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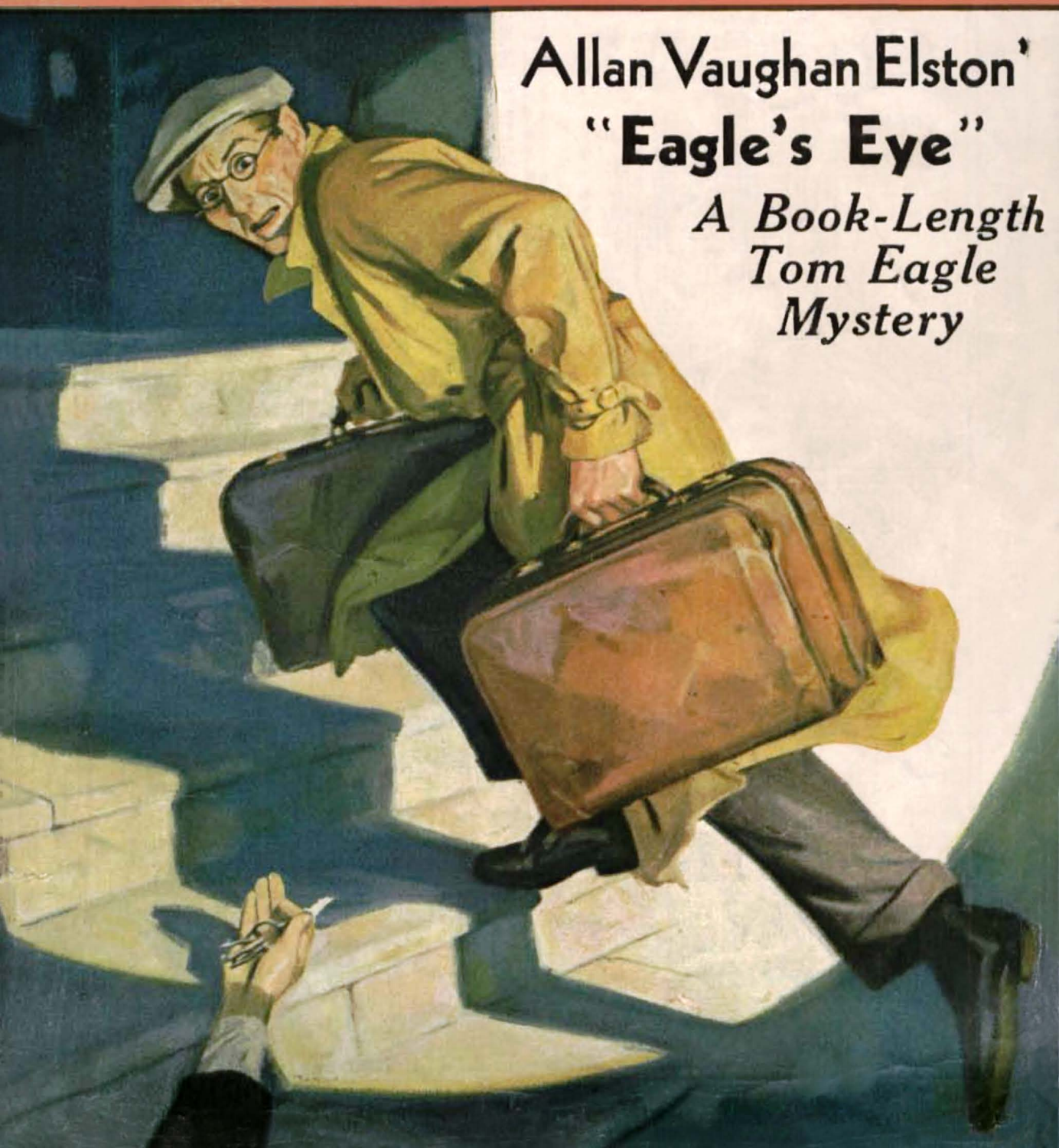

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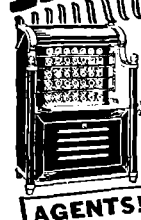

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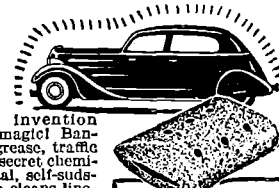

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Volume 259 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 19, 1935 Number 3

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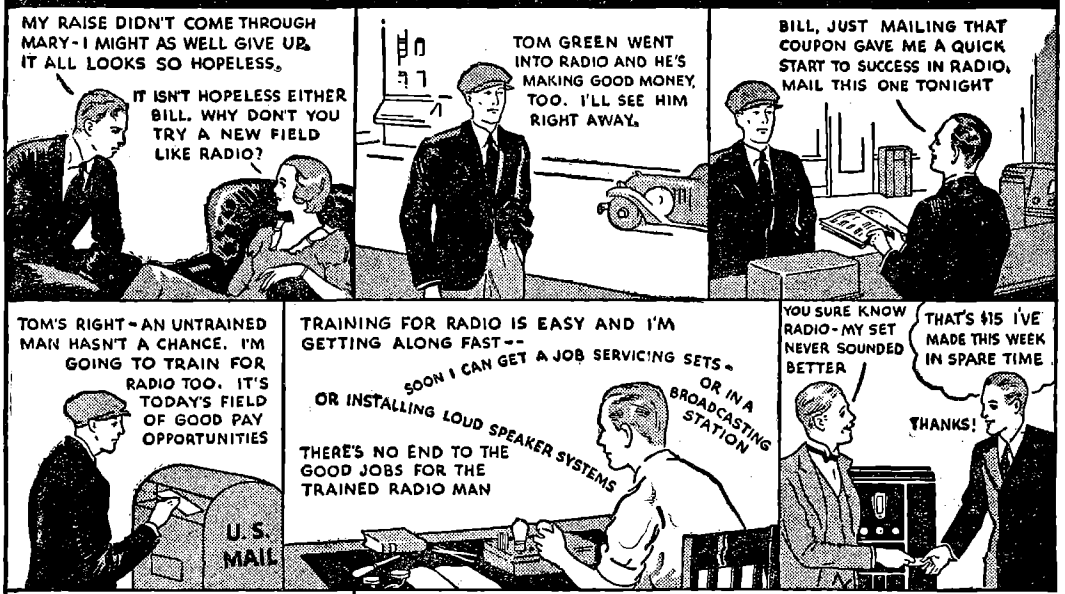

