Red Finch's neck. Mariano caught the loose end and yanked. Red Fox Finch, jerked forward like a pulled tooth, fell to the porch.

Mariano whirled to meet the attack of Sul Smith from the rear, but he need not have. The rosy cheeked Mr. Charles Lowden, stung into strange wild action by that kick in the ribs, was just completing a perfect tackle on the big foreman's knees, so hard and sudden that Sul Smith flopped like a stuck pig. But the foreman was neither stunned nor hurt. His fingers gripped the gun cramped half under him in its holster.

But they never pulled it. Sheriff Forster's boot came down on his wrist like a vise. The other Bent Toadstool cowboy, after a moment's hesitation, had gone for his shooting iron, too, but the barrel of the deputy's .45 jammed into his ribs and he thought better of it.

Mariano's quick eye saw all at once just who was on top in this dogfight. Almost casually he reached out a foot and began raking Red Fox Finch in the ribs with his spur.

"J'you like spur, eh, Señor Feench!" he purred. "J'you like—"

"Here!" snapped Sheriff Foster. "Cut that out!"

Regretfully Mariano obeyed, but in stepping back he managed to rake the other spur rowel smartly up along the prostrate spine of Finch's foreman.

In another couple of seconds Sheriff Forster had things fully in hand—except for Red Fox Finch's raving, profane tongue.

"Let me at him and I'll—" he choked.

"Next month, maybe, Finch," interrupted Sheriff Forster dryly. "Right now you—and your two men with you —are taking rooms at the jail. You can't jump a man, no, not even a Mexican, right under my nose and get away with it! Yeah, I ain't blind. You and Smith started it. You drew on an unarmed man. I been aching for a chance to take you, Finch, and now I've got it. Come on!"

"Excuse, please, Señor Sheriff," said Mariano Lujan anxiously. "Maybeso how long j'you t'eenk for keep thees fallers on the *juzgado?* Two weeks?"

The sheriff grinned broadly.

"Oh, I don't know, Mex; assault ain't such a serious charge," he said. "But while I ain't making no suggestions, I expect a man might gather an' brand quite a few cattle before they're out. Providing, o' course, that he finds 'em *west* of Tusa River water! What do you think?"

"Me," said Mariano, "I'm t'eenk ees more better j'you hang heem, eh?"

Sheriff Forster grinned. Then, with his growling prisoners, he departed toward the jail.

"My word," said Mr. Charles Lowden. "Really, my lad, you mean to say you *changed* that river's course—came here and risked your life, all to save me my cattle? And now you will help me gather and brand them so that—my word, all this for me? My lad, I shall reward you handsomely."

"Reward?" Mariano Lujan shrugged his slim shoulders, shook his head. "No, señor! Ees notheeng, señor!"

Mariano went out to his horse. It had been hard, back breaking work tearing out that driftwood dam to turn the river, and if there was one thing in the world that the fastidious vaquero did not like, it was hard work.

He had lost out on his promised split in Finch's big deal, and he had refused any reward from the Englishman, but he was satisfied. To a degree, at least, he had repaid Sul Smith for one ruined rawhide rope, and Red Fox Finch for those spur rips in Tito's precious hide.

Mariano swung into the saddle and began to sing.

Continuing

The BROAD ARROW

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

The Story Thus Far:

A GRIM scene was being enacted at the whipping triangle on the prison ship *Success*. Doctor Perry, watch in hand, counted aloud each of the twenty-five lashes as they bit into the bare back of the prisoner, John Haxon. Oakes, the convict whipper, grunted as he got his thick, broad shoulders behind each singing whirl of the cat. Captain Killough, commander of the vessel, watched with darkening face as the man he had sworn to break took the inhuman punishment without a whimper.

Cursing, Killough ordered Haxon taken below, with the final lash. But before the prisoner could be untied from the triangle a small boat came alongside. Over the rail of the *Success* came Miss Victoria Day, the reigning beauty of Sydney, her father, Major Day, supervisor of government labor in Australia, and Mary McQueen, daughter of a stockman in the interior.

Despite Killough's frantic efforts to get Haxon out of sight, Victoria caught sight of the man. Prisoner's and society belle's eyes met—and recognition flashed in each. Haxon's face became a mask of hate; Victoria Day, with a strangled cry of horror, fainted.

The next morning Major Day came out to the ship alone. Curtly he demanded of Killough the reason for the daily floggings of Haxon, of which he had learned by investigation. But Killough, who hoped some day to be the major's son-in-law, was prepared for him. Glibly he related a series of insubordinations among the prisoners inspired by this same Haxon. He told of the brutal murder committed by the man which had sent him, a lifer, to the hulks. But Day was not satisfied.

"Vicky thinks this man's name isn't Haxon at all," he said. "She thinks he's Geoffrey Blake—old Sir Eustace's heir—who disappeared—"

"Nonsense!" retorted Killough. "I knew Blake well. He went wild and Sir Eustace disinherited him. But he isn't Haxon. Blake was bad—but he was a gentleman."

Day still was unconvinced, and interviewed Haxon personally. But the lifer defiantly refused to talk; and the major, fearing his presence so near to Victoria would unsettle her, decided to number Haxon among the gang of convict labor consigned to McQuirk's station, a short distance inland.

Atkins, the convict-overseer, was a brutal man, who kept his heavily chained charges moving to the tune of his bloodstained whip. All morning they had moved along the hot, dusty road on the way to McQuirk's, eliciting little attention from passing stockmen. Haxon, coming in for especial notice from the burly Atkins at Killough's last orders, did not lift his head until a young stockman pulled up beside the drooping column and charitably offered to stand a round of beers for the gang at the next public house. The horse-

man, who told Atkins to call him Mr. Stuart, accordingly was surprised when Haxon jerked up his head.

"I don't want any of your damned beer," he said.

Atkins whirled on him, his whip ready; but Stuart interfered.

"What's he out here for?" he asked curiously, struck by the futile courage of the lifer.

"For doing in a mug I didn't like," Haxon said, eyeing Atkins with a sinister look.

IT WAS either a threat or a warning. Atkins understood that clearly. That he did not resent it instantly and with violence was surprising even to the overseer. He was not exactly afraid of a chained man. That would be ridiculous. Yet it made him uneasy to look into Haxon's eyes. There was something of deadly menace in them, as there is in those of a caged tiger. And there would be hours when this fellow would be working, a pick or an ax in his hands, within easy reach of the overseer. Atkins decided to go a little slow in antagonizing him.

"Don't be too hard on him," Stuart said in a low voice as he passed Atkins a pound and a shilling.

The stockmen waved farewell and turned their horses into a pad which ran into the bush from the road. They were flash riders and well mounted. The trail was blocked by trees, but they went over the down timber lightly and easily.

Atkins cracked his whip and the chain gang plodded on its way. The party passed from the scrub to a country of beautifully wooded parks, with thousands of acres of magnificent trees. Liverpool itself turned out to be an ugly little hamlet of fifty or sixty houses, but the hills about it were picturesque. Hidden in the valleys were the stations of the squatters who ran cattle and sheep.

Shortly after leaving Liverpool they passed a shanty almost hidden by wattle bushes. Atkins stopped his party to get water. A mixed mob of sheep and goats grazed on a hillside back of the house. They were in charge of a plump, homely gin and a very intelligent Scotch collie. The black woman wore a grin and a loincloth. Her lord and master, a cockatoo settler, was asleep on the porch. He was a short, fat, greasy white man in blue patched dungaree trousers and a jumper, without either shoes or shirt. He sat up and lighted and sucked a short, foul clay pipe.

It developed that he was hospitable. He called in the gin to make a billy of tea for the three guards. After which he brought out a dirty deck of cards and gambled with Atkins beneath the thunder of the tin roof as it expanded in the heat. Later they changed the game to Chicago, which they played with five dice.

The sun was setting when the overseer took the road again with his cavalcade. The road camp was only four or five miles distant.

Chained next to Haxon was a lad named Denis Roberts, a frail little fellow with the marks of consumption written on his sunken face. The tramp through the bush had completely exhausted him. He staggered as he walked. More than once his dragging feet caught on a stone or a root and he went down. The first time Haxon pulled him up by the chain without attracting the attention of Atkins, but on the next occasion the overseer's stock whip cracked out and scorched the boy's leg where he lay.

"He's done—out on his feet," Haxon protested.

"I'll show him how done he is," the overseer roared. "No shamming in my mob."

A moment later he modified his threat. There was a look in Haxon's eye that daunted him.

"Well, drag him up and get him going again, can't you?" he yelled.

CHAPTER V

MARY HAS AN OPINION

MAJOR McQUIRK inspected with a cold eye the twelve transported men just assigned him by the government. He was

a hard man, an ex-army officer, discharged from the service because he had beaten a native servant to death in India. The affair had been flagrant, but it had been hushed up. He had been permitted to disappear in the bush of Australia.

"A fine lot of riff-raff you've picked up for me, Atkins," he said, a whiplash in his voice. "Scum of London. Not a good laboring man in the lot. Look at this. Do you call it a man?"

He pointed at an exhausted wretch who was leaning against Haxon for support. The long tramp under a hot sun on the chain had been too much for him. It was the boy, Denis Roberts.

"Playing sick on us, the dog. Maybe I'd better touch him up with the cat to teach him better, Major," suggested Atkins.

"And I have to pay twelve shillings a week for him," McQuirk complained harshly.

"I'll get it out of him," the overseer promised, grinning. "I've got a little friend that can get blood out of a turnip."

The major stopped in front of Haxon.

"This one looks better. Well muscled. A surly devil. I see he's wearing the yellow jacket. We put up with no nonsense here, No. 12,111. Understand?"

Haxon said he did, but his defiant eye did not yield in the least.

The overseer pointed out Oakes.

"He was the flogger on board the *Success*. A stout scoundrel."

"Put 'em all in Shed 4 after they've been fed," the major ordered. "Set half of them to hauling timbers tomorrow and the rest at the rock pile."

McQuirk turned away and walked in his heavy, solid fashion to the rose covered house where he lived with his daughter. It was a rambling place, all on one floor, with about twelve good sized rooms. Three women servants, all of them assigned convicts, looked after the work in the house. The gardens were taken care of by a man, a lifer, transported for killing a valuable but vicious dog which had attacked him while he had been trespassing. All of these servants were the exclusive property of Nora McQuirk. She directed, scolded, punished, and rewarded them.

The major walked into a large parlor furnished less stiffly than most English houses of the period. There were comfortable armchairs and a piano. Books and music were scattered about the room in a rather casual, disorderly fashion. Miss Nora liked to play and to read, and she had a child's habit of dropping instantly any pastime that ceased to hold her attention.

When her father entered the parlor she sat cuddled on a sofa, small feet tucked under voluminous skirts, engaged in talk with her dear friend Mary McQueen, the daughter of a squatter whose station was only twelve miles distant. Mary had ridden over earlier in the day. She had come to spend the night. At sight of her McQuirk showed interest. He considered her a sensible girl, not too pretty, with no damned nonsense about her. She would make a good wife. Though considerably more than twice her age, Major McQuirk intended to ask her some day to be his.

Even though McQuirk was too thick skinned to be sensitive to atmospheres, he felt a certain excitement in the air. Beneath Mary's fine eyes the color in her cheeks was warmer than usual. Nora's piquant chin was lifted a little.

Nora got in the first word.

"Mary thinks you're cruel to your assigned men, father," she cried.

McQuirk looked quickly at Mary McQueen, frowning at her. He did not like that. It was not a woman's place to concern herself about such things, and certainly not to criticize him.

Swiftly Mary struck back.

"She's a little story teller, Major, and she knows it very well. I didn't say any such thing. We haven't even mentioned your name."

The major was relieved. He smiled, pleasantly enough, for he understood Miss Nora's little ways.

"You said you thought the whole convict system cruel and unjust," Nora charged.

"And so I do, but that isn't saying that Major McQuirk is to blame for it."

"He's to blame if he's cruel to those assigned him, isn't he?" Nora's question was a challenge.

"I keep 'em in order, if that's what you mean," McQuirk said flatly. "Discipline must be maintained."

"Of course," his daughter agreed, temper in her eye. "But Mary thinks if you'd have sugar plums for them—"

"I don't." Yet Mary stood to her guns, eyes lively with indignation. "What I say is that it's all wrong to treat human beings the way these men are treated. I don't know who's to blame."

"Don't you think," suggested the major, "that this is rather too deep a question to be settled by young ladies?"

"Yes," agreed Mary, "but I can't help having an opinion."

Nora explained—

"She's all worked up because she saw a man flogged while she was visiting Victoria at Sydney."

"I didn't see him flogged, but I saw him just afterward." The girl's lips trembled. "I'll never forget it. Vicky fainted."

"Gross negligence," McQuirk pronounced curtly. "No doubt the fellow richly deserved it, but there's a time and a place for all things. I never let Nora go near the convict quarters where the triangle is."

He said it with a stolid air of virtue. Like many others, he disassociated his relations to the felons assigned him with those to Nora, the neighbors and the rest of the world. He was a fond father, and he counted himself a good citizen; but he was known all over New South Wales as a hard and merciless master.

Mary said no more, but she was unconvinced. Nobody could possibly have deserved such a cruel whipping, and certainly not the one into whose tortured soul she had for a moment looked. He might be a sinner. Very likely he was. But she was sure that the sin against him outweighed a hundredfold what he had done. There was something about those eyes, so anguished, and yet so savage and defiant, that had driven a knife into her heart.

One of the maids brought the major brandy and soda. He moralized while he helped himself.

"Our laws and our customs are born of experience, my dears. They represent the consensus of opinion of many wise men gathered in council. There's a lot of sentimental tosh going around nowadays, but the truth is you can't bribe criminals to do right. You have to put the fear of the whip in their hearts. Atkins has just brought up for me another mob from Botany Bay. They're a bad lot. Without batting an eye any one of them would murder all three of us, given a chance. I see they don't get a chance. I crack the whip so as to give them no time to think of mischief. If I didn't we'd have a rush* of croppers in no time."

"Of course, father knows best," Nora said sententiously.

"I flatter myself I do." McQuirk finished the drink and changed the subject of conversation. "Did you have a pleasant visit in Sydney, Miss Mary?"

"At first, yes. Then we saw this awful thing. Vicky went to bed ill. The convict who was beaten reminded her of a young man she knew at home. It was a great shock to her."

"He reminded her of a man to whom she had been engaged," Nora explained to her father.

"I'm not sure they were engaged," Mary demurred. "He was a great friend of Vicky's when she lived in Surrey with her aunt. Then he went wrong and disappeared. Major Day investigated and found out he isn't the same man."

"But Vicky still thinks he is, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

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*A break by convicts was known as a rush.