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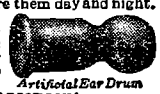

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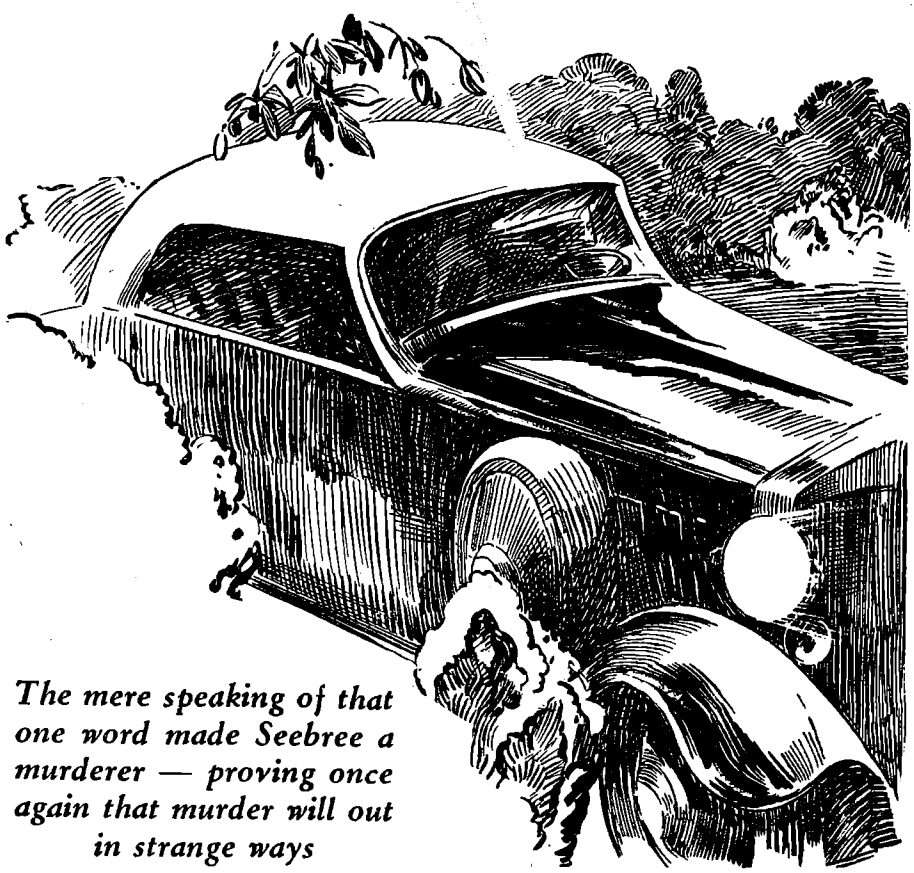
Eagle's Eye

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "The Lavender Lamp," "Badge of Honor," etc.



The mere speaking of that one word made Seebree a murderer — proving once again that murder will out in strange ways

CHAPTER I.

PRISON OF PALMS.

THE ship had sighted his signals, Wayne Seebree could see and was bearing in toward the island. He stood on the edge of the cliff with his gaze straining eagerly and with a riotous thump in his heart. The clamor of sea fowl filled the air, while below him white water billowed in from an infinity of slate gray, pounding at the base of the cliff and spouting geysers of spray.

On either side of him a signal fire was banked with leaf mold, from which smoke arose in tall, dun columns. At such a distance the ship's crew could hardly have seen more, Seebree thought, although he himself for an

hour had been leaping frantically on the cliff, waving the rag of his shirt. For a while he had feared that this vessel would be like another one which had skimmed the horizon, four months ago, and which had sailed on without sighting his signals.

Now he was exhausted, but jubilant. For *this* one was coming in to the island. It meant the end of seven months' wretched isolation. Wayne Seebree thought wistfully of home, the comforts there, the life of luxury which he had always lived and would now live again.

In a moment he turned and faced inland, toward the jungle. He saw a steepness of rich green reaching to the ridge of the island. Here and there the fronds of coco palm and the tufts of screw pine poked out above the tangle. Seebree's gaze fell upon a path which led from this bench of cliff up into the trees.

Seebree gave Slake no time to turn around

If one followed it, he could cross this insular mountain and descend into a valley beyond. Wayne Seebree, in these last seven months, had often done so. He knew every foot of this three-mile island, had searched it from end to end for the yams, plantain, taro, nuts and breadfruit which had recently been his subsistence.

Now, with rescue in sight, a strange

change came over Seebree. His eyes narrowed. Jubilation still glowed there, but something else also came to invade and possess Wayne Seebree, something dark and furtive which brought a tight curve of cunning to his lips.

For long minutes he stood tense, brooding, while the tropic sun struck upon his blistered face and sweat dripped from the mat of his hair. Ragged, bearded, with only a clay-stained yachting cap to mark him for more than a beachcomber, the man stood staring with a peculiar slyness at the steep green inland wall. When he turned seaward again, his look was hard and grim.

The craft out there was nearer now. She was a stubby steamer with one thick funnel and an awkwardly high poop. She was dropping anchor more than two miles off shore and Seebree knew she wouldn't dare come nearer. Those spots of light green water here and there meant submerged reefs. Such reefs extended clear to the horizon, which was why this neck of the sea was generally avoided.

Now Seebree descended a precarious niche of the cliff and made his way through the spray there to a spot of open beach. The steamer, he saw, was launching a boat. A terrific surf intervened. Yet expert sailors, Seebree thought, could get a boat through it.

He saw the boat fighting white crests out there. It came on with dogged caution, manned by an officer and four oarsmen. A swell tossed it; then, for a while, it was out of sight. Seebree held his breath until it reappeared. The boat came stubbornly on.

FINALLY it was grounded at Seebree's feet. As he advanced toward it, he was suddenly afraid. Fear whitened the blistered hollows of his face, and for an instant his resolution weakened.

It wasn't fear of anything he had ever done—but of a thing he was resolved to do now.

A stocky skipper and four sailors got out of the boat. They stared curiously.

"Who are you, mate?" the skipper asked.

"My name is Wayne Seebree."

"Where do you hail from?"

"New York. And thank God for a chance to get back there. I've been stranded here for months."

The skipper blinked his amazement. "The hell you have! The chart says nobody lives on this island."

"Nobody did," Seebree answered with a pallid smile, "until the sea tossed me on it."

"From what wreck, mate?"

"The yacht Sail Away, owned by Gerald Howden of New York."

"You don't tell me! Yes, I remember when that yacht was reported missing. Seven months ago, wasn't it?"

"About that long, although it's been hard to keep track of time. I've been living here like a squirrel."

"Alone?"

The skipper was cupping his palms to light a pipe, so he failed to see Seebree's eyes drop evasively, or to notice his brief hesitation.

"Alone?" the seaman repeated.

"Alone," Seebree asserted in a hoarse, forced voice. The last vestige of blood drained from his face. Wayne Seebree knew that the mere speaking of that one word made him a murderer.

"Where's the wreck?"

"It happened miles out, on a reef in a storm. I was lashed to a spar; th sea bounced me in on this beach."

"Humph! And no one else?"

From a dry throat Seebree said, "No one else."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? Of course. I've tramped the island for months, hoping I might find someone. It's only two or three miles across it, skipper."

"That's right, Mr. Seebree," the skipper said. "It's charted as 'Skull Island' and marked uninhabited. Ships give it a wide berth on account of reefs and shallow soundings on all sides. Got a little off my course, this time, or you might not 've been sighted in forty year."

Seebree shuddered. "That's what I was afraid of, skipper. It nearly drove me nuts."

"I reckon they call it 'Skull Island,' mate, on account of a skull being a symbol for death." The skipper went on to explain that this island was outlying from the New Hebrides group. Neighboring islands just beyond the horizons, he said, were inhabited.

"Just my luck to get beached on this one!" Seebree complained.

"Well, since you're the only survivor, we better beat the tide back to my deck."

SEEBREE embarked with them and the sailors pushed off. For an hour the boat crew fought swirling white breakers. Seebree sat stiffly, not once looking back toward the island. Guilt suffused him. Fear scourged him. He had lied to this honest skipper.

Length by length the boat beat through the breakers. Seebree was sick to the verge of fainting when his feet at last touched the steamer's deck. This was the Tonga Belle, he learned, a Yankee tramp bound north for Honolulu. The skipper's name was Jones.

"Weigh anchor without delay," the skipper said to his mate, "an' let's get clear o' these damn reefs."

His promptness brought immense relief to Seebree. He was thankful, also, to see the tropic dark come on swiftly.

He wouldn't dare to draw a full breath until they were beyond sight of that island.

Jones put a compassionate hand on his shoulder. "Reckon a white man's supper and a bottle o' wine is what you want most, Mr. Seebree."

"Right, skipper. But a shave and a bath would make a close second."

"Steward, draw a bath for Mr. Seebree."

"Aye, sir," said Slake, the steward. "This way, Mr. Seebree. While Slake draws your bath, you can take on a cargo o' victuals."

Jones led Seebree into the saloon. The steamer, by now, was gliding cautiously out to sea.

"Tell us about that yacht wreck, Mr. Seebree."

With wine and meat before him, and with half the crew gathered curiously around, Seebree told about the disaster to Gerry Howden's yacht. He told the truth in all details except one.

As he arose from the table, a voice spoke from the doorway. "Your bath is ready, sir."

It was Slake, the steward. He was a pallid little man with tricky eyes and a smug grin.

"A bath?" Seebree echoed with a wry smile. "Well, no man ever needed one worse. Excuse me, skipper."

He followed Slake to the only bath on the ship. The tub there was full of salt water, with a brush and soap laid by. When Slake withdrew, Seebree lost no time stripping off his rags. A

moment later he was seated in the tub, immersed to the chest.

Then Slake re-entered the bath cabin. He came pussyfooting in so quietly that Seebree was unaware of his presence until he heard the man say, "Here's towels, sir."

"Thanks," Seebree said with a slight annoyance.

The annoyance sharpened when Slake did not immediately withdraw. Slake was staring at the flesh of Seebree's bare back. Glancing around, Seebree had the feeling that here was a fellow with a sly talent for making himself obnoxious.

"You've been alone on that island seven months, sir?" Slake inquired.

The man's tone frightened Seebree. Slake's tongue was in his cheek and the ghost of a grin was on his thin, pale lips. He was still staring impudently at Seebree's bare back.

"That is true," Seebree said. "Would you mind getting out?"

"I see a tiny strip of adhesive tape, sir, or maybe you call it court plaster," Slake said. "It's pasted over a scratch on your back."

Seebree's hand went back over his shoulder and reached down between his shoulder blades. But his fingers failed to touch the strip of court plaster there. At the same time Seebree reached his other hand back and up from below. It likewise failed to reach the sticker. The fingers of one hand lacked at least five inches of touching the fingers of the other. Strive and twist as he would, Seebree could not decrease that interval.

It hadn't occurred to him before, but now he realized that not one man in ten can touch a certain spot on his own back.

Exactly at that untouchable spot on his back, a bit of court plaster was stuck over the scratch of a jungle thorn.

"Well, what of it? Would you mind leaving me?"

Slake's derision became bolder. "That bit of tape is clean and fresh, sir. Can't have been there seven months. A day or a week, maybe, but not months. Besides, a shallow scratch like that would heal in seven months."

Seebree was furious. "Well?"

"You got short arms and broad shoulders," Slake taunted. "You can't touch that scratch, any way you twist. And you say you were *alone* on the island? Well, then, if you didn't paste the sticker there, *who did?*"

CHAPTER II.

THE MENACE OF SLAKE.

"YOUR bath is ready, sir."

The announcement and the derisive challenge of it startled Wayne Seebree. It came now as a frightful reminder of his first encounter with Slake, nine years ago on a South Seas tramp.

Slake, his valet, was at this moment standing in the doorway of a sun parlor at Seebree's Riverside Drive house in New York. Slake's pear-shaped and baldish head was inclined forward in an attitude of mock humility. His tongue was in his cheek while one of his bony hands washed constantly through the other. Damn the fellow! For nine years he had clung like a leech. Always he made Seebree think of that arch hypocrite from David Copperfield, Uriah Heap.

"I'll be right up," Seebree murmured with a scowl.

"Very good, sir." Slake, still smirking, backed out of the room.

With Seebree was his wife, Corrine.