Mary made no further comment. She felt an odd reluctance to discuss the personal angle. It had seemed to her that Victoria's reaction to the scene on the *Success* had as much panic in it as horror. It was as if she had buried this man, Geoffrey Blake, in her past and did not want him to reappear, as if she had an active, paralyzing terror of him. In her own mind Mary was convinced that Haxon was Geoffrey Blake. She had seen the look on the man's face when his eyes had met those of Vicky. There had been not only recognition, but scorn and contempt.

Between the two there lay a secret. Victoria was afraid that he would betray her.

CHAPTER VI

BUSHRANGERS

IN McQUIRK'S road gang were more than one hundred and fifty felons. They were supervised by two overseers and twelve guards, all armed. The detachment in which John Haxon found himself was under the charge of a big, good natured Irishman named Paddy Flynn. It was engaged in hauling heavy timbers from the bush to build a bridge. Most of the work was done by hand, though six yoke of oxen snagged the heaviest timbers from the forest and plowed the cuts from which the men shoveled the dirt.

The boy, Roberts, was in the Flynn squad. Sullenly and reluctantly Haxon had taken him under his care. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but the boy's face and his physical condition carried an appeal he could not escape. During the night the lad's barking cough had annoyed the convicts in his shed. One of them, a lifer named Hawkes, had threatened to strangle him if he did not stop. Others had growled assent. But when Hawkes moved to beat up the young fellow he found another lifer barring the way.

"Let him alone," Haxon had ordered. "Unless you want a thrashing."

"I'll see you in hell first," Hawkes had growled.

In the darkness they had fought, a rough and tumble battle during which neither could see. The others in the shed could hear the sound of fists thudding on naked flesh, of shifting feet, of deep breathing, of grunts of pain. At the end of five minutes Hawkes had growled sulkily—

"Enough."

Haxon had contrived it so that Roberts worked next him in the line.

In the course of the forenoon Flynn drifted across to Haxon.

"Don't think you're foolin' me a bit, man," he said with a grin. "That boy's doin' nothin' and you're helpin' him with his shenanigan."

"Do you care who does the work, he or I?" Haxon asked gruffly.

"Divil a bit, so it's done. And I'll give you good. It's two men's work you're doin'. The boy's sick. That I can see. But I'll drop a flea in a pig's ear. Don't ye let Atkins or McQuirk catch on to your little game, me lad."

Whenever Haxon spoke to Roberts it was harshly or with bitter sarcasm. So he saved face. He was at war with the world, and he conceived that any natural human kindness was a weakness. His heart was to be as cold and hard as a stone. That was the creed by which he existed. Some day, if he lived, he would get his revenge. He intended it to be as cruel and as callous as the punishment that was being inflicted upon him.

The hours were long, the work hard. It was the business of the guards and overseers to drive the assigned men, to keep the whip cracking whenever necessary. Contractors paid twelve shillings a week for each convict. Most of them cared very little how soon they wore out the laborers. A fresh supply could always be had from the transports.

One stipulation the government made. A flogging could be ordered only by a magistrate. This protection was apparent rather than real. Most of the con-

tractors and squatters were magistrates. In order to appear to cooperate with the authorities, employers usually did not flog their own men but sent them to the nearest neighbor for punishment.

Life was a weary business for the government men. Night brought no relief, and day no pleasure. One week slid into another unnoted, at least by John Haxon and the other lifers. For them there was no hope ahead. They had to walk their horrible treadmill to the end.

During all the days of convict transportation both Australia and Van Diemen's Land were infested with bushrangers who preyed upon the settlers. These men were escaped felons, refugees who had fled into the scrub. At one time and another many hundreds of them operated. Since it was not possible to live on the bush, these outlaws had to raid the stations and small towns in the section where they roamed. They were a scourge to the country, and the colonial police drove them from pillar to post until one by one the gangs were exterminated. In the city of Sydney alone thirty-four bushrangers were hanged in one year, a good many of them for trivial offenses.*

From the moment of his arrival in the antipodes John Haxon had determined to escape into the bush at the first chance and join the outlaws. It was the only way he could pay his debt of hate. The fact that the Jewboy's gang had just been captured and hanged did not influence him. Jack Lynch was still riding the back blocks. He was a notorious ruffian, just the man to throw in with, Haxon decided. That the mounted police would get him in the end, dead not alive, the lifer did not doubt.

Yet, as the weeks passed into months, Haxon became aware of a change in himself. The penal system had hammered him into steel. It was his pride that he had put behind himself all the friendliness that animates men. When his chance came, as he was sure it would at last, he would be ruthless in revenge. For that he lived.

But already there was warfare in his breast. He was a traitor to the savage purpose he cherished. There had slowly grown on him, against his will, a conflicting interest. He meant, if it could be done by working and scheming, to save Denis Roberts from the fate closing in on him. Haxon reconciled these aims, or tried to do so, by promising himself that as soon as the youngster was off his hands he would sink forever all the human kindness within him.

ROBERTS was a shy, sweet, grateful lad. In his sensitive nature was much of the poet, much of the impractical dreamer. His unworldliness had betrayed him to disaster, for he had borrowed from his master's till six pounds to help a poor girl who was in trouble through no fault of his. Before he could replace the money the theft had been discovered. He had been given a seven-year transportation sentence.

The refinement of the boy, his gentleness, his frailty, made him a mark of derision in a plague spot like McQuirk's camp. But for Haxon the hardy criminals there would have bullied the life out of him. The lifer stood between him and trouble. He did his work for him, nursed him, fought for him, stole blankets to keep him warm at night. For this boy, to gain favors for him, he curbed his surly defiance and was civil to the guards. Though he hated himself for it, he cringed to Atkins to wheedle medicine for Denis.

"Soon I'll be as much of a sneak as Oakes," he told himself bitterly.

Already, by bearing tales to the guards and softsoaping them, Oakes was a trusty and had become chief flogger at the camp.

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* The leaders of these gangs were bold and desperate men. The names of some of them have become legendary. Mike Howe and Walker are remembered as unmitigated villains. Melville played the prodigal gentleman. By tradition Jackey Jackey and Ned Kelly have become modern Robin Hoods.

Roberts adored his protector. The boy had been a clerk in a solicitor's office, but he knew that Haxon had been a gentleman. Though the lifer was externally rough and fierce as any of the hardened criminals with whom they associated, the boy recognized a difference. His brutality, Roberts felt, was in part at least a self-protective veneer. Nobody else had shown any kindness to the clerk since catastrophe had overwhelmed him. His harsh manner did not deceive the lad.

The friends were fortunate in being in Paddy Flynn's squad. The Irishman was a decent man, who made the barren existence as easy as possible for those in his charge. He could not have been any easier and held a job under Atkins and Major McQuirk. In fact, word had been passed, by some grapevine route, that the guard was to be discharged as soon as some one could be found to take his place.

Flynn's squad was working in the timber, cutting and hewing gum trees for bridge stringers. The men had knocked off for lunch, which consisted of a pannikin of tea and a bit of browny, with a slab of cold goat meat. Occasionally they could hear the wail of a dingo or the scream of a greeny perched high up in a eucalyptus.

Suddenly Haxon sat up, every nerve keyed to attention. Three men were riding into the little clearing. They were well mounted, and might have been taken for old sundowners if they had not been so heavily armed. The one in advance was a huge fellow in a red checked shirt, wide brimmed gray hat and top boots. A brace of the new American Colt revolvers were in his belt, a musket in his hands.

"Bail up!" he boomed at Flynn, and covered the guard with his musket. "Stick 'em up quick!"

Swiftly Flynn's hands went up. The consternation on his freckled face was amusing.

"Bushrangers," Haxon murmured to Roberts. "Lynch's gang."

The other two riders slipped from their saddles and walked up to the guard. They disarmed him, lashed his wrists together and his elbows to his sides, then tied him to a tree.

The big fellow swaggered forward and stopped about ten feet from the bound man. He stood with his feet straddled.

"Meet Mr. Jack Lynch, fellow," he roared boastfully.

The eyes of Flynn stuck out with astonishment and dismay. Lynch had been a lifer before he escaped, a particularly turbulent one, and it was likely he would not miss a chance to murder the first guard who had come into his power.

Lynch drew a pistol from his belt and fired at the tree where the guard was bound. The bullet struck off a chip of bark five inches from Flynn's heart.

"Don't!" young Roberts cried, jumping up and running forward. "Don't kill him, for God's sake."

The bushranger glared at the boy.

"What's that? What did you say?"

Haxon moved into the conversation.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Lynch. I've been hoping to get a chance. More power to you. We all say that. Eh, lads?"

From the chain gang came a loud chorus of assent.

"Who are you?" demanded the outlaw chief of Haxon.

The convict gave his name, adding with a laugh—

"You're the man for our money, Mr. Lynch."

The bushranger began visibly to swell.

"Am I?"

"All of us poor devils on the chain swear by you. Hurrah for Lynch!"

The others echoed the sentiment in a feeble cheer and loud oaths.

"And well you may. For I'm going to set you all free, after I've put a hole through this fellow's heart."

"Would you do that?" Haxon was surprisingly diplomatic. "Of course, you know best. But if you free us we'll not all get away. Some of us will get nabbed

and brought back. Then we'll be hanged because of Flynn's death."

"You'll have to risk that then," Lynch flung back brutally. "Not my fault if you can't look after yourselves. I've ridden fifty miles to get me one of these stuffed monkeys in a uniform and, by God, I'm going to get one."

"It warms me to hear you say so, Jack Lynch," Haxon cried. "Some day I mean to get three or four myself. But why pick poor Flynn here? He's the most decent guard in New South Wales. Why not get Bully Atkins, say? There's one we want to see knocked off."

"One at a time," the bushranger growled. "I take 'em as I find 'em. This duck comes first."

"Don't kill him, please," begged Roberts. "He's our best friend among the guards."

"That's right," spoke up another. "Never turns us in for a flogging."

Flynn, white to the lips, said nothing for himself. Some instinct told him he had better let others do the talking.

"Where is this Bully Atkins?" demanded Lynch.

"With the road gang," a felon said. "Less than a mile down this pad. While you're about it I'd send Flynn to kingdom come too. The more the merrier."

ONE of the other bushrangers, a rather small, neatly built man, shook his head vigorously.

"No. If we go too far the back blocks will grow too hot for us. Get this Bully Atkins if you must, and let it go at that."

Lynch stroked the big black beard that covered his chest and visibly strutted.

"They'll never get me—not Jack Lynch. There aren't beaks enough in the country to do it. But we'll let this fellow go for awhile. That is, I'll leave him tied up and if we don't get Atkins or some of his mob we'll finish this one on our way back. Get busy, men. Oval your irons. I've got no time to waste."

The convicts fell to work at once on their leg irons. Lacking chisels and spalling hammers, they used axes and mauls to bend the irons into an oval shape so that the heels could be slipped through. Out of the twelve felons in the gang five made no attempt to escape. Three were men whose sentences were nearly expired; the others were Haxon and Roberts.

"You're staying for me," the boy murmured to his friend.

"I'm staying because I don't want to go with that mob," Haxon answered gruffly. "They'll all be back at the flogging block inside of three days."

The big bushranger strolled across to Haxon.

"What's the matter? Aren't you going to do a bolt?" he asked.

"Not now." Haxon looked disdainfully at the men working eagerly at their irons. "Too many new chums. When I go, it will be alone or with a real bushman. The mounted police and the black trackers will pick these fellows up when they're starving and drag them back for a hundred apiece hard."

"My guess too," Lynch agreed. "Unless they get lost in the bush and die." His little pig eyes wandered over the muscular frame of the lifer. "You're a likely cove. How long you been out here?"

"Two years."

"What stretch?"

"For the term of my natural life," Haxon said sardonically.

"Cut a throat, did you?"

"Something like that," the prisoner replied morosely.

Again the narrowed eyes searched Haxon. The big man made up his mind.

"I could do with another good man in our gang. It's a hard graft. Are you game for it?"

Six weeks earlier Haxon would have jumped at the chance. Here at last was offered the weapon for his revenge. All he had to do was to reach forward and take it. But he realized that he could

not do it, not without feeling like a deserter. He had to stand by Denis Roberts to the finish.

Haxon shook his head.

"No," he said.

"Mean you'd rather stay here and let these curs peel your back whenever they please? Mean you're too much of a yellow cur to take a chance?"

Haxon's eyes blazed.

"Never mind what I mean. I'm not going."

Lynch flung out his big matted beard in a roar.

"Then stay, you belly crawling dingo. You're too tame for the life of a gentleman of the bush. It would be a rum start for Jack Lynch to take up for a pal a whiner who eats the cat and likes it. My horse, Ned?"

The outlaw flung himself to the saddle and went out of the clearing at a gallop, the other two rangers at his heels.

After the last convict who was ovaling his irons had departed, Haxon released Flynn.

"Better make yourself scarce," he advised. "Lynch may come back as he said."

"I'll remember this," Flynn promised, and he disappeared into the bush.

To the five men who remained came the sound of shots, after which there was silence except for the yang-yangs and the magpies.

"We'll move to the road," Haxon suggested.

They followed a narrow pad leading through the scrub, which brought them to the road building gang. Here they learned news. Lynch had killed one of the guards and had been driven away by the unexpected arrival of four mounted constables. The police had taken the trail of the bushrangers. There were now four outlaws instead of three. Lynch had offered a place in the gang to the lifer Hawkes, one of the men who had come with Atkins from the *Success,* the same ruffian whom Haxon had thrashed for trying to bully Roberts. Without a moment's hesitation Hawkes had accepted.

CHAPTER VII

OAKES DOES A FAVOR

IT WAS as Haxon had predicted. The liberty of the bolters was short-lived. For days the camp was alive with mounted constables, black trailers and squatters. One by one, or in twos, the bolters were dragged back hungry and exhausted. They were flung into a bull pen, and in a day or two the floggers went to work. Another guard was found to take the place of the one who had been killed. Within a week of the raid the life of the camp was moving on just as it had before the appearance of Lynch.

Flynn saw to it that McQuirk heard what Haxon and Roberts had done to save his life. The major gave this little weight, both because Flynn was from his viewpoint a bad guard and because the conduct of a felon never met with his approval. He always found his assigned servants lazy and deceitful ruffians who needed the whip. His answer to Flynn's report was to shift him to another squad. He told Atkins he would not have any of his men playing favorites.

The new guard in charge of Haxon and Roberts was a wiry little fellow named Sams, with quick, black, stabbing eyes that missed nothing. His voice had the rasp of a file.

He watched Roberts swing an ax and was at him swift as a terrier pounces on a rat.

"Here, you, baby face! Call that chopping? Get your shoulders into it. You can't pull any tricks on me."