Half buried in cushions, she was reclining on a chaise longue. Now she tamped out her cigarette and complained crossly:

"Wayne, why don't you get rid of him? I simply can't stand the sight of him."

"Who? Slake?"

"Of course. He gives me the creeps." Corrine Seebree tossed her exquisite, red-haired head. Her slim shoulders twisted with a gesture of distaste. "Why," she insisted petulantly, "don't you get rid of him?"

Why didn't he get rid of Slake? The unconscious irony of that inquiry all but forced a bitter laugh from Wayne Seebree. He himself hated and feared Slake. Slake was a poison thorn in his flesh.

In all the world, only Slake had guessed the truth. Slake, once a ship's steward and now valet to Seebree! The devil himself, for a valet, would have suited Seebree better.

For six years after the rescue from Skull Island he hadn't seen Slake. Then, three years ago, the man had popped up. Like an evil genius, he had appeared the very week after Seebree's marriage to Corrine Howden.

"I hate to sack him," Seebree muttered. He turned his back so that Corrine could not see his face. As he stared out the window at the passing traffic, he added, "There's such a thing as gratitude, you know."

"Piffle! You've given him a job for three years, haven't you? And at three times what anyone else would pay a valet. I've meant to speak to you about that, Wayne. Three hundred dollars a month, for a valet, is ridiculous."

Seebree whirled defensively. "Three hundred? What makes you think that? I only pay Slake *one* hundred."

"But I happened to see a stub in your checkbook, Wayne. The first of this month you paid him three hundred dollars."

"That was for a quarter," Seebree lied quickly. "Slake uses me for a savings bank. Only draws his pay quarterly."

Corrine, he saw with relief, believed him. As one of the wealthiest women in New York, it wasn't often that she paid any attention to such a detail as the pay of a servant. But now she continued to insist that Slake be discharged.

"Just because he was steward of a ship that picked you up sick off an island nine years ago, Wayne, and nursed you back to health—that's no reason why I should have to look at him all the rest of *my* life!"

Seebree heard the Gilbert Chardells, house guests, approaching along the hall. To avoid them, he went upstairs to his rooms.

Slake was there, laying out dinner clothes. "Your bath will be getting cold, sir," he purred.

FIVE minutes later Seebree was immersed in his bathtub.

Again, exactly as nine years ago on a ship, Slake came pussyfooting in with towels. Again Seebree was unaware of the intrusion until he heard the man's sly voice.

At the same instant he felt a cold, clammy finger press at a spot between his shoulder blades. It was the only spot of his flesh which Seebree himself could not touch.

"The old scratch has healed, sir," Slake whispered.

It was a subtle, malicious reminder, Seebree knew, that he was at Slake's mercy.

"Get out of here!" Seebree shouted,

although rage all but choked him. Slake bowed and withdrew.

How, Seebree wondered desperately, could the man be handled? He realized that Slake was basing it all on nothing more than a guess, but the guess happened to be right. Or rather the man must have made *two* guesses. First that Seebree had deserted a comrade on Skull Island. The second guess must have occurred to Slake six years later.

For six years Slake no doubt had wondered who the deserted comrade could have been. A comrade there must have been, else how could that bit of adhesive tape become pasted between the shoulder blades of broad, short-armed Wayne Seebree? Some other man than Seebree must have also survived the wreck of Gerald Howden's yacht, a survivor who had carried a sealed first aid kit in belt or pocket. Who was he—and for what motive had Seebree deserted him?

For six years the cunning Slake must have pondered about that—and then read in the papers about the marriage of Seebree to the fabulously wealthy widow of Gerald Howden. The rotogravures, Seebree remembered, had played that story for all it was worth. The tabloid sob-sisters had made good copy out of it; that gallant campus rivalry years ago between the two classmates, Howden and Seebree, for the hand of Corrine Withers; the alternate preferment of Corrine for first one and then the other; her marriage, finally, with Gerald Howden; the continued close friendship of the Howdens with the disappointed suitor, Seebree; the wreck of Howden's yacht on a cruise which the wife had passed up, and from which only Wayne Seebree had survived; and six years later, the marriage between Seebree and Howden's widow.

"Poetic justice!" had been the popular verdict. But the sly Slake would have another name for it. Slake would leap instantly to the motive of desertion. The loose end of his first guess would immediately become moored to an impelling stake to be gained by Seebree, and now actually gained—Howden's pretty widow and her forty million fortune.

Now Wayne Seebree had both. But he could hold them only by sufferance of Slake. Seated in the tub with an ache of fear in his eyes, Seebree wondered how long he could go on with it. Suppose Slake should talk! Suppose he should insist that he had seen a fresh bit of tape on Seebree's back the day of the rescue!

CORRINE inevitably would become suspicious. She would see an answer to the mystery of Slake forcing himself as valet upon her husband. Except for two months recently when he had taken a two months' full pay vacation, Slake had been constantly in the household for three years. Always over the repeated protests of Corrine.

At the first insinuation from Slake, Corrine would revive her inquiry into the amount of his pay check. In the end she would consult legal advice and be reminded that she had only the word of Seebree that Gerald Howden was dead.

No doubt, Seebree reasoned, Gerry Howden *was* dead—now. For nine years he could hardly have survived on Skull Island. To conceal his existence there at the time of rescue had been simple enough. In order to double the chances, each castaway had tended a signal fire on a separate side of the island. There had been a high ridge between them. In the event either

signal was seen from the sea, the successful signaler was to summon the other.

Wayne Seebree had deliberately failed to summon Howden. Would the courts call it murder? Corrine would, Seebree thought with a shudder. She'd name it a deep-dyed treachery of murder blacker than man or devil had ever before conceived. She could get to the bottom of it, too. She could send an expedition to search Skull Island. And such an expedition would probably come upon Howden's skeleton, with watch, belt buckle and other identifications near it.

Corrine, Seebree knew, could be a fury of vengeance. When aroused, the woman had a fierce temper. What more could arouse her than to learn that for three years she had been living with her husband's murderer? Or, if Howden had possibly survived, to learn that her marriage with Seebree was illegal! She had entrusted the management of all her vast fortune to Seebree. She had made him president of Howden Motors and a big name in financial circles of New York.

All that could go, like a breath, if Slake talked. He must never talk. Wayne Seebree's lips were set grimly as he stepped out of the bathtub. As he slipped on underwear, his face in the mirror shocked him. It was haggard and as rigid as wax. Pallor replaced his usual rich color of high living. His hair was actually grayer. Damn Slake! Slake must never talk.

Out in the bedroom Slake handed him a dinner shirt, then stood by smirking, hypocritically servile, washing one infernal hand through the other. Seebree wanted to choke him.

"There's something I've been meaning to speak to you about, sir," Slake said in a tone of abject humility.

"Well, what is it?" Seebree braced himself to expect something like a request Slake had made four or five months ago—a two months' leave on full pay.

"I've had a bit of rheumatism, sir, lately," the valet said. "And I'm not as young as I was. So I'm wondering if you'd mind if I retired from service, sir, on the first of next month."

Seebree, half-dressed, turned and stared at him. What was the fellow up to now?

"You want to quit?"

"If you care to put it that way, sir."

SEEBREE was cautiously on guard. Slake might be about to spring the big demand which Seebree had been expecting for three years. Until now there had been nothing but petty blackmail — a measly three hundred dollar job.

"You can do as you please, Slake. If you want to quit—quit."

"I'm thinking of buying a farm, sir, upstate."

"Not a bad idea. Hop to it."

Slake hunched his shoulders, spread his palms in a gesture of self pity. "But I'm a poor man, Mr. Seebree. I have no means to buy a farm. Perhaps you can advance me the money."

"Perhaps I can, Slake." The price of a farm, Seebree thought, would be cheap riddance.

"I've already picked the farm out, sir," Slake said.

"Chicken farm, is it?"

"Oh, no, sir. A stock farm. It's Mr. Van Dorsen's place. He's been a guest here, you know, and I've often heard him speak of it."

Seebree restrained his protests with a supreme effort. The proposition was outrageous. Hugh Van Dorsen main-

tained one of the fanciest farms in the state. It was a show place, stocked with blooded Durhams. Seebree doubted if anything under a cool hundred thousand would tempt Van Dorsen to part with that property.

Which meant that Slake was at last showing his hand. Big stuff. Real blackmail. It would never end, Seebree realized with despond. Slake would start with this, then keep on bleeding him for life.

But Seebree managed to hide his recognition of that fact. Keeping his face unharassed, he said: "We'll see about it, Slake. What did I do with those shirt studs, anyway?"

"Here they are, sir."

"By the way, Slake, I want Riggs to serve Chambertin '11 at dinner this evening. Step down and tell him, will you?"

"Very good, sir." Slake left the room.

Wine for dinner was the last thing in the world which now concerned Seebree, but he wanted desperately to be alone. The nerve of Slake! Wanted a hundred thousand dollar farm, did he? Next he'd be wanting the Empire State building. And he could just about make Seebree say yes, too!

There was only one way out. Wayne Seebree censured himself bitterly for not having taken it at the outset. He must close those smug lips of Slake, forever.

He crossed now to a private desk. With a key, he unlocked a drawer whose contents no one but himself ever touched or saw. Under papers there was a loaded gun. It had been there for nearly three years. No one knew he had it, or could trace it to him. Once he had bought it at a pawn shop, to use on Slake.

Always he had lacked the nerve. Always he had put it off. But the issue was forced now. This very night he must kill Slake.

CHAPTER III.

ERRAND OF MURDER.

AT dinner tonight were only the Seebrees and their house guests, the Gilbert Chardells. Seebree was thankful for that. Usually Corrine had a perfect mob around her.

Estelle Chardell sat across from him, a pale, slight woman with yellow hair hiding her ears. She was an old friend and confidante of Corrine's, but Seebree knew little of Gilbert Chardell. Chardell was a smooth, dark fellow who had appeared from nowhere a year ago and married Estelle. The man was good looking, persuasive, mysterious. Seebree doubted if Estelle herself knew anything about his past.

"But I haven't the faintest idea about the bond market, dear," Corrine was saying to Estelle. "I never bother with business any more. Wayne handles everything."

Gilbert Chardell leaned confidentially toward Seebree. "I got a swell chance to pick up an option on some Long Island shore stuff, Wayne," he said. He added ruefully, "It'd take a quarter million, though. If I could raise it, I'd double it in a month."

The man wanted him to go on his note, Seebree realized, and shied away quickly. "Who do you pick for the Preakness, Gilbert?" he evaded.

A flicker of disappointment came to the long-lashed brown eyes of Chardell. But Corrine took up racing talk brightly. She herself was an accomplished horsewoman.

Seebree's inner mind, all the while, was on Slake. He must do it tonight.

Where? Not here, of course. Not at any place where a shot could be heard.

Corrine's musical voice came to him—"I can hardly wait until summer —so we can go out to Jersey Elms."

The name gave Seebree an inspiration. Jersey Elms was the very place. It was Corrine's country house in the Kittatinny Hills, sixty-odd miles west of New York. It was closed now. Shut up tight, dark, and, being the center of a large timber estate held for speculation, three miles from the nearest neighbor.

If there were only some way to persuade Slake to make a trip, tonight, out to Jersey Elms!

Seebree's mind grappled busily with that problem, while the others chattered about horses, operas and new books. Corrine did most of the chattering. She was brilliant this evening, her hair and cheeks like flames.

"About that option," Chardell said aside to Seebree. "It's a steal, Wayne."

"No doubt," Seebree answered without warmth. Chardell was, he knew, on the verge of making a touch. The man was broke and on the make, no doubt. Smooth, but not smooth enough to put anything over on Wayne Seebree.

"A clean steal, Wayne. If only I could—"

"Fill Mr. Chardell's glass, Riggs. That's right, the Chambertin '11."

Seebree saw Estelle's violet eyes fixed on him. She reminded Seebree of a quiet, yellow cat. Did she realize that her husband was nothing more than a grafter? Probably not. Corrine vouched for her, and Corrine ought to know. According to Corrine, Estelle Chardell had no faults except that she was impressionable and romantic-minded. "She admires *you* perhaps more than she should, Wayne!" Corrine had chided. Rot! thought Seebree.

He jerked his thoughts back to Slake. Suddenly he heard Estelle say, "I'd love to go with you tomorrow, Corrine, but I really haven't a *thing* to wear."

Nothing to wear! Instantly Seebree saw how he could do it. He devised a simple, natural errand which would take the valet, Slake, out to Jersey Elms.

As they arose from the table Corrine asked, "You're going to the theater with us, aren't you Wayne?"