Denis tried to speed up the tempo, but he had neither the muscle nor the wind. Flynn had given him the easy jobs, such as filing saws, cutting away brush, and doing errands. He had looked the other way when the boy rested. Flung into heavy work by the new squad overseer, young Roberts

crumpled up and could not deliver.

Sams railed at him, then used the greenhide.

The boy, whitefaced, set his teeth to keep from shrieking.

Haxon growled a protest.

"Don't you see he's sick?"

The guard whirled on him.

"What's it to you? I've heard all about you and him. I'll have you know I'm not Flynn. You can't gammon me. I'll boss this mob."

During the past months John Haxon had learned humility. Some devil of rebellion in him made him hate to bend his pride. To be obsequious and servile, to show no resentment at injustice, seemed to him a cringing denial of manhood. But he was learning to do it for the sake of the broken youth he was protecting.

He touched his forehead and murmured—

"Yes, sir."

That night Sams reported the incident to Major McQuirk.

"I got it from one or two of the men that Flynn has been favoring this Roberts and letting Haxon do a lot of his work for him," he explained. "My idea would be to cut it out of 'em."

"If it happens again bring them before me," the major said. "I'll put an end to that nonsense."

Within an hour Atkins reported that he had found a blanket which had been stolen from the store.

"Where?" demanded the major.

"In Shed 4."

"Have you made inquiries?"

"Yes. I took it up with the whole squad in the shed, one at a time."

"And found out?"

"That sick man Roberts has been sleeping under it. Most of 'em wouldn't talk, but Slim the Dip says Haxon stole it."

"Send Haxon and Roberts up to my office."

"Yes, sir."

Major McQuirk sat behind a portable desk, quill pen in hand, and finished the letter he was writing before he looked up at the two convicts brought in for judgment. He stared at them out of eyes cold as those of a cod.

"Two complaints have reached me," he said curtly. "The first is that you, No. 18,327, have been shirking the work and that you, No. 12,111, have been covering it up for him."

Haxon spoke for both.

"He's sick. It isn't possible for him to swing an ax or saw wood. So I thought it better to work extra hard and do his share as well as my own."

"I'm the judge of whether he is sick," the major said coldly. "And as to doing extra work, you're supposed to do all you can anyhow. The second complaint is that you plotted together to steal a blanket from the store."

"He had nothing to do with that," Haxon said. "I did that. I don't need any help to sneak a blanket."

"What did you want with it?" McQuirk demanded.

"I slept cold nights," the lifer said sullenly.

"Oh, you slept cold nights, and so you thought you would help yourself to one of my blankets. That it?"

"Yes," the convict growled, looking straight at him.

"That's a lie, you dog. You stole it for *him*." McQuirk nodded toward Roberts. "Two things I won't have in this camp are shirking and stealing."

He drew toward him a sheet of paper and dipped the quill pen in the ink. For a minute he wrote steadily. After reading what he had written he handed the paper to Haxon.

"You will both report to Mr. Woods. Give him this paper."

Woods was a neighboring squatter who dealt in convict labor. The lifer let his defiant eyes drop to the paper. Upon it was written a request to Woods to give bearer and companion each twenty-five hard.

"You'll go across the south paddock chained together," the contractor said stonily. "Tomorrow morning. I'm not

sending a guard with you, but you'd better be back by noon if you know what's good for you. I daresay you haven't forgotten what happened to some of your friends this week who tried to do a bolt."

"I'll make you a fair proposition, sir," Haxon said, keeping out of his voice all the hate and defiance that boiled within him. "This boy won't come out alive from twenty-five hard. He has consumption. Give me the whole fifty and let him off, Major McQuirk."

Surprised, the major stared at him. This was the most extraordinary proposition that had come to him since he had been using government men. He could not understand it, and guessed that there was a catch somewhere.

"Are you expecting me to believe that you'll take the cat for this fellow?" he asked incredulously.

"That's what I said, sir."

"Why?"

"Because I can stand it and he can't. I know how frail he is. A flogging will kill him."

"What do you care? I've heard about you, fellow. You tried to stir up a rising of the croppers at Toongabbee. Always you've been a troublesome scoundrel. Why this change of heart?"

"I don't know," the convict answered dourly.

THE major was a sportsman. The offer of Haxon appealed to him. Moreover, there was something in what the fellow said. Now that he looked at Roberts more carefully he observed the pallor of the worn face. Killough had played him a dirty trick in sloughing a sick man off on him. But McQuirk could not afford to run any risk of having the boy die under the whip. It might make an ugly scandal.

"All right. Done. Give me back that paper."

McQuirk wrote another note, folded it and handed it to the lifer.

"You've got what you're asking for, my man," he said with a thin smile. "If you don't like it, you've only got yourself to blame."

As the two felons walked back to Shed 4 Roberts wailed his distress. He had protested to McQuirk and been told sharply to mind his own business. But the thought of what his friend was doing made him desperately unhappy.

Haxon jeered bitterly.

"What are fifty more when I've had so many already? I'll add them to the debt I owe."

"I can't bear it," Denis said, tears in his eyes, his lips trembling. "I can't stand having you suffer for me."

"You've damn well got to, and so have I," Haxon answered grimly.

John Haxon had a bad night. It was not possible for him to sleep soundly and forget the ordeal he had to undergo. A wild and bitter rage seethed in his heart. More than once he had been forced to fight down the desire, almost overpowering, to go berserk, kill one of the more brutal guards and pass out of life fighting. Lying in the darkness in the shed, fastened to the chain in the wall, he felt again the urge to kill and be killed, to make an end of the hell in which he lived. But two considerations restrained him. He had pledged himself to square certain accounts, and he meant to do it. He could not quit and let Denis be destroyed. His indomitable will made him carry on.

The last consideration was strong with him next morning when he started across the south paddock toward the Woods station. If it had not been for young Roberts he would have taken to the bush. To him, always a rebel and an active one, it seemed a spineless business to carry the order for his own flogging. Any man of spirit would resent it. But to bolt would mean that the sick boy would have to pay the penalty.

He read the note.

Please give bearer fifty hard
And oblige.

—J. L. F. MC QUIRK

It was addressed to Woods, the owner of the station, who was a magistrate and empowered to order government men to the triangle.

The day was pleasant and not too warm. Sheep grazed lazily in the paddock. A willy wagtail flew past, a streak of black and white, and alighted on the back of a sheep, where it stood chattering and scolding, except when its beak was diving into the wool for insects. The irons of the convict dragged through scarlet runners loaded with a mass of beautiful flowers. To the right, close to the house, he could see a young orchard of quince trees in bloom.

None of the beauty of the day reached the mind of John Haxon, which had become insensitized by filth, brutality, and hopelessness. The sound of the wind in the treetops whispered nothing to him. The glory of a sunrise meant only another day of wearying toil. The whir of pheasants in flight filled him with the bitter sense of his own liberty lost forever.

A man was crossing the paddock fifty yards ahead of Haxon. The lifer recognized the slouching figure as that of the trusty, Oakes. He had no wish to walk with the fellow, who was both a sneak and a spy. Moreover, Oakes had been one of the most active floggers of the captured bolters.

But it was a strange kink in Oakes' brain that he was always trying to ingratiate himself into the friendliness of the convicts whom he betrayed. He wanted to be popular with both the chain gang and the overseers.

He waited, not without a little trepidation, for Haxon to join him.

"Headed for the Woods station?" he asked, showing his toothless grin. "Going there myself with a message from the boss. He and his brat are invited there for dinner tomorrow."

Haxon looked at him and said nothing. His scornful eyes told all that was necessary.

The flogger went on cheerfully, not at all daunted:

"Glad you had sense enough not to bolt with those coves last week. A hundred each was what they got. Some of 'em would like to do me in for giving 'em the cat, but Lor' love you, what could I do? When Atkins says flog, I flog. Have I got any choice? If I say no I get my own back ribbed. Don't you know it? Besides, it might as well be me as some one else. Take that time I had to give you a Botany Bay dozen on the *Success*. Lor', my heart bled for you. Sez I to myself, I'd like to cut your bloody liver out, Captain Killough. But what could I do?"

Haxon repressed an impulse to give this fellow the thrashing of his life. If he did, he'd have to pay for it in the end.

"I've got a soft heart, I have," Oakes continued in his unpleasant whine. "Too much so for my own good. Can't be helped. I was always thataway."

In Haxon's mind a plan was born. Since Oakes was so tender and altruistic he would let him do a little suffering for somebody else. After he got through with the experience he would be a good deal more tender.

"If you're going across to the Woods station there's no need of my going too," Haxon said. "You can do me a favor by delivering this note to the boss there."

Oakes took the note, looked at the address, and turned it over in his hand. That he could not read Haxon realized at once. He had already guessed as much.

"Who does this note go to?" the flogger asked doubtfully.

"To Mr. Woods. Atkins wants him to send over some work bullocks for a few days."

"All right. I'll deliver it, as a favor to you, Haxon."

"It'll be quite a favor," Haxon replied.

"Is there any answer?"

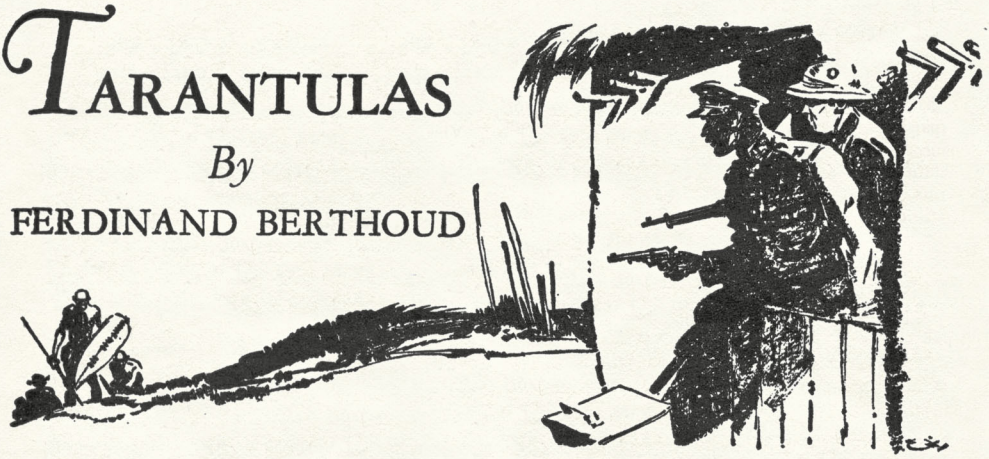
"He'll give you the answer for you to bring back with you."

TO BE CONTINUED

TARANTULAS

By

FERDINAND BERTHOUD



PADDY DOYLE and I crept out into the bush and shoulder-high grass and, from a safe distance, had a look at them. Hundreds of deep brown, beautifully muscled men, some with head rings, many with waving ostrich feather headdresses. Men with throwing and stabbing assegais, knobkerries, battle-axes, oxhide shields and sometimes hundred-year-old trade guns. But they went on.

These men were Matabele, the men we dreaded and were fighting, but they didn't stop to harm us. The ones who in the end became our greatest danger were the very ones the government had sent to aid us.

It was during the Matabele Rebellion in 1896, and I and this Eurasian, Paddy Doyle, were running a trading store a mile and a half south of the Mangwe Pass in the Matoppo Hills. As a boy of seventeen I'd gone out to Africa on my own, and with two others had done the five hundred and twenty miles from Mafeking to this store on horseback. Four hundred of those miles had been along the Crocodile River. Now I was fourteen hundred miles above Capetown.

The wattle-and-daub store had caught me. In the five hundred and twenty miles we'd already come to five different shacks of stores, but this one was up in the fighting area. A rough, native-built mud and thatch building, with *limbo*—trade linen—for windows in place of glass. A kraal, or yard, an acre in extent and fenced with mopani branches behind it. A stable for coach mules at its rear. Round, doorless huts to sleep in. The chance of a brown mamba or some other snake gliding out every time one moved a sack or a box. Gnarled trees and sand, and a blazing, blinding sun that threw solid black shadows. What more could a foot-loose boy want?

Bartering with raw natives, attending to the leather-swung ten-mule coaches, mingling with Dutch and Afrikander transport riders, the general glamor of that real virgin Africa which now no longer exists meant more to me than going on into a beleagered town. And Paddy was lonely; he wanted a partner. I let my friends go on to Bulawayo, and stuck at the store with Paddy.

The mere fact that in the whole of Rhodesia the only men not in *laager*—forts—were we storekeepers on the coach road through the Matoppo Hills alone was sufficient inducement to inspire any boy. While King Lobengula had captured and tortured to death every outlying white man, woman and child he'd left the coach stations unharmed. By a curious native twist of mind he'd imagined that the ferocious tortures he'd inflicted would scare every other white out of the country. And he'd left the sixty miles of coach road above us open

for them to go. But they didn't go.

During those months of rebellion naturally we had endless scares. Some mighty bad ones. The tiny Dutch *laager* was nearly two miles away from us, and out of sight and sound of gunshot. Once one of Lobengula's *impis* under a chief called Babiaan—Baboon—came within a mile of us and sent us a threatening message. And then it was that Paddy and I crept out to look at the mob of armed, head ringed natives.

THE first time I ever really appreciated the grim terror of actual physical danger, danger so close it touched me, however, was when the rebellion had ended. And the men who were the danger then were half castes who'd been fighting for us, and had been our friends.

When the British government had seen the desperate straits Rhodesia was in with Lobengula and his Matabele warriors, they did their best to help us. They sent us the most readily available troops, the Seventh Hussars. But sending regularly drilled British Tommies to fight natives who fought like leopards was like asking bull terriers to go up trees and catch squirrels. They were out of the picture. They weren't of any use.

As the colonial troops harassed them, the Matabele simply withdrew from the open country and went into the Matoppo Hills. They were unconquered. There was no way for white men to drive them out from there. The hills were just a tumbled mass of rocky *kopjes*—hills each a twin brother to the other. The white men only lost themselves in them, and the Kaffirs could hide in the caves and sally forth as they pleased to attack any exposed, unready spot.

The Cape colonial government eventually settled the difficulty for us. With marvelous speed they collected eight hundred Capeboys — Cape halfcastes ranging from pale yellow to deep black —armed them and clothed them in khaki, put them under scratch colonial white officers, didn't trouble to drill them at all, but put them on the train and started them up to us.

From the railhead far below they were marched up the road; and standing in that store, I saw them pass—a tired, but remarkably well ordered, regiment of men eager and anxious for their job. In that store I also saw them march down again, and then they were something else.

They were rested for a day or so when they got to the hills, and then the Capeboys were shown their territory and let loose. To them there really wasn't much to it. Never had a more appropriate crowd of men been thrown in to wipe up a mess. Each acting as an individual with gun, bayonet, knife, dynamite and whatever else came handy, they scoured those hills.