"Sorry, but I can't make the grade," Seebree answered wryly. He pinched her cheek. "That X-valve merger comes up tomorrow. I brought the file home with me, and I'm going over every page of it tonight."

"You see!" Corrine complained to Estelle. "He's a perfect slave. I spent years trying to make him work, and now I can't make him play."

SEEBREE went to the telephone. Within hearing of them all he called his broker.

"How did the market close on X-valve?"

"I can't say, off-hand, Wayne," the broker said.

"Look it up and call me back right away, will you, Sam?"

Seebree then hung up. After seeing Corrine and the Chardells off to the theater, he went up to his rooms. There was an extension phone in his private den adjoining.

He pressed a button, summoning Slake.

"My smoking jacket, Slake. I'm working at home tonight."

"Very good, sir."

Then the telephone rang, as Seebree

was sure it would. It wouldn't take Sam, the broker, more than a few minutes to look up the market on X-valve.

Seebree didn't give a continental about X-valve. The vital thing was that a call should come in the presence of Slake.

"See who it is, Slake."

Slake answered the telephone. "It's your broker," he reported.

"Sam Skelly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

Seebree took the phone and said into the receiver: "Hello, Sam. Seebree talking."

He heard Skelly say, "X-valve closed at par flat, Wayne."

"Thanks, Sam." Seebree heard a click as Skelly hung up.

But Seebree himself did not hang up. With his left thumb he held the hook down and kept on talking.

"Palm Beach, did you say, Sam?"

After a pause—"Well, well. Sounds like music to my tired ears, Sam. And I need it, Sam. I've been working too hard."

After another pause—"When do we start, Sam? Tomorrow morning? Sure I'll go. I'll be on deck with bells on. Barracuda biting? Good! Count me in, Sam."

Now Seebree hung up and turned with a glow toward Slake, who had been standing by all the while.

"We're taking off in the morning for Florida. Early. Better pack our bags tonight, Slake."

Slake was used to these quick trips. "Yes, sir. We go by train?"

"Nope. We'll load ourselves on Sam Skelly's yacht. Round up my hot weather togs, Slake. Tennis rackets and gold clubs. And the fishing stuff, of course. Hot as blazes down there, I'll bet. Better get out all my white ducks and Palm Beaches."

"Sorry, sir. But your hot weather suits are all out at Jersey Elms. You never wear them anywhere else. Your golf and fishing outfits are there, too."

Seebree knew quite well that they were. But he said with a grimace: "The devil they are! Hang it, that puts me in a hole."

"Do you suppose we could find a store open, sir?"

"At this hour Monday night? Of course not. Slake, you'll have to fetch that stuff in from the country."

"Tonight, sir?"

"No help for it, Slake. Take the roadster. It's only sixty-odd miles, and I'll see that you get plenty of sleep tomorrow."

"Very well, sir."

In such matters, the valet was always docile and obedient. He now took two empty traveling bags from a closet.

"Here are the keys to the house out there, Slake. Remember, all my tropic wear, and something suitable for the yacht. And don't forget the sport outfits."

"I know where everything is kept, sir. I put it away myself."

IN a few minutes Slake was gone. Seebree heard him back the roadster out of the garage. Slake, he knew, rarely drove a car. Certainly he was not a speed driver. A train would easily beat him to Jersey Elms.

With his face set in hard, grim lines Wayne Seebree took the pistol from his drawer and put it in his pocket. Then he donned an old trench coat and pulled a cap low over his eyes.

A mirror told him that he still looked like Wayne Seebree; so he found a pair of old-fashioned spectacles and

put them on. They helped. He looked less like himself now. And it was night time. He'd be careful that no one he knew should see him.

A balcony gave from his bedroom. To this came a vine trellis which Seebree now used as a ladder of descent. He walked rapidly four blocks and then hailed a taxi. The taxi took him to the Pennsylvania Station.

Fifteen minutes later he was seated in the smoker of a train, speeding westward across New Jersey. He kept the cap well down over his eyes. This and the glasses mildly disguised him. His ticket read to Stroudsville, Pennsylvania.

Less than two hours out of New York, the train stopped at the town of Kittatinny. From here it was only six miles to Jersey Elms. If he got off, he'd have to walk those six miles. The risk in that was that Slake might beat him to the house. But Seebree knew of a tank five miles further on, where this train always took water. By slipping off at the tank he would need to only walk a mile.

A countryman embarked at Kittatinny. He sat down in the smoker opposite Seebree, unfolded and began reading a newspaper.

The paper, Seebree noted, was the Kittatinny *Herald*. The man sat knee to knee with him reading the last page. Therefore the front page stared Seebree in the eyes. A tall headline startled him.

EAGLE WINS CONVICTION

Eagle! Seebree remembered now that a man of remarkable talents, named Tom Eagle, happened to be district attorney of this rural New Jersey County. The fact frightened him. He'd heard a good deal about Tom Eagle. Thus far in his term of office no one had been able to get away with murder in Eagle's county.

EAGLE! A full-blooded Cherokee Indian, wasn't he? But for all that a brilliant attorney and a graduate of Harvard Law School. He had been pictured to Seebree as a man of six senses who could see with uncanny precision through a dark curtain of crime. Seebree flushed. Why, by the devil's luck, had he chosen to set the stage of his own crime squarely within the jurisdiction of District Attorney Tom Eagle?

"Eagle wins conviction," he read again on the page posed before his eyes.

> Major Tom Eagle, with unimpeachable logic, today brought about the conviction of Paul Standeven, accused in the notorious "Half-Million Murder."
>
> "We are a peaceful community," Major Eagle said to reporters after death sentence was passed on the defendant. "So let the next murderer think twice before he intrudes upon us."

Seebree's hand shook as he lighted a pipe. His own was an errand of murder. Averting his eyes from the print of the paper he stared out the train window. The gun weighed like a shackle in his pocket. Should he go ahead with it?

He must. If he didn't he was ruined anyway. When or where would he ever have a better chance? No human ear would hear the shot. No human eye would see it. In the dark, even Slake wouldn't know what hit him. They would find Slake dead—but how could even Tom Eagle prove anything about it?

Seebree heard the locomotive whistle for the tank. It was now or never, he thought. Pulling the cap lower over his eyes, he arose and went back to the

vestibule. He raised the trap there. When the train jolted to a stop at the tank, he slipped off.

No one saw him. He was sure of that. And outside, a cloud obscured the moon. Thick woods adjoined the right-of-way. Climbing through a barbed fence, Seebree was soon in them. He moved south swiftly, though furtively, like a scurrying shadow. Often he had hunted quail in these woods; he knew every inch of them.

In twenty minutes he came to the lawns of Jersey Elms. The tall, dark house loomed there, utterly devoid of life. Seebree moved from shrub to shrub until he was directly in front of it. No tire tracks on the gravel drive. Therefore Slake had not yet arrived.

Wayne Seebree drew his gun. He stood in ambush back of a lilac, waiting for Slake.

Soon he heard a car coming, far off along the narrow macadam road which led through the woods from Kittatinny. Slake! Seebree knew he had arrived barely in time. He crouched behind the shrub, breathless, yet steeled now to an irrevocable decision.

Three miles to the nearest neighbor, he knew. That should make it absolutely safe. Seebree vaguely recalled that the nearest neighbor was a farmer namd Sawyer. But Sawyer would hardly hear a shot at three miles.

Now a roadster came out of the woods and stopped squarely before the porch of the house. Its lights were on, exposing the only occupant, Slake.

Slake disembarked with the two bags. He fumbled a key from his pocket. Then he moved to the porch steps.

He had a foot on the first step when Seebree stepped out from his shelter. Seebree gave him no time to turn around. He pressed the muzzle of the gun against the valet's back and fired. The bullet tore through Slake, emerging at his breast.

The woods resounded with Slake's scream, then threw back a sharp echo of the shot. Slake fell in a heap on the steps, dying.

Seebree stood petrified with terror. Then he saw the two bags brought along by Slake. They belonged to the Seebree household, and the initials "W. S." were on each of them. To leave them here, Seebree thought frantically, would tie his own name to the crime.

What to do with them? The simplest disposal, he thought, was to put them in the house. Many of his travelling bags were stored in closets there, so two more would not mean anything.

Slake, either dead or dying, lay face down and Seebree saw that a key to the house was clutched in his hand. Seebree could not bear to touch the key. But he had a key of his own on a ring. He unlocked the front door with it. Then he entered with the empty luggage.

He groped to a baggage closet under the hall stairs and tossed the empty bags into it. Then quickly he retreated from the house, locking the door after him.

THE roadster which had brought Slake here was parked in the drive. Because it was his own car, it might tend to incriminate him. Therefore he must take it away.

Also it would provide transportation back to New York. He could not depend on catching a train at the tank. And if he walked six miles to Kittatinny, it would be too slow a retreat.

Therefore Wayne Seebree embarked promptly in the roadster and drove away. He took the same route by

which Slake had arrived, a narrow macadam pavement through the woods, with many turns and grades.

Seebree still had the gun. He must get rid of it. He could toss it into the ditch beside the road. There it might be found later, but what of it? No one could identify it as Seebree's.

When he had driven about three miles, Seebree stopped. He wiped his finger marks from the gun and then threw it. He heard it land in leaves at the edge of the wood.

Then he drove on around a curve. A farmhouse loomed to the left of him, with a mailbox and a picket gate at the roadside. The house was lighted. Odd that a farmhouse should be lighted this late, Seebree thought. He regretted throwing the gun away so close to it. He slowed down almost to a stop, half of a mind to go back and hide the weapon more securely.

But that, he decided, would lose valuable time. So he stepped on the gas. He sped three miles to the town of Kittatinny. After traversing it by a dark backstreet, he took a through pavement to New York.

Seebree drove like the wind now. He covered fifty miles in as many minutes.

At exactly half an hour after midnight he parked the roadster in his Riverside Drive garage. The grounds were dark. So was Corinne's suite on the second floor. Seebree presumed that she hadn't yet returned from the theater. Corrine generally took in a night club or two after a show.

Seebree climbed the trellis to the balcony of his own room. Inside, he removed the cravanette, the cap, the old fashioned spectacles, and put them where they belonged. He stood now in his dinner suit.

After making a litter of letters on his desk, he sat down there and rang a bell.

When Riggs came in response, he found Seebree huddled over a mass of correspondence and looking very tired.

"Whisky and soda, please, Riggs."

Riggs brought whisky and soda.

Twenty minutes later Seebree heard the return of his wife. Corrine stopped by for a minute and told him about the show. She eyed the papers on his desk with disapproval. "You'll kill yourself working like this, Wayne," she said.

Seebree yawned and stretched. "By the way, Corrine, since you insisted, I fired Slake."

"You did? What a relief! That man always gave me the shivers. When is he leaving, Wayne?"

"Tomorrow. I gave him a month's pay in advance and told him to leave immediately. He said some of his things are out at Jersey Elms, and would I mind if he went after them."

"He went after them tonight?"

"I suppose so," Seebree said, and yawned again.

CHAPTER IV.

MAJOR EAGLE.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY TOM EAGLE arrived at his courthouse office early, as usual, and found Nell Hope already there. Miss Hope was his efficient secretary.

"Anything new?" Eagle inquired. He hoped there wouldn't be. The Standeven prosecution had all but exhausted him.

Nell Hope sorted through a pile of mail.

"Here's a request for you to address the national convention of scoutmasters next month, Major."

Eagle shook back his mass of straight, loose black hair and smiled. "Answer yes, Miss Hope." He was state commander of the Boy Scouts, and gave more time to them than he could really afford.

"And here's a notice of the twenty-fifth reunion of your Harvard Law class."

"It's good to remember old friends," Eagle answered softly. "But I'm afraid I can't go."

"And here," the girl said, "is an urgent request for you to referee a track meet at Carlisle."

The black eyes of the district attorney brightened. He himself at Carlisle had been an All-American fullback, and later twice the decathlon winner at Olympic games. "Answer yes," he said.

"And here's one, Major, from the department of justice at Washington, thanking you for—"

Nell Hope was interrupted by a small, knotty man in a frayed felt hat who burst unceremoniously into the office.

"She's dead, Mr. Eagle," he gasped. "I found her across the road in the woods."

Eagle stood up straight and alert. He recognized the caller as a farmer named Alvin Sawyer who lived three miles west of town on a narrow macadam road.

A frantic despair was on Sawyer's face. He clutched at Eagle's arm and repeated, "I found her in the woods."