Cave after cave, cranny after cranny they fired into. If answered, they dynamited. In a week or so the business was done. Such Matabele as were left alive frantically made peace. The rebellion was over. That was the end.

IT WAS around midday when we knew the Capeboys were coming back down again. Paddy Doyle had stepped outside the door wondering what the singing noise was up in the pass. Paddy looked funny and beckoned to me, and it certainly puzzled me too. Away in the Mangwe Pass a mile and a half above us was the sound of a bawling chorus, but we couldn't catch a word.

The head of a cloud of dust in a moment informed us. Round a corner and into sight rode seven white officers. They swept toward us as if finishing a race. All seven slid off their horses, and let the animals fend for themselves.

"Get inside!" one of the officers rasped. "Shut the doors! What arms have you got?"

Paddy Doyle, whose father was an Irish soldier and his mother a Hindu, had seen fighting in India, and he knew

the signs of trouble.

"I thought the rebellion was over," he said.

Paddy rushed to a hut in the back and got his carbine. I ducked to mine and found my Smith & Wesson and my Winchester that hadn't any shells. The officers had barricaded the two-piece Dutch type door in the front of the store.

"Our Capeboys—they're out of hand," the officer went on, and he was serious. "The damned idiotic Chartered Company paid 'em off in Bulawayo and didn't disarm 'em. They've looted every store on the way down for liquor, and at the second store out they found two white women and killed 'em and burned the store down. They just looted Mann's place, the other side of the pass, and they're howling down here on two barrels of brandy they broke open and the other liquor they got."

"That's rotten," Paddy said. "You fellows got much ammunition? Don't you think the best way would be to leave the top half of the door open so as not to look so frightened or unfriendly? It does look like a bit of a beastly mess."

The officer who had spoken touched his revolver. All seven of them had nothing but revolvers.

"We've got a few rounds. But that's the worst of it. A few shots, and then what can we do with eight hundred men? The white regular army sergeant-major's still with them. I'm afraid he's doomed."

Paddy and I had seen that sergeant-major as he went up the road with the regiment some weeks before. We'd watched him down drink after drink with the covetous Capeboys looking on. A huge, rough, overbearing man, he had a place in the regular British Army; he was necessary and understood his business; but with a crowd of semi-savages he was tackling something out of his line.

There was the flutter of many feet kicking through sand a hundred yards or so from the store and, boy-like, I pried another hole in the many-holed wall of wattle-and-daub and looked out. Through it I watched a horde of men stagger from the road on to the outspan. Most of them just squatted or tumbled down. Some, who appeared to be quite sober, scouted around and collected firewood and lighted fires, but the whole crowd halted well away from us.

To any one who had understanding that would have been distinctly suspicious, but I hadn't the sense to know it. For almost an hour no man came near us, then one single Capeboy came over. Quite civilly he leaned over the lower half of the door and looked past the officers and to the shelves behind.

"We want some bully beef," he said to Paddy. "We are hungry. We have money. Can we have bully beef?"

Paddy laughed.

"Certainly you can. How much do you want?"

The Capeboy's eyes took in everything in the store not hidden by the bodies of the officers. His gaze lingered upon a sixty-nine-gallon barrel of Cape brandy, but went at last again to the shelf of bully beef tins.

"All on that shelf, baas."

Paddy reached down about a dozen tins, all there were.

"Here you are. Those help any?"

Without question the man paid for them, murmured a "thank you" and wandered away.

Minutes later another Capeboy came over. Just as civilly he asked for some ordinary thing, then came out point-blank.

"Can I have a bottle of brandy, baas? I'll pay for it."

Paddy smiled, but shook his head.

"I'd like to let you have it, but it's against the law. You know that. If I serve you I might get six months in jail."

The Capeboy grinned, showing all his teeth, then went away.

Through my hole in the wall I saw a little band coming. Paddy was expect-

ing them. Twelve or fifteen men stood around the door, and one man spoke for the lot. There was no sign of the white sergeant-major.

"We want whisky, baas," the half-caste said. "We want *dop*. You got it. Our money good as white man's money. We want to pay for it. Give us liquor, baas."

A little while before we'd had the natives build us a rude grass veranda from the roof in front of the store to keep the blazing sun out, and Paddy looked over the Capeboys' heads and at it. It almost touched those heads beneath it.

"No." Paddy again smiled. "I'm not going to break the law. If I had a right to do it, I'd give you fellows all the liquor I have after the good work you've done. But you can't have it."

"Perhaps we take it," the Capeboy announced.

But the small mob left. Luckily no officer had spoken to them, or it might have been different.

FOR what seemed an age no Capeboy came near. Then a deluge of them came over. The same spokesman leaned over the half door and spoke again for the lot.

"Give us liquor while we want to pay for it, baas," he said, and he wasn't pleading.

"It can't be done," Paddy argued; he still tried to smile.

The Capeboy turned, looked to the back of the crowd and made a motion. One of the other boys held up a burning stick and nearly touched the dried grass of the veranda roof.

"All right, baas. You say no, baas, tonight we come and fetch it."

"You'd better not."

Paddy laughed, but he wasn't so sure.

The officers knew their men, and the officers were writhing. We couldn't get help, and a chance of rescue didn't exist. Then the sudden African sundown came. Starry night came on. Blank unreality and uncertainty came. And we all drank hard of our own stock.

Paddy and I dug out candles and put them in bottle necks and lighted them. Each officer had gouged out a peephole for himself, and with gun ready watched and waited for the charge. Seven o'clock passed; eight o'clock; nine. Still nothing occurred. Round scores of smoldering fires we could see squatting Capeboys, could hear occasional singing, but the ominous inaction somewhat cracked our nerves.

"They got a big lot up at Mann's place," one officer presently commented unhappily. "It's when they've finished drinking that that they'll come on us. I wonder what's happened to the sergeant-major."

The officer who first got to us appeared to shudder.

"They've been spoiled by this big orgy of Kaffir slaughtering. That's the worst of it. God knows what they may have in mind."

Paddy tried to appear unperturbed, but his mind was far off, and he may have been looking at India or Africa or anywhere.

"God only does know. When they're sober their minds are but a muddle of wild superstitions; when they're drunk savagery and superstition may make them do any weird, fearful, unearthly thing."

Ten o'clock came, and outside we could see huddled masses of sleeping men. From some groups still came mournful chants. The first officer plucked up courage.

"Either the sergeant-major's got them quieted," he said, "or else most of 'em have drunk themselves to sleep. We're pretty well all in from this hell of a march down through the Matoppos. How would it be if we took a chance on taking two-hour naps? Suppose two of us at a time slept for two hours?"

Paddy was game for anything. I was just a plain fool.

"Anything you think is right," we both agreed.

It came my turn to sleep at twelve; and in a shadow thrown by the guttering candles in the bottle necks I lay on the rough earth floor. To be well out of the way and to get to sleep quicker I chose a spot behind the counter at its far end. I was close to the wall and wholly hidden from the others. Near me was a barrel of Cape brandy that had leaked and dampened the earth, and had caused the very foot of the wall to crumble. But I didn't notice that. I actually was deathly weary.

I may have been sleeping for half an hour, or it may have been longer, but suddenly I started dreaming. In my dreams I was back in England at a race meeting and was having a gorgeous time. Race after race I was picking winners. I couldn't go wrong. I could see the horses scampering up the stretch and to the winning post, my horse far in the lead every blessed time.

The races began to become actual things. They no longer were paltry dreams to me. It was a living nightmare, for soon the races were being run right over me where I lay. The horses were galloping around a course mapped out on my very chest. And, as a race would end, I'd raise a weary right hand and sweep the animals away from me.

The racing at last grew monotonous. At the end of a race there sounded the rustle of an abrupt movement of feet as of a crowd rushing to meet a winner and his jockey. Some one in the crowd quietly, anxiously, called:

"Here they are, Paddy! They're coming in this time! Bringing fire! Rouse Bertie!"

Then for the slightest flash the racing went on again.

At that moment the lifting of my hand suddenly wakened me. Drowsy, hardly wondering at the commotion and noise near me, I looked down at my chest and at my now still hand. Then I was up and on my feet. Up like a high-springed jack-in-the-box. Up quicker than any startled boy ever whizzed up in his life.

Over the bottom of the wall scuttered myriads of tarantulas. Over the side of the counter next me raced hundreds of tarantulas. Over the floor shot a host of tarantulas. There were dozens of tarantulas down inside my shirt. The unnatural continual flickering of candlelight had brought them out from every crevice and crack, and in from everywhere through the rotted foot of the wall. In the shadows on me and about me they had dodged around to make investigations.

Every officer was on his feet and alert, but I knew nothing about that. Every officer, gun in hand, was at his peephole. Paddy hastily was bringing up boxes and bags to reenforce the braces with which he'd barricaded the door. Of that I knew nothing, either. I didn't give a damn for any officer; I didn't give one cuss for any Paddy; just then I didn't give one hang for any outside trouble in the whole wide world.

All I cared about was getting rid of my shirt. That was all I wished to accomplish. I already was ripping it off as I got up.

As two deadly serious officers saw me they jumped from their posts and made a grab for me as I charged round the counter. As I biffed into him Paddy dropped the case he was carrying and made a clutch at me. Strengthened by fear, I tilted him over, and he rolled back up again. My feet instantly were kicking the braces away; my hands were far too busy. And the leaning supports gave way.

WITH a quick jerk I wrenched the door open. Paddy made another clutch at me.

"You silly young fool!" he screamed. "Are you gone raving mad?"

But I was out, pelting toward where I thought the nearest Capeboy fire might be, and that was all I thought about. A stumbling rush, the shirt somehow caught, and I was halfway to it. Another couple of steps, then a black

hand touched me and sought to hold me. Then the shirt came over my head. Even then I didn't stop.

Right around me was a crowd of glowering Capeboys, a wide semicircle of them, crouching and murderous looking. The mob of eight hundred half-savages seemed about to curve in toward the store.

Then I was into them. Too scared and too busy with my shirt to get the full significance of it, I charged straight through them. Too intent on getting rid of one trouble, I didn't sense that I was into an immeasurably worse one.

Then the Capeboy tagging along with me let go his hold. Barely missing a step, I was on and past the rest of the halfcastes and to the fire. Eagerly I dropped the shirt into the flames and saw it start to burn. Then, in the moonlight, I stood bare and frantically clawed and scratched over my body and chest.

I didn't mean to leave a living tarantula on me. I didn't know if they'd got down inside my breeches; I wasn't taking any chances. The things had made me insane.

For a full minute I must have stood there, lost and as if alone. I stood wildly rubbing myself, forgetful of everything. Then suddenly a gray face before me broke in on the solitude. For just one second I barely noticed it, hardly caught its intentness; it was close and peering in awe at me. Then abruptly my mind flashed clear.

My blood appeared to stop circulating. All around me, in a confused mob, were the eight hundred Capeboys. Half fainting, I felt I'd given myself right into their hands as a ready made hostage or sacrifice; that I'd saved them the extra risk of fetching me out when they murdered or captured the others. Then, to my dumb astonishment, I realized they now were all keeping well away from me.

Wide eyed, open mouthed, they were keeping their distance and watching me frantically rubbing and scratching. Over the still night air came the sounds of gasps and indrawn hisses and murmurs. Their feet which just before had been rushing now crept, then were still. And in the moonlight I saw faces that appeared as though looking at a ghost.

Scared till icy, still clawing myself, I yet stood. A quick, hopeless glance back at the store, and behind the natives I glimpsed a slit of light. Trembling, expecting every second to be seized and torn apart, perhaps thrown on the fire, I turned and moved toward it. Still pop eyed, open mouthed, the Capeboys opened a lane for me.

More dead than alive, I kept right on and threaded the opening they'd made. Not a man but kept well out of reach. Slowly I staggered on past them, puzzled at their silence. Then I was through.

A few more anxious yards, then an abrupt dash, and the store door went open wide. I was back in again. As I ran in, Paddy Doyle reached for a bottle and poured himself a stiff one. On the counter were splotches of blood where errant tarantulas had died. I saw Paddy's lips flicker and heard the bottle tap on the counter as he put it down and lifted his glass to his face.

"Trying to commit suicide?" he jeered. His voice was queer and his teeth chattered. "Trying to murder the whole lot of us? What the hell got into you, you lunatic? That's what comes of having anything to do with silly, half baked kids!"

Dry tongued, I tried to laugh it off.

"Don't be so sour, Paddy," I said. "There were too many tarantulas in here, and I tried to get rid of a few of 'em for you. Give me a drink."

THE dawn we all had prayed for suddenly came, and in the growing daylight we looked through our peepholes for thirsty savages. Whatever hell we had to face, we somewhat uncertainly fancied we could tackle it better by day. Heavy eyed, through our peepholes we

scoured the sand and the veld and the scrub, and at last got a glimpse of the near skyline of the Matoppos. Then the sun shot up, and we had full African day.

An officer at his lookout squealed, and it wasn't the squeal of a man who was wounded. It was the stupid squeal as of a woman who will fight off hell and starvation and tragedy, and then shriek at the sight of a mouse.

"Something's wrong!" he wailed. "The outspan and the veld are empty. I can't see any one. Not a living, moving soul. Now what's the game? Some clever new Capeboy trick?"

Paddy Doyle didn't stop to answer. Paddy took one look, then kicked aside the barricade and opened the door, letting the fresh air in. Paddy, who'd fought in India, knew his India and its inscrutable mind, and in a way fathomed the unfathomable brain of the African native.

"Let's take a breath," he said. "I need a walk. Come on out. The trouble's all over. See the dead ashes of their fires? They're gone."

Stiff, wondering, we all shuffled out on to the soundless sand, looked to the limited horizon which the hills permitted us, looked up to the sky. The whole great world was calm.

"Gone?" the same officer gasped. "Moved on down the road without us? Forging on toward their homes? I can't believe it!"

"Can't you?" Paddy Doyle questioned. Paddy's foot had kicked something in the sand, and he picked it up and looked at it strangely. "Can't you? See this, and see that over there?"

Together we all looked at the bayonet which Paddy held, and which still was stained with blood. In the sand we saw other bayonets cast away. Then suddenly we saw what they'd been used for.

Sick, we realized that the Capeboys had brought the sergeant-major with them all down the road bound as a captive. Between them they must have carried him, or prodded him before them. In a curious, conflicting way they must have hated, yet admired, him. But they couldn't still carry him on.

And they'd killed him. At the sight of his running blood they'd gone back to their pagan, savage, cannibal ancestors and had slashed and carved and flayed him. The mess they'd left for us to look at, but for the tattered clothing that still held it together, never could have been known as the remains of any human being.

The officer in charge stooped over the ghastly carcass. His quivering face was chalky.

"Poor devil," he murmured. "They must have killed him quickly, whatever else, for we never heard a sound."

"Yes," Paddy agreed. "Quicker than we might have died, if they'd burned us in the store."

The officer pondered a moment.

"I wonder what made them suddenly change their minds and kept them from attacking us?"

"I fancy I know," Paddy suggested slowly, then looked queerly at me. "Their being Capeboys, that's all, I expect. The black side in their halfcaste stopped them. To a raw native a madman is holy, and they venerate and fear him. You know that. When they saw this young fool, Bertie, charge out into them and take off his shirt and begin making passes over himself they thought he was taboo—divine, sort of. So they desisted. That's about it. Look at him! Does he look like anything divine?"

To the officer such stuff was old, but the actual experience seemed fantastic.

"You mean to tell me, Paddy, that when they saw Bertie acting like a raving maniac and wiggling his hands and grabbing at those swarming tarantulas they thought he was holy?"

"Yes," Paddy assented, and grinned as he looked at me again. "That's the only explanation. The lad certainly was a maniac. And he still is, so far as I'm concerned," he added good naturedly. "For which I say thank God."

Constricting the CONSTRICTOR

By CAPTAIN MANSFIELD

FEW of us know that the longest snake ever captured was an American reptile, born and raised, one might say, where Old Glory waves over a schoolhouse on Tawi Tawi, one of the southernmost islands of the Sulu Sea.

His snakeship was thirty-nine feet in length—and was making a name for himself. He found that the domestic pig was extremely succulent and easy to catch. The Sulu men claimed that the snake used poor judgment in not swallowing the Christian Cebuano along with his pig. That might also have happened as the boa gained confidence in himself, if a Dutch animal hunter from Sandakan way had not come on the scene.

Every man except the Hindu and China *comerciantes* rallied to his call for help. Enough bamboo poles and coir rope to rig a to'gallant were provided for the snake's capture, and as dawn broke one morning the party set out. They came straggling home by starlight without the snake. Those who could walk helped those not left in the little Moro graveyard at Thumb Hill.

Later that night the hunter, the constabulary captain and the Yankee schoolmaster gathered at the Hindu's store, where around some A.V.H. gin the talk was all of capturing snakes. The Yankee spoke up—

"I'll bet the maharaja here could catch your snake for you, Dutch."

"Yes, sahib, I catch plenty snake, big ones, when I was little boy. How much you pay? Ten pesos?"

The hunter was flabbergasted. He had come to catch a snake, not to buy it. He laughed the Hindu to scorn, and offered to bet him a hundred pesos he couldn't do it.

"Don't be a fool, Dutch," warned the schoolmaster. "Hindus know snakes better than they know themselves." The Dutchman backed down then.

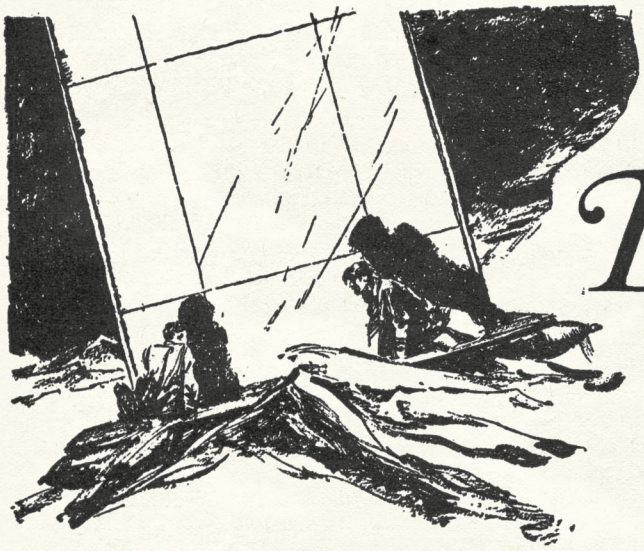
After a few more drinks, the trader having failed to find out the Hindu's method of catching snakes, he agreed to his terms. If the Hindu were successful, he would learn his method and that trick alone would be worth the price.

The next morning the hunter, sore and lame from yesterday's exertions, had a late breakfast. He was at the constabulary barracks when an excited Sulu man appeared with the information that the snake had been caught.

"Quick work!" exclaimed the hunter, as he headed the stampede for the jungle, but he had his doubts. Arrived at the scene, the Hindu held out a hand for the ten pesos.

It was all very plain and astonishingly simple. The Hindu had built a twenty-foot fence of tough, green bamboo poles fastened with *bijuca* vine. At the middle was a six-inch opening. A pig had been staked at each side of the opening. The boa had swallowed the first pig, then crawled through the opening in the fence and swallowed the other bait. With a pig inside of him on either side of the fence he was moored fast.

Then a strong bamboo basket was slipped over his tail, another over his head. The two baskets were drawn together and fiirmly lashed with *bijuca*. Then a few posts were chopped out and the snake was ready for shipment.



Danger ZONE

By CHARLES L. CLIFFORD

FROM the first moment of awakening things went badly with Corwin. There had been a big party at the Topside Club the night before. His tongue felt as though a very dry catcher's mitt had somehow been introduced into his parched throat. It was still dark outside.

He stood shivering on the thin grass rug by the bed. Damp, cold air swirled up through the bamboo flooring. He could hear the rain falling steadily on the tin roof. For months now it seemed that that steady downpour had greeted him as he fell out of his dank blankets. He longed for the south—the bright heat of the Mindanao jungles. No rainy season there. Just a quick, refreshing shower before retreat—all the year round . . .

He was late for breakfast. The other officers on prison guard duty had already left for the stockade. He wondered about them as he dug into a hard papaya. They seemed to think they were lucky doing duty here on Corregidor. They were close to Manila. Lots of dances, white women, fun. True, you had to turn out at an unearthly hour. Check your prisoner gangs out of the stockade by dawn. But then you were through work at one. Eat a big lunch at the mess. Cold beer. Then a glorious siesta until you heard the thumping of the leather dice-boxes at the bar. No tramping through jungles and wading crocodile infested swamps. No Moro slugs or barongs. No tin can camps and wild Moslem yells in the night. And no wretched loneliness of isolated Scout posts with a transport and mail once a month.

Well, he'd take the southern islands any day. A year here, and already he was homesick for the *bosque*.

He gulped his breakfast. The cocoa had run out; and he hated coffee. There were no mangoes. The eggs . . .

He swore loudly, shoved back his chair and buckled on his pistol belt. He stopped long enough in the shelter of the porch to light his pipe. The bowl was moldy; the tobacco, though just out of a vacuum tin, was rank and wet. The wind tore at his slicker as he slogged through the red clay toward the stockade.

The prison camp here on Corregidor consisted of a jumble of rough buildings housing some thousand lifers, all natives. They were lent to the Federal Government by the Insular authorities, who

were glad to relieve the congestion of the sinister Bilibid prison in Manila. These hapless creatures toiled all day on the roads and fortifications of the Gibraltar of the Orient—the frowning fortress of Corregidor that guarded the entrance to Manila Bay.

Battalions of Philippine Scouts took turns guarding these prisoners. They were divided into working groups according to their designated tasks. Over each gang was a *capataz,* or straw boss. These were bullying white men who hounded their charges on like animals. Under these again was a *bastonero,* or trusty. In time a *bastonero* caught all the mannerisms of his *capataz.* A Scout officer was detailed to each group, in charge of the soldier guards and the discipline of the gangs.

Corwin took post by the main gate of the stockade. Miguel, his sergeant, stood by his side. The prisoners, in column of twos, shivered in the driving rain. They bent their heads, trying to ward off the gusts with their straw dishpan hats. Their shaking fingers were shoved under their flimsy sleeves. They were in stripes—black on the coarse gray cloth. They were shackled to a common chain like desperate animals. Large white numbers were stenciled on their backs.

The sergeant, Miguel, read out the numbers in a harsh, sing-song voice. The *bastoneros* thumped the shaking backs with their stout clubs.

"Go on! Shake it up!"

Some of the wretches grinned as they dodged the blows and ran through the gate.

The long line clanked through the portals. Corwin, mounted on an ancient dirty-white horse, muffled his slicker about his throat and rode after the last guard.

The soldiers marched on the left flank of the column. If they had to fire they could thus shoot right through the rank without fear of hitting a comrade. The privates of the guard carried short Winchester pumpguns loaded with buckshot. The noncoms carried Service rifles. They would handle the long range work. The prisoners had been instructed that at the sound of a shot they were to fall on their faces instantly.

The column clanked on through the steady rain. There were no slickers on the prisoners. Already they were wet through, the thin, shoddy suits clinging to their bent backs.

They marched through the Scout garrison; through the heavy, putty-like red mud. The path led steadily upward; Corregidor is merely a huge rock rising from the sea.

Corwin rode moodily a few yards in rear of the last pair of prisoners. He noted idly that the last squad or so were not manacled. They were trusties—old-timers in the gang, far more useful without leg irons.

THERE were perhaps two hundred prisoners in Corwin's lot. Apathetically, mechanically, his mind reverted to his routine for the day as his old horse plodded on. The big gang—more than a hundred—was still on the infantry barracks job, a simple problem of guarding. A cordon of sentries placed in the little sentry boxes surrounded the whole area of work. The little Scout soldiers merely watched the space between the boxes. A lizard could not escape their vigilance. As for Corwin, there was little here for him to do save make a perfunctory inspection once in the morning after posting the sentinels.

The rest of the lot was divided into gangs ranging from four to possibly twenty men. The largest of this lot was at work on gun emplacements. One of the advantages of this class of labor was its secrecy. These poor devils were here for life. What matter if they knew the positions of the great guns and magazines, the tunnels and hidden roads of the carefully guarded fortress? The smaller gangs, under first class privates, were usually employed on some special job for which their previous training

peculiarly fitted them. One, for instance, was used in the great tool shops of the Coast Artillery post; another at the terminal station, and so on.

The long column was approaching the infantry garrison, halfway up the rock. Through the wet bamboos Corwin could already see the car station, its platform crowded with civilian employees and marketing native women. There was a bend in the road there and an adjoining trail that led toward a gloomy canyon, which led in turn to the sea.

As the last prisoner came to this road junction he turned swiftly to the right and began to trot stolidly away. Corwin saw him at once. For a moment he stared in amazement. It seemed incredible that a man attempting to escape would go about it in such a ridiculous manner. Prisoners had been shot down for milder breaches of regulations than leaving ranks. Some had actually got clear for a few short hours. Several had swum from the island for the seemingly close shore of Mariveles. But the ravenous sharks that infested that channel took care of them.

Instinctively Corwin had drawn his pistol. Not twenty yards from him was the bobbing back of the trotting prisoner. He was unshackled, therefore one of the trusties. And, by the way he ran, he was old. Corwin saw the wet wedge of his front sight between the fugitive's shoulder blades—ghastly thin shoulder blades under the thin striped suit. He cocked the pistol. In the interest of discipline it was his duty to fire. This had been impressed upon him by written orders. And his major was the sort whose orders were obeyed to the letter.

Near at hand he heard the hoarse voice of Sergeant Miguel.

"Quick, Lieutenant! He get around the corner!"

With a flick of his eyes Corwin saw that Miguel was on one knee. That his rifle, rear sight flipped up, was covering the plodding prisoner.

"The man's mad," Corwin thought, "or he'd run like hell! He knows there's twenty guards ready to fill him with lead."

The escaping prisoner turned his head slightly. Corwin could see the dull light in his eyes.

"Why, he's old! An old man—Cedalia, the old quarry man, the one who threw the stick of dynamite at the bird who stole his daughter. He told me all about it."

Remarkable, Corwin thought afterward, how a string of thoughts like that could race through a man's mind in the space of a few short seconds.

He pressed the trigger. There was a terrific banging and rattling. At the sound of the shot each prisoner in the column fell flat on his face as if he himself were shot through the back of the head. The chains and the mess pans they carried made an unearthly din. The Scouts on the flank of the column dropped to their right knees. Their pieces thumped to their shoulders. They rolled their gleaming eyes sidewise so that they could see the least movement of their lieutenant.

"You missed, Lieutenant!" Miguel said sadly. The escaping prisoner was out of sight. "We go?"

Corwin nodded slowly. There was no way out.

"Bring him in alive. No shooting—"

But the little Scouts, arms advanced, had sprung away like released whippets. The beating rain swept Corwin's words away. Corwin moved the column forward. He watched the brutal *capataz* as he herded the remaining prisoners in front of the gloomy, half finished concrete buildings of the infantry garrison.

The men in chains shivered, clutching their miserable rags about them. They answered to their numbers in faint, shaking voices. They were listening. And the eager little Scouts were listening too. Corwin, his heart heavy, had a foreboding that his orders had not been heard.

Then the shots came—one, quick and sharp on the wind, after it the banging of the pumpguns. Ten minutes later

Miguel and his men came proudly back, dragging behind them the bundle of bloody rags that had once been the trusty, Cedalia. Miguel had heard no orders, he said solemnly.

"That makes it bad for the machine gun emplacement job, Lieutenant. What you gonna do about it?" the white straw boss, or *capataz*, growled.

Corwin looked at the pig eyed *capataz* —a tough ex-soldier, who had borne an unsavory reputation in his old outfit. All along Corwin had resented the attitude of the man. Twice he had caught him beating prisoners; each time he had reported him, and the *capataz* was on probation now. The last time Corwin had wrenched the pick handle from the fellow's hand and knocked him over a ten-foot bank. The man had said nothing; just rubbed his hairy jaw and glared from his mottled eyes.

"I gotta have a demolition man. They got blasting to do on that rock out there."

The tone of the man was calculatedly offensive. But Corwin was preoccupied by the mess at hand. One of his prisoners had been killed. There was a report to be written, explanations to be made to the major. This fellow and his bellyache could wait.

Corwin said coldly:

"That's *your* job. You're the man killer here."

An odd gleam came into the man's eyes. Triumphant, almost. It was as if a thing had been said—a slip made by Corwin—for which he had hoped. But his face immediately resumed its habitual expression of sullenness.

"So I got the say, have I?"

Corwin turned from Sergeant Miguel, annoyed.

"You heard what I said!"

"O. K."

The *capataz* turned to a nearby *bastonero*. He spoke to the native in the dialect. Three of the unshackled prisoners stepped from the rank. Then, muttering curses, the *capataz* strode toward the chain gang and, stooping, unlocked the leg irons from one of the lot. Corwin, still talking with Miguel, paid no heed. But the alert sergeant said in a low voice:

"He take one of the chain men and unlock him. Those men who go so far away to the machine gun rock are never the chain men."