"Found whom?" Eagle asked gently.

"My daughter Flora. She's shot."

"Dead?"

"Yes," Sawyer said wretchedly. Eagle eased him into a chair. He saw that the farmer was utterly stricken with grief and on the verge of collapse.

"Your farm is on a woods road three miles west, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I never harmed anyone. Neither did Flora." Sawyer dropped his face to his hands in complete dejection.

"When," Eagle asked, "did you see your daughter alive?"

"Last night at bedtime. This morning she wasn't in her room. I hunted for her. Found her across the road—shot."

"You didn't hear her go out?"

"No."

"Was there a gun near her?"

"I didn't see any. We don't keep one in the house."

"Come, I'll go with you." Eagle put a compassionate hand on Sawyer's shoulder. "Telephone the coroner and the sheriff, Miss Hope. Ask them to follow."

Eagle led the farmer outside to an automobile. In a few minutes they were driving westerly along an infrequently used macadam.

Bleak despair marked Sawyer's face. It was an honest face, Eagle thought. The man was dressed in shabby denims and his hands were toil-hardened. Eagle knew him to hold a good reputation in the community. It was clear, also, that his present grief was genuine.

Three miles out of town they came to the gate of Sawyer's farm. It was a stony piece of land, mostly wooded pasture. The roof of the house needed shingles, and Eagle noted that live stock in the corral was underfed. Sawyer was obviously a poor countryman who found existence a hard struggle.

EAGLE would have stopped at the gate, but Sawyer told him to drive on a little way. "Just around that bend," he said.

They drove on around a bend of the road.

"Here's the place," asserted Sawyer. Eagle stopped the car and they got out.

Scrub oak and hickory came to the south ditch of the road. No fence was there. The farmer led Eagle a score of paces into the woods.

"There she is," Sawyer said.

A pretty, brown-haired country girl of about twenty-five years lay lifeless on the ground. Eagle saw at once that she had been shot through the chest at close range. Kneeling, he saw powder burns on her dress. No firearm was in evidence. But for that, it would have looked like suicide.

Sawyer squatted with his back to a tree. He covered his face and mourned audibly.

"It ain't right!" he complained wretchedly. "Flora never harmed nobody. It ain't right I should lose her."

"Did she keep company with a man?"

"They was nobody regular," Sawyer said.

"Did a man call on her last night?"

"No." The stricken father spoke the word quickly. So quickly that Eagle wondered for the first time if he might not be holding something back. Discounting the grief which now lined the man's hard, knotty face, Eagle also saw stubbornness there. And a fierce pride. Certainly the man had loved his daughter. It occurred to Eagle that if any disgraceful circumstance were connected with her death, this father might deny it even under oath.

"Please do not move," Eagle said, "while I look for footprints."

The ground was so hard and stony that footprints would not readily be evident. But Eagle was an Indian. His eyes were uncommonly sharp; from his tribal ancestors he drew an exceptional talent for reading signs in the woods. Now he was in his element as he crouched low and began a search for prints.

Although others would have missed it, he quickly saw the mark of a woman's heel. Near it he found the sole print of a man. He measured these prints, then compared them with the footwear of Alvin Sawyer and of the dead girl.

"Hers and yours," he said. That much was to be expected, since Sawyer had found the girl here this morning.

Eagle continued a meticulous search. If it wasn't suicide, the murderer must have been here too. Eagle dropped to his hands and knees. He crawled, examining every inch of the ground nearby. He moved in wider and wider circles about the spot, overlooking no leaf, scarred stone, or tuft of grass. He was thankful that the coroner and sheriff were not here yet. Always District Attorney Eagle liked to read his own clues, undisturbed, from the tracks of crime. Tracks were his hobby. Although a brilliant prosecutor, first of all he was an Indian. Footprints in the forest were, to Eagle, likely to be an open book.

HERE, however, they were sparse and difficult. He found only a few which were complete. In most cases there was nothing but a crushed leaf or bent stem of grass. Such prints as he did find appeared to match with either the shoe of Sawyer or of his daughter.

Still Eagle persisted, circling wider all the while. Finally, in a bed of oak leaves, he found a gun. It was a .38 revolver and had been fired twice. He allowed the weapon to remain as found until the arrival of other county officers.

Now he stepped the distance to the body and found it twenty paces. About sixty feet. Could the girl have committed suicide and then, in revulsion at her act and with the reflex of her upflung arm, have thrown the weapon that far?

"Was your daughter despondent over anything?" Eagle asked Sawyer.

"You mean did she kill herself?" Sawyer cried. "No. She wouldn't. She couldn't. She didn't."

Eagle fixed a keen gaze on him. He stood straight and immobile for a moment, his high, dark cheekbones flushed. Could a daughter have disgraced the family name, thus leading an outraged father to kill her? After a penetrating appraisal of Sawyer, Eagle discarded the idea.

Then he observed that an oak tree of thick bole stood directly between the body and the pistol. Therefore the girl, had she thrown the gun in that direction as she fell, would have hit the tree with it. Some other person must have been here. A murderer.

Yet there was no ghost of a footprint to indicate such a person. Possibly the girl had been shot out in the road and had run this far before falling. Eagle had known a deer, shot through the heart, to run a half-mile. Could a human, so wounded, have run twenty paces?

This one hadn't. For now Eagle's searching eyes made out a scar on the bark of the tree nearest the body. Probing at the scar, he found it to be the hole made by a bullet. The bullet had passed entirely through Flora Sawyer's body. Now it was embedded, breast high, in a tree back of her.

"Hello, there, Major!" It was Sheriff Jarlow's voice booming from the road.

Jarlow had just driven up with Coroner DeQuince. A second car now arrived, and from this disembarked a deputy named Pryde, a fingerprint man and a photographer.

"Well, Major!" DeQuince said ungraciously. "If you got another murder on your hands already, it means that spiel you made in court yesterday didn't do much good."

Jarlow, fat and lazy, stood with his thumbs hooked in his vest and gazed down at the dead girl. "Humph! Flora Sawyer! Last person in the county I'd figure anyone 'd go gunnin' for!" Then he saw Sawyer hunched dejectedly by a tree. "Sorry, Alvin. Didn't see you at first."

"Tracks, Major?" DeQuince asked briskly.

"Her father found her this way," Eagle said. "I find her tracks and his."

"Don