It was true. Far at the end of the island, through the jungle and away from all habitation, lay the jagged bit of rock that was being fortified. It was some two hundred yards from the abrupt cliffs of the main rock and offered dead ground to fire from the beach. Magazines were being tunneled in this rock and craftily placed machine gun positions. These were to defend the island from landing parties. Because of its isolated position—a single sentry had to spend the working day over prisoners with tools and explosives—only selected prisoners were ever sent to this job.

CORWIN eyed the man the *capataz* had selected to take the place of the unfortunate Cedalia. The prisoner kept his own eyes cast stubbornly on the ground. His big circular hat had tilted forward so that it hid most of his face. Corwin stepped closer.

"You, look at me," he said in Spanish.

The man paid him no heed.

Miguel snarled at him in the dialect.

"Look up, dog, when the officer speaks to you!"

The man raised sullen eyes. Corwin was struck by the unusual shape of his face, by the intelligence in his slant eyes. He said to the *capataz:*

"Why do you pick a chain man? We can't send him out there."

The man's eyes winked hatefully.

"I thought it was my job? Well, Lieutenant, if you want this job done, you gotta do it my way. We're behind now. Oney yesterday you showed me a letter from topside kickin' about our draggin' some these jobs out. This here guy is the oney one savvies explosives. It's my business, as you say, to know

that. If he don't go the rest ain't no good to us. We got that drillin' almost finished now."

Corwin was bursting with fury. He hated to have his men hear this brute talk to him in that way. He said to Miguel:

"Put Caba with them. He plugged the last one who tried to get smart. He'll keep them in order."

Miguel grinned cruelly.

"They kill Caba before they ever make any funny stuff where that boy see."

Corwin promptly forgot the matter. He went into the construction boss's hut and called the major. As he expected, the major told him to wait for him there. He wanted to make a personal investigation on the ground.

The various gangs moved off to their allotted tasks. The custom was to march in a body. As each new job was reached a gang would drop off with its guards. At noon the gangs were grouped, fed and marched back to work. At this time the officer detail was changed.

MAJOR LAMBERT rode up to the infantry barracks. He was a man who was very jealous of his reputation and proud of the fact that so far his battalion had not lost a prisoner by escape. The escape of a prisoner from Corregidor was viewed as most alarming by the powers that were. Prisoners saw things that even many officers were forbidden to view. An intelligent one might have a pretty tale to tell to an agent of some foreign power interested in the interior arrangement of the mysterious fortress that was the key to American possessions in the Orient.

The major complimented Corwin on his prompt and satisfactory action. He leaned well down from his mount and said theatrically:

"One getaway and there'd be hell to pay, Corwin. So far, I understand, not a single prisoner has ever made it without recapture. The M.I.D. have dope that indicates several foreign countries have tried to get to these lifers. Even tried to bribe the civilian guards. We can't be too careful. And I might tell you that my personal policy would be to try an officer who was even remotely connected with a successful break."

Corwin shrugged. If the major had ridden this island the way he had he would realize that it was practically impossible for one of these prisoners to get away, even if he did get loose from the guards for a few hours. The nearest mainland was Mariveles. And that was some two miles across shark boiling water. It could not be swum. And every boat on the rock was guarded; those approaching were warned off by standing outposts.

The morning wore on. Spasmodically the cold rain swept over the great rock in blinding sheets. Head bent, feet and legs drenched, Corwin rode from gang to gang, perfunctorily counting the miserable prisoners and asking the time worn questions of the shivering sentries. As he plodded by the Topside Club a group of Coast Artillery officers called to him. It was almost noon, and he assumed they were through for the day. Already they were shaking the dice for the pre-luncheon cocktails.

"Hey, Corwin!"

Corwin shook the water from his campaign hat.

"Pretty soft, you guys!"

"Come in and have a hot toddy!"

"There was a call for you, Corwin. From your adjutant."

Corwin turned his horse over to a Filipino mess boy. His boots oozed water as he ran up the steps. He waved the grinning, hospitable artillerymen away.

"I only wish I could," he growled.

He got Strohm on the wire. The adjutant said:

"Sorry, Bill. Kiser's got a nasty touch of fever. They just packed him off to the hospital. We're short handed, so you'll have to stay on all day. I'll fix

you a day off and a pass for Manila later."

The artillerymen wanted Corwin to lunch with them. They were a happy-go-lucky bunch of bachelors, and the Scout officer was sorely tempted. But he had the steward put him up a couple of sandwiches.

"I've got to work," he said. "They make us work for our pay."

"You get a full night's sleep anyway," one of them said. "Look at us. Night firing problem all this week. What would you Scouts do if we didn't protect you from the sea and all that?"

"I'll swap with you any day," Corwin said.

He went out, munching, into the rain.

He rode slowly over the peak of the rock and down into the dripping jungle that covered the head of the island. Once around the last bend beyond the artillery garrison, the great trees and matted vines shut down like a sinister barrier. It was as if he were in the interior of Mindanao, so primitive was the vegetation.

He was bound for his last job, the little rock where the gang of four cut into solid rock to make machine gun magazines and emplacements.

The trail led through a deep canyon, then up on to a high bluff that gave a view over the China Sea. From the precipice he could see, far down, the rock where the men were at work. At the base of the cliff was a narrow shelf of beach. A faint, winding and difficult trail led from the top of the bluff down to this bit of shingle.

Corwin dismounted and tied his weary nag. The rain had stopped for awhile, but the visibility was poor. Black clouds hung low over the sea. Great waves dashed and hissed on the little beach. Clouds of spray beat up against the dark sky where the heavy swell lashed at the isolated rock.

There was a small raft which worked on an arrangement of pulleys and a cable from the shore to Machine Gun Rock, as it was called. As Corwin stared downward he saw the soldier, Caba, and his four prisoners pulling themselves in to the shore. He called to the guard; then after five minutes of precarious sliding and crawling, he dropped from the foot of the trail and stood by Caba on the beach.

The soldier explained that he had brought his prisoners in so that they might light a fire of driftwood. They were all very wet. And this gang had been allowed to bring their rice and fish ration with them, as they were far removed from the noon gathering places.

Corwin sat under the doubtful shelter of a jutting bank and lighted his damp pipe. He watched the prisoners collect scattered pieces of wood for their fire. He pitied them as they ate their pasty rice and the evil smelling fish that had been sloshed about in their mess pans all morning.

"I'll do the guard while you eat," Corwin said to Caba. "No trouble, have you?"

The soldier grinned.

"Any trouble here it comes from me, Lieutenant," he said.

Corwin had spread his map out and was checking off his afternoon inspection route. He had the unpleasant sensation of being watched. He looked up. Standing close behind him was the man from the chain gang. He was busily engaged in tugging at a half buried bit of log.

"Get wood from the beach," Corwin said sharply to the man.

Caba jumped at the prisoner.

"Beware, dog!"

The man shot a villainous glance at the Scout soldier.

"I am not a dog!" he said.

Caba swung with his shotgun. Only Corwin's swift intervention saved the prisoner from a cracked skull. Corwin reprimanded the soldier harshly. The little soldier took it placidly enough.

"It is all they understand, Lieutenant. I stay with them on that little rock and nobody near. Nobody he can see. I am close to them. I make them have afraid

or maybe they—"

He shrugged. And Corwin, looking out at that far, dim rock didn't blame him much.

IT WAS almost dark when Corwin made his last inspection of the day. Again he rode up on the windswept cliff. Again he stared down at the wave lashed Machine Gun Rock. Sergeant Miguel had ridden with him, having borrowed a mount at the infantry job. He said he wanted a ride; and Corwin was glad of his company. He liked the old man. They had shared many a hike together in the southern islands, and Miguel was as crazy to get back to Mindanao as Corwin.

The sergeant held the horses as Corwin peered over the cliff. There was no sign of life below. Corwin called. He called again. There was no answer.

Corwin looked at his watch. It was five minutes to five. He turned back to Miguel.

"That's funny. They should have knocked off at quarter of—"

The sergeant's face wrinkled.

"There is only one trail, Lieutenant. We would have seen them."

The heavy clouds were lower over the water. The sea was milder. A faint mist lay close to the top of the sullen gray waves.

"It's damn near dark," Corwin said. "Do you think—could anything have happened?"

"That chain man," Miguel said, fingering his rifle. "I say this morning to that wise *capataz*—"

"Look," Corwin said. "The raft is still out there. If they'd come in they wouldn't have pulled it back out, would they?"

"The sea would break it," Miguel said. "The orders are to lift it up on to the beach."

Corwin fumbled with his glasses. The case was wet and they stuck. Miguel, all business now, tied the horses to a nearby tree.

"Maybe I better go down, Lieutenant. That Caba is a wise one. If he is not on the job—"

"There's somebody," Corwin said.

Through the mist they could see the figure of a man. He was edging around the narrow shelf of rock that acted as a sort of landing place on the near side of Machine Gun Rock. Miguel leaned forward, his sharp eyes gleaming.

"Prisoner!" he said sharply.

Then across the water came the sound of a muffled explosion. A pall of yellowish dust leaped out and upward from the sea side of the rock.

"What the hell!" Miguel said.

The prisoner on the shelf of rock was working frantically at the tossing raft.

Corwin raced for the trail.

"Something wrong there, Sergeant!"

Miguel raced after him.

"Stay back," Corwin yelled, "where you are! If there's trouble I'll need you to cover me. I'm going out."

Half down the slippery path Corwin, his eyes still on the rock, saw that the prisoner had something in his hand. It was the shotgun of the guard, Caba.

Miguel saw it, too; and Corwin heard his rifle bang out from the top of the cliff. He even saw the spurt of rock dust where the ball struck just above the prisoner's head.

The prisoner ducked back around the corner of the rock.

Corwin turned himself loose and fell sprawling on the beach. He ripped off his slicker and hurled his field glasses aside. Far above him the steady land breeze dragged out the sergeant's warning, pleading words. Corwin knew what he must do.

Murder had been done and a Bilibid lifer was at large!

He raced out into the surf, plunged fully dressed into the sullen swells. He thanked God, as he felt the awful drag of his shoes and leggings and of his heavy pistol, that he was a strong and skilled swimmer.

He lashed out with a racing crawl stroke toward the dark bulk of Machine

Gun Rock.

At every stroke he expected to feel the shock of the shotgun's charge. And as he thought of the shotgun he thought of the gallant Caba, no doubt murdered. And the thought spurred him on and made him reckless of his personal danger. On the following wind he could hear occasional shots from Miguel's rifle; he knew the loyal old sergeant was doing his best to keep the prisoner from getting a shot at him this side of the rock.

Corwin made the near ledge of the rock unmolested. He had been aware in the surprisingly short swim that both wind and tide were with him. And as he thought of this the prisoner's plan became clear to him. He meant to make for Mariveles on the raft. It was nearly dark, and with wind and tide behind him it could be done with ease.

Pistol advanced and cocked, Corwin moved silently forward, pressing his body close against the face of the sheer rock. He made a sharp turn and was aware of a litter of rubble half blocking his way. To his left a great gap yawned in the rock. Something new—not here on his last inspection yesterday.

He peered cautiously into the dimly lighted cave. Then he shuddered, shrank back, stood stiffly like a bird dog at a point. The walls of the place and the ground at his feet were dripping blood. Mangled bodies, one of them headless, lay among the ragged, blasted rock. What was left of Caba he could recognize by the rags of the uniform.

In Corwin's mind the whole ghastly scene was reenacted. This chain man, expert with explosives, had undoubtedly rigged a trick fuse. Something beyond the ken of the wary but simple soldier, Caba. Then, with the gang still working in the chamber, he had moved out of danger himself on some plausible pretext and fired the tremendous charge. By a lucky fluke the shotgun had been uninjured.

Corwin strode furiously forward. There was only a short length of landing ledge left on the sea side of the rock. The prisoner had to be on that, or in the magazine tunnel just ahead. Recklessly Corwin yelled as he rushed forward.

"Come out, you murdering rat!"

A voice answered from the tunnel—answered in clipped, perfect Spanish:

"I am aiming at you. Drop the pistol!"

CORWIN fired at the sound of the first words. The echo of the pistol report rang hollowly through the dim cavern. Corwin rushed forward. It was his only chance. In the faint light at the front of the magazine he saw a shadow. He aimed quickly, squeezed the trigger; and then was he aware that the automatic had jammed. The new shell was sticking up at an angle, the slide half back.

The prisoner must have realized almost at once what had happened. He came out on to the ledge like a cat. He pressed the muzzle of the shotgun into Corwin's stomach.

"Move back to the raft! If your soldier fires you die!"

Corwin backed away from the gun. His blood raced through his head with savage hate. Almost he decided that it would be better to die pressing against that ugly gun.

The prisoner called loudly to Miguel, warning him. And then he pushed Corwin around to the land side of the rock.

"Your officer dies if you fire one shot. And I will keep him between you and me. If he goes with me quietly on the raft no harm will come to him. When we make the mainland he shall go unhurt. Do you understand?"

Miguel called back—a string of obscene Illocano invective. The prisoner grunted. He handed Corwin a knife, undoubtedly Caba's.

"Cut loose the raft! There are boards on it for paddles. First give me that map."

With the gun still pressed against

the Scout officer, the prisoner tore from Corwin's pocket the secret map of the island with its indicated fortifications, batteries and magazines. Corwin winced. This was the supreme indignity; for the few maps of the kind issued were numbered and signed for by each officer concerned. A solemn oath had been taken by him on receipt of that precious bit of paper.

"We go! Cut fast!"

Corwin cut fast. The raft rolled alarmingly under him. The knife was sharp. As he cut the bow line the prisoner shouted—

"Take the rope forward along the rock."

Corwin came back on to the rock. He drew the raft forward. With a final look he saw that Miguel had gone. He knew he would be riding like mad for a phone. He moved as slowly as he dared; but the prisoner, obviously guessing his thoughts, cursed and threatened him.

"The sergeant is gone. You are safe to depart. Why not leave me here? I will only be a danger to you on this small raft."

The man grinned evilly. His hat had been lost. He had stripped himself of his prison garb. He shivered in rags of dirty underwear.

"Listen to me," he said. His swift words rang with hate. "I am desperate. I have killed four. I dreamed of this day. I am not a *tao*—"

"You're an Oriental spy," Corwin said quietly.

The prisoner smiled.

"You will never know," he said. "But you may know this: With this accurate and official map I can make good my escape. I know where to take it. It means sanctuary, money and permanent freedom. I have everything to gain in making the mainland; nothing to lose by a thousand more killings. I will shoot you like an animal unless you do exactly as I say."

"You're an officer," Corwin said. "An educated man—a spy!"

"Strip quickly," the man said. "At once, or I shall shoot you down."

Corwin stripped; the gun was pointed at his body. He shivered in his underwear as the other carefully donned his uniform clothes. The shoes and leggings he kicked into the water. Then, still covered, Corwin did as he was bade. He crawled on to the pitching raft, took the bow paddle and, with his back to the prisoner, who kept the gun close between his knees, at the word of command drove the awkward board into the water.

All kinds of wild schemes raced through Corwin's mind. The sanest seemed to be to go through with the thing as the man with the gun directed. That way, if he kept his word, he would be turned loose on the shore at Mariveles. It was about two miles to the nearest land. With this following wind and tide they should make it in something over an hour. Hardly sooner with such an ungainly craft. That would give the authorities ample time to embark a company or two of Scouts in fast launches. And as Mariveles was simply the point on the peninsula of Bataan, the troops could be flung across farther up and cut off the prisoner's escape. As for himself, he would enjoy the dubious adventure of a cold and lonely night on the beach while others caught his man.

That was the reasonable assumption.

But Corwin revolted at thought of it. His pride rose up and choked him even as his sense of logic warned him that it was the only reasonable solution. Another alarming thought took shape. Suppose the man had planned this escape. Not likely, because he could hardly have known of the old quarryman's intended try . . . But, yes! Now that he thought of it, he seemed to remember that the two had been friendly. Might not this spy, or whatever he was, have urged the crazed old man to make the attempt, have foreseen his own substitution as the only other man familiar with explosives? Even now there

might be accomplices awaiting him on that dark beach ahead. Waiting in a seaworthy boat that would quickly carry the man to safety.

CORWIN turned his head slightly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the dark blot that was the prisoner steadily paddling at the stern. He attempted to talk; but the man growled at him, warned him to keep quiet. There was a sinister quality in that voice coming back to him through the misty darkness. It sent a shiver down Corwin's dripping spine, even though the hard work of paddling had warmed him. A ghastly foreboding mastered him. This man would not turn him loose when they reached land. And he would not risk the sound of a shot. He had made Corwin return the knife after cutting the moorings. He would move up close to him, gun prodding; then he would use that keen blade of Caba's.

"What's that?"

The words came sharply, and Corwin looked across the water. He was aware of the faint sound of engines as the lights met his eyes. At first just a dim, white light moving over the water. Then he saw the green riding light of a vessel.

"Is it a launch?" the prisoner asked thickly.

Corwin wondered. They were halfway across, yet it seemed too soon to have gotten a launch out after them. And they must know from Miguel's report that such an act would be fatal to him. Still, that major was cold blooded . . .

They could hear the engines plainly now. Whatever it was it was coming on fast and it would pass them closely.

"I think it's a mine planter," Corwin said. His voice shook with a tremendous excitement.

Already ideas were rushing through his brain. How could he signal the boat? If only she would run them down! Powerful swimmer that he was, he would have no fear of this man in the water. No gun could be used there.

"Cease paddling. Lie down flat."

Corwin obeyed; but he kept his eyes riveted on those approaching lights.

"If you attempt to call, I fire," the prisoner said.

Corwin twisted his head, keeping it close to the pitching raft. He could dimly see the man at the stern holding his gun advanced. And that gun was pointed directly at the small of his own back. Not a chance.

Corwin looked back at the lights. They were coming on fast. It seemed that they were bearing straight down on the raft. Fervently he prayed that they were.

Closer came the boat, making at least ten knots. And soon it was evident that they would be almost in her path. Frantically the man at the stern yelled at Corwin:

"Your paddle! Back water!"

He set the example himself; and Corwin, alertly watching, saw that in his wild haste to avert what appeared to be certain collision, he carelessly dropped the gun on to the raft. A lurch of the raft threw it forward. With both hands furiously paddling backward, the prisoner was for the moment some three feet from the butt of the gun.

Corwin whirled on his heels and leaped. The man saw him coming and fell forward toward the gun. The raft rocked perilously as the two men lunged for it. It was then for the first time that Corwin realized the amazing strength of his antagonist. Though a smaller man than the Scout officer, he was large for a native. He was powerfully built. And the arduous physical work he had been forced to do had worn him down to bone and muscle. Slowly the gun gave in his direction. Its barrel, at first well under Corwin's desperately gripping arm, began to move. Corwin realized that it was only a matter of moments before the muzzle came clear. And with that clearance would

come the fatal shot. Corwin tugged at the wet barrel. The prisoner had the advantage in that he had hold of the stock of the weapon.

Even as they struggled in that death grip Corwin was conscious of the wild plunging of the raft. It seemed veritably to balance on the swells with only its edge touching. One tremendous lurch threw the two men closer and, in that propitious moment, the gun was jammed violently toward Corwin. He got a better hold and hung on. But he knew it was only a temporary respite. In the end the desperate prisoner must win. Corwin was weakening—bitterly, with shame at the thought that the other was the stronger at this sort of game. Once more, as the raft plunged and leaped, the gun slid toward the prisoner. Now it was coming clear. In another moment . . .

There was a terrific upheaval of the raft. In spite of the horror and anguish that gripped him Corwin had time for the useless thought that it must be caused by the backwash of the steamer. As the raft rose perilously upward Corwin got a flashing glimpse of the boat. The white light at her masthead was far beyond them.

The raft leaped as though rammed by some monster of the sea. Corwin had the absurd thought as he was hurled upward and outward that some giant whale must have run afoul of them. The next instant he was struggling, blinded and gasping, in a welter of foam.

The raft fell back with a slap that sounded like the tail of a whale, in all truth. And as it struck the water an excruciating pain shot through the Scout officer. His legs had been struck. He realized that one, at least, was broken. He sank. He felt consciousness leaving him. Desperately he battled upward, tearing at the wall of choking water that bore him down. Then, just as his stiffening fingers were making their last feeble effort, they encountered something solid. It was moving. It must be the raft drifting by. With one last spurt of strength, engendered more by a frenzied will to live than by any physical quality, Corwin got a death grip on the thing and pulled himself upward . . .

When Corwin came to there was blinding light in his eyes. He was stretched flat on a bobbing, moving thing. Almost at once he saw the prisoner, flotsam like himself, lying near him. The man appeared unconscious. But the object that supported them both was not the raft upon which they had set out from Machine Gun Rock!

Corwin sat up. His legs sent awful pains darting through his bruised body. Those blinding lights—what were they?

When a measure of strength and clarity came back to him a quick glance about him told the fearful truth. Above him, bowing with the surge of the sea, was a pyramidal object, cloth covered and flaunting a jaunty red flag at its peak. The flooring under him was of frail bamboo—a sled-like affair that seemed to be dragged smoothly through the water by a giant unseen hand. And as he stared, fascinated, he knew that the unseen hand was the mine planter that had passed them; that the fingers of that hand were the taut towrope that he could even now see foaming at the bow of the sled. An artillery target! It undoubtedly had fouled and upset the other raft as the mine planter towed it across their path.

That violent impact had crushed his leg; and undoubtedly, aided by a favoring wave, had, with freakish coincidence, hurled his captive squarely upon the target platform, knocking him out cold.

He knew also that the lights blazing in his eyes were the beams of intersecting searchlights — two sinister eyes marking their prey . . .

He stared back, down the sharp arrows of light to the dark shores of Corregidor. And as he stared, his eyes dilated with horror, the first roar of the guns rolled back across the water.

HE SAT immobile, watching the flash of the guns. He knew them, his gangs had put in concrete emplacements for them. A battery of 155's—mobile, camouflaged, ugly-snouted rifles hidden in the foliage close to the beach at the middle of the island.

As each gun roared out in its turn its projectile came skipping and slapping across the water. Ducks and drakes—huge, glistening ducks and drakes—Corwin could see the bright spurts of spray they threw up under the beams of the searchlights.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

From right to left the guns of the battery crashed out in wicked precision at five-second intervals. Eight shots a minute, he seemed to remember his artillerymen friends had said.

The raft under him plowed steadily forward The target bowed and curtsied like a prim old lady. Shells screamed by, seeming almost to brush him with their cold breath of death. He tried to drag himself upward, to wave off this horror. Tearing at the frame above him, wrenching at his useless legs, he felt like a man in a nightmare chained to the ground in the face of mortal, inexorably approaching peril. He heard himself screaming against the wind.

The spray struck up against the target in white smothers, blinded him and smashed into his parched mouth. He could not rise above his one good knee.

The prisoner still lay on his face.

Corwin twisted about, groaning with agony. He looked about him and saw that the target was moving across a deeply indented bay. On the chord of an arc that would terminate within a few hundred yards of the Mariveles promontory, if the towing mine planter held her present course.

There would be a chance there. Even a fair swimmer could make it in no time at all if he went over the side as they were abreast of the nearest outcropping of rock.

But with this leg . . .

He was attracted by a hoarse call. He looked forward whence the sound came and was startled to see the prisoner, apparently very much alive. Corwin saw that the man had already realized that something was terribly wrong. He could see that the convict was still dazed; and as that thought registered, another, an alarming one came home to him.

In a few moments now, barring a direct hit, the target would be at its closest to the mainland shore. The prisoner was not badly hurt; that was apparent from the free manner in which he was twisting about. He was no fool; that he had proved. And he was desperate. He would see his chance, possibly already saw it. He would go over the side. There could be no danger of waiting soldiers. Headquarters would have warned all garrisons of the danger zone along the Mariveles shore; and would hardly call off the firing of the yearly test on the off chance that an escaping prisoner would be fool enough to attempt to cross this zone of almost certain death.

Corwin knew what he must do. He could not save himself; but he'd be damned if they said of him afterward that he had let his man get away.

He dragged himself toward the other man. He groaned loudly as he pulled himself along the wet deck of the raft.

"Legs broken—both of them. And one arm useless. Raft fell on me."

The scowl on the convict's face relaxed somewhat. There was no pity there—just a pale, unearthly mask of fear in the beating white light. Corwin drew closer slowly, not daring to hurry for fear the man might see that part of his helplessness was sham.

"Help me," he pleaded. "Tie me up. I'm bleeding to death."

A terrific shock heaved the water up about them. A deluge of spray crashed down on the target. Half washed, half pulling himself toward the other, Corwin was almost against him when the

sheets of following spray began to subside. He gathered himself, measured his distance as best he could. Then, with all the strength left in him, he drove his right fist flush against the man's jaw. Without a sound the fugitive fell face downward on the raft.

SWIFTLY Corwin felt for the knife and found it; and then with his last remaining strength he dragged himself forward. If he succeeded now there was a bare chance that he might save himself and bring in his prisoner. He must cut the towrope. Surely, if this moving target stopped dead in its arranged movement across the course, fire would cease. The observers would realize that something was wrong. No point in shooting at a stationary target. And if he succeeded now, still some distance from the nearest shore, the prisoner would have a tough time making it through that cold water in his weakened state.

Corwin dragged himself to the fore part of the raft. It took all the nerve in him. The spray and the foaming water at the bow almost choked him. It blinded him; and above the steady roar of the guns he could hear the slapping and thudding of the grisly projectiles tearing into the waves about him. Any minute now . . .

He leaned far out, feeling for the straining line. He found it, began to hack at it feverishly. He must get through it before that inert form came back to life.

Strand by strand he could feel the rope give. Halfway through, his heart leaped. Not long now. He could feel the cut strands snapping up about his fingers. But the wet rope was heavy and stubborn. The knife was dulling; the hawser seemed alive, jerking and eluding his weakening hand.

The raft swayed, shook behind him. Above thrust of water and the smashing of the ever closing pattern of falling iron, he heard an oath, a hoarse cry. He shot a startled glance backward. Then, like an animal backed against its last cover, he turned, knife in hand, and waited.

The prisoner was creeping toward him on hands and knees along the slippery, rolling deck. In his hands he held a length of two-by-four evidently ripped from some part of the superstructure of the raft.

Corwin saw that he had no chance. He might fling the knife—he had heard of such things. But he had no skill at such tricks; there was small chance that he would register a fatal hit.

He turned back deliberately. Once again he felt for the elusive towrope. Desperately he sawed at it in the one hope that it might part before the other got to him. As for himself, he saw the end. One look into that ghastly grinning face told him that in only a few swift seconds that club of wood was bound to come smashing down on his unprotected head.

His darting fingers encountered the rope, groped for the section he had partly cut. It slipped away from him. By the time he relocated it and renewed his cutting it would be too late. There was no time to get through a new section of the rope before the prisoner would be on him.

He decided to meet the man, fight it out to the end there on the foaming bow of that pitching raft.

He arose to his knees. That was as far as he could move upward. The lights blinded him. The batteries from the shore were banging out a wild symphony, their shells ripping the sea about the raft into a white welter. Corwin felt, in that moment, like some mythological creature, unreal, inspired, as he raised up his arm and saw the knife flashing in those spotlights that held him and his antagonist inexorably fixed in their awful glare.

The attacker was now on his feet. He was bracing himself for the blow. It was evident from his savage purposefulness that he understood what the

Scout officer had hoped to do.

With all that was left in him Corwin hurled the knife. He saw the bright flash of its trajectory through the white light. The man saw it coming—Corwin, slow and clumsy in his weakness, had given ample warning of his intention as he drew his arm back.

The knife missed, turned over and over, gleaming.

The prisoner laughed hoarsely, screamed something to Corwin. He raised the heavy wooden brace above his head. He looked like some wild demon spewed in vengeance from the sea. Corwin closed his eyes. This was the end . . .

There was a terrific crash. Before consciousness snapped out of Corwin he had a sensation of spinning, awful, giddy flight, then nothing.

Presently he was aware of voices. Then reawakening horror—those lights—blinding—burning, seeming to sear into his very bones. He was cold; but his feebly groping hands felt blankets about him.

"Easy now! Watch that leg! Here, get him under the arms—"

A friendly, familiar voice.

Again darkness, but a warmer darkness. A little feeling filtered into it. Not dead, then. When Corwin came to again he was warmer. He was in a bunk. He felt the homely, comforting stir of engines. A moving ship. And, thank God, those ghastly lights were gone.

He opened his eyes. Men were standing about him. Soldiers. Among them Corwin knew a face—young Hause, who had growled about night work that day at the Topside Club.

Corwin grinned feebly and tried to sit up.

"You're on the mine planter," the lieutenant said. "My proud command. Quiet now—we're not much on leg setting; but we'll have you in the sick bay *pronto*."

"Prisoner?" Corwin croaked. "My map!"

The artilleryman shook a radio form that he held in his hand. His face was grim.

"Got both. Shell cut the towrope. Target went adrift. We had to cease firing. Sent a boat to make her fast again. Prisoner dead as a mackerel on the raft. Cracked shell casing caught him probably. You were out cold. Snapped hawser clapped you one. Radio warning just came. Fine time after the whole show was over!"

"Get word back to my C. O, will you, Hause?"

The lieutenant grimaced.

"Already done. I knew you'd worry about that old sorehead."

A Signal Corps soldier knocked and entered the cabin. Hause took the message the man held out to him.

"By the look of it, here's the answer."

Corwin's worried eyes stared at the flimsy.

"It'll be six months on the rock for me at best," he groaned.

Hause handed the message to him, grinning. It read:

SPLENDID WORK MY BOY. WILL BE WAITING ON THE DOCK WITH THE COMMANDING GENERAL TO SHAKE YOUR HAND.

—LAMBERT,
MAJOR, P. S.

Hause chuckled.

"What is it? Offer from the Northwest Mounted Police?"

Corwin folded the paper and stared contentedly at the deck beams overhead.

"It looks," he said, "as if I were getting by in the Scouts. Do they carry hot Scotch on mine planters, Bill?"

The lieutenant turned a severe and most official look on the staring soldiers who were grouped about. They closed the door of the cabin quietly after them.

"Only in the commander's cabin," Hause said.

He bent and tugged at a drawer beneath the bunk.

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

IN CONNECTION with Red Skull, Arthur O. Friel's story concluding in this issue, the author submits the following on the subject of the Lost White Men, long rumored to exist somewhere in the back country beyond the Brazilian-Venezuelan border:

Brooklyn, New York

The Lost White Men of Guayana, the Blancos Perdidos, or whatever they may be called in different languages, have been the subjects of legend for many years; in fact, centuries. And I believe the tale to be not unfounded. I myself went hunting them some years ago. And the farther I penetrated into that back country the more I heard about them. The farthermost Indians I reached—blowgun Indians, unclothed, who let me come to them only because they had heard that I was blond, a squareshooter and not a Spaniard—these lads knew where I could find people, perhaps descendants of those Lost Whites, who were not only white but blond, like myself. These blonds, however, were few and scattered; and the onset of the rainy season (terrific and long lasting in those frontier mountains) made it impossible for me to reach them by the only roads, rocky streams. I had to get out, and I haven't been back yet. Since I was convinced that the traditionally fierce white tribe now was virtually extinct, another such expedition seemed not worth while. Moreover, since then other seekers of the same lost tribe have gone into that general region, usually via the Orinoco; and I've waited to hear what they discovered.

They, too, found no white Indians. In fact, one such seeker, after three successive trips, announces that he considers the whole story to be a myth. He also says, however, that he could find no Indians whatever, or even traces of them, on a river where I found quite a number and photographed more than a few. From which, of course, may be drawn various inferences; but which, to me at least, hardly proves that such people never existed.

THE abortive attempt of the Bretigny expedition to settle French Guiana (one of many efforts by France to colonize that miserable place) took place about 1643. Concerning it one historian says:

"Three or four hundred men were sent out, under the command of the Sieur de Bretigny,

who can only be described as a madman. As might be expected, he quarreled with the Indians at once, who, of course, retaliated. He seems to have had a continual fear that some one would murder him, which was hardly wonderful when he punished the poor Frenchmen with a refinement of torture only possible to a depraved mind. The gallows, the gibbet and the wheel were not enough; he must invent other cruelties, which he called purgatory and hell. . . . At last his temper became unbearable, and most of his people took refuge among the Indians. . . .

"Bretigny was not satisfied with these desertions to the Indians, for he naturally expected the refugees would incite the cannibals to come and attack him. Taking some of his myrmidons, he therefore went up the river and demanded that the runaways be given up. This being refused, his people fired on the Indians from the boat, but the red men, from the cover of trees and bushes, poured a shower of arrows and killed every one of the party. Finally, bringing the bodies ashore, they were made the occasion of a great cannibal feast and dance."

After which, as this writer further narrates, the few settlers who had remained behind Bretigny either fled to the West Indies or joined their "deserter" comrades among the cannibal (Carib) Indians. What became of all these refugees thereafter is not disclosed. But, knowing something about the acquisitive character of Frenchmen in general, I doubt that these adventurous colonists were content to stick long in that worthless jungle. So I have moved them onward from there.

TWO other subjects which I'd like to touch on here are quite dissimilar: cats and diamonds. We have had considerable discussion in Camp-fire on the questions: "Does a puma ever yell?" and "Does an uncut diamond ever glow?" The second of these questions arose (to my own surprise) from a story of mine wherein figured some alluvial diamonds found in Venezuela, near British Guiana. Neither in that tale nor elsewhere did I say that *every* rough diamond, found in any and every part of the world, shows an inner light. My reference was to those particular diamonds in that particular locality. And I still say that certain diamonds found in that same general section do give out a soft glow, especially when clean and examined in a bright light.

Concerning pumas, also, I confine myself to those of the South American wilderness. And to the general discussion I might add a few personal observations and a personal opinion. As for "yells," I have heard such sounds several times; and my men (natives) invariably ascribed them to the puma. Those shrieks were always quite distant; but I have no doubt that the men were correct. Certainly the voices were not those of jaguars. I know them quite well. Consequently I believe that pumas, panthers, cougars, or what have you, do yell when they feel so inclined. And how! It's one helluva yell.

THAT, however, is not the main point I have in mind concerning pumas. That point, which I advance only as personal opinion, is that I also believe the brown cat to be a lonesome cuss with a sneaking sort of liking for man. In this opinion I am not entirely alone. In fact, it is based partly on things told me by wilderness habitants or rovers; also partly on my own experiences. I have had pumas come up to me at night, while I lay alone in a hammock, and walk around me, very near, until I struck a light. Then they went away, but not on the jump; walking off with a rather dignified gait, quick but not panicky. They made no noises except the soft tread of their feet, which I happened to detect. How many others visited me while I was sound asleep I naturally don't know. But those I saw acted more like half-wild dogs, willing to be friendly, but wary of a kick, than like killers thirsting for my blood.

I have also been visited by jaguars. But their attitude and actions were much different. They made noises, ugly vocal noises, the general tone of which was: "Damn you, I hate your guts, and for less than a cent I'll rip 'em out!" But when I made a light and waited for them to make good they didn't come through. Instead they made more nasty noises and then disappeared, hell-bent. I let them go.

SHOOTING at any big cat when he's close to you is bad business. Moreover, unless I'm hungry or actually attacked, I prefer not to kill any living creature except venomous snakes. I'd rather watch it and see what it does.

As the result of such observations, plus the tales of other observers at various jungle campfires, I personally feel that the brown cat, the puma, is in general a good scout; temperamental, savage by nature, of course, and nobody's tame pet, but withal a pretty squareshooter if not soured by being hunted.

—ARTHUR O. FRIEL

WHERE did ice for cold drinks come from in the Virgin Islands in 1825, a reader wants to know.

Montfort, Quebec, Canada

We have just read "Seven Turns in a Hangman's Rope", and have enjoyed it very much. But there is only one thing that we have wondered at, knowing St. Thomas as we do, and that is: Where did Monsieur Daniell get the ice in his "iced-interior silver jug", especially in St. Thomas in 1825? Of course, you will say:

"From the ice-machine," but we doubt it! Eskimos may have brought it down, but we doubt that!

—WALTER N. HILL

Here is the author's answer:

Dunedin, Florida

For many years before the invention of the ice-machine and its introduction to the Danish West Indies (the American Virgin Islands since March 31, 1917), "ice-ships" came frequently to St. Thomas and Santa Cruz, *i.e.*, sailing (and later steam) vessels laden or even ballasted with ice, from Copenhagen. The ice thus brought into Denmark's chief colonial possession was usually sold on the wharves, and bought up by the baronial-minded planters of Santa Cruz and the prosperous merchants and ship-owners of St. Thomas. It was wrapped in gunny-sacks, and kept as long as possible, and in the intervals between such ice-laden vessels, the swizzels were frequently made with an egg included in the "ingrediments", as the Negroes called it, presumably to simulate the froth that resulted from the normal combination of granulated sugar, crushed ice (pounded in a bag with a wooden mallet) and Angostura Bitters.

I have heard about the ice-ships many times from middle-aged and elderly people in this colony, and have even occasionally been regaled with egg-swizzels in certain old-fashioned estate-houses where there happened to be no ice short of several miles in to town.

—HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

CORRESPONDENCE on the record of sailing vessels between New Zealand and Australia.

Harlingen, Texas

I read the reply to L. C. Myers (April 15th) regarding the record of the sailing vessels between New Zealand and Australia. I am naturally interested in this article inasmuch as my father, Captain S. S. Austin, was Commodore of the Henderson-MacFarland Fleet of Auckland, New Zealand, and brought the *Alice Cameron* out from Scotland. He also sailed the bark, *Novelty,* which he claims to have been a faster vessel than the *Cameron,* and made the run from Sydney to Kaipara Head in five days and 21 hours. I have no means of knowing whether this was officially noted.

Have you any record to show who was master of the *Cameron* when she made this fast run in 1862? Was it Barron, Neering, Granger or Austin? During the Maori War in New Zealand the Henderson-MacFarland Company dispatched five vessels from Auckland to the Pacific Coast for cargo of wheat. Captain Austin, in command of the bark, *Novelty,* made the run up to the coast in 31 days. The other four vessels leaving within 24 hours of each other were never afterwards heard of. Those vessels were the *Trieste, Sir George Grey, Southern Cross,* and I believe, the *Alice Cameron.*

—LYNN AUSTIN

Tom L. Mills, Ask Adventure expert for New Zealand, replies:

Feilding, New Zealand

Your very interesting letter sent me back to "White Wings," a book on 50 years of sail in New Zealand trade by the late Sir Henry Brett, proprietor of the *Auckland Star,* on which paper he started life as a typesetter and later shipping reporter. This Grand Old Man of New Zealand journalism sent me a copy of his valuable book a little while before his lamented death. In his book Sir Henry makes several references to boarding the *Alice Cameron* when she entered the harbor after her swift voyages—for she carried the latest overseas newspapers, and there was keen rivalry amongst shipping reporters in those faraway days when there were no cable and telegraphic services out here. Those rival reporters were after those papers for the news for their Auckland papers.

Sir Henry refers to a record passage made by the *Alice Cameron,* in 1862, under Captain Barron, from Sydney to Three Kings (above Auckland) in four days, eight hours; and then a wind and the loss of her foretopsail yard.

WITH reference to the bark, *Novelty,* of 300 tons, there is this record in the Auckland *Southern Cross* (now the *Star*):

"The *Novelty,* Captain John Harrison, left San Francisco on November 28, 1850, and arrived in Auckland on December 28. The passage made by the *Novelty* stands as a record to this day for any sailing ship on that run." There was a sailer also named *Novelty* that traded to and from Sydney (in Australia) and Auckland. This boat was built in Auckland.

The bark, *Trieste,* was a fast boat under Captain Clarke Rowland. A record voyage was claimed for her, but Sir Henry Brett disputes it, and in examining her record with the *Alice Cameron,* on one occasion, he gives this judgment: "Taking the time of the two vessels inside of Rangitoto Channel (Auckland harbor), the run occupied about six days 12 hours—so we may call it a dead heat." Then he goes on to deal with the *Alice Cameron's* feat in 1862.

I can find no reference to the tragedy of the wheat voyages you refer to, nor the names of the *Sir George Grey* or the *Southern Cross.*

—TOM L. MILLS

ASK *Adventure*

For free information and services you can't get elsewhere

Skinning an Alligator

YOU can put the hide over an anthill for the finishing touches.

Request:—"On a projected trip to South America I may have occasion to skin an alligator. Can you tell me how it's done?"

—LAWRENCE PHILLIPS, Jackson, Michigan

Reply, by Mr. Edgar Young:—The way to skin an alligator or croc' is to open up along the side of the belly where it joins the side and skin out carefully. The small ones skin out rather easily. You have to turn the foot inside out and cut the toe bones off close up where it is intended to use the skin for mounting. After the hide is cured and softened the skin is turned right side out again. You have to scrape out all meat from the bones of the head and pick and scrape back into the crevices to get all particles to keep this meat from rotting. A good plan, which I have used, is to place the hide over an anthill and let them do the work. They will get all meat in a short time and not hurt the skin.

Airplane Carriers

SECRET apparatus for landing planes at high speed.

Request:—"1. What are the methods used in stopping the planes landing on the decks of the plane carriers *Lexington* and *Saratoga?*

2. What are the maximum and minimum landing speeds of planes used on these carriers?"

—JAMES CONWAY, McKeesport, Pennsylvania

Reply, by Lieut. F. V. Greene:—1. A net arrangement whereby the forward movement of the landing plane is rapidly checked by a system of constantly increasing forces which are applied to the landing gear the moment it strikes the deck. This apparatus may not be discussed, however, as it is considered confidential.

2. About forty miles per hour as an average. Planes at sixty miles per hour can be stopped in forty feet without injury to machine or pilot.

Nepal

WHERE 'tis usual to speed the parting guest.

Request:—"Is access to Nepal difficult? Why do so few explorers enter this country?"

—HARLAN M. MIZE, Leaf River, Illinois

Reply, by Capt. R. W. van Raven de Sturler:—Physical access to the country is not so difficult. I have known much worse. The real difficulty is the British-Indian government's dislike of allowing any white man (even physicians) to enter Nepal for fear that some white man may obtain influence with or employment in the Nepalese government.

Here and there, some one, like myself, not important enough to attract attention, gets in by special privilege, but such visits never last longer than a few months at the best and then only for a certain, definite purpose, after completion of which he is courteously reminded that his time to depart has arrived.

Old Mississipp'

HOW to catch a big "cat" above Moline.

Request:—"Could you recommend any particular location on the Mississippi north of Moline to the Wisconsin line where we could expect good fishing? I'd like especially to get a big cat; pointers on getting it will be appreciated."

—R. W. EVANS, River Grove, Illinois

Reply, by Mr. John B. Thompson:—Around Alma or Wabasha, Wisconsin, would be just the region for you. Use large minnows, beef, liver, mussels or crawfish for bait. Let the bait touch bottom. Fish deep holes.

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Send each question *direct* to the expert in charge of the section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **Do not** send questions to this magazine. Be definite; explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question. The expert will in all cases answer to the best of his ability, but neither he nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. **No Reply** will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing or for employment. Ask Adventure covers outdoor opportunities, but only in the way of general data and advice.

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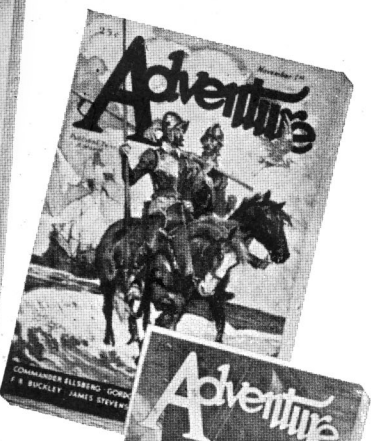

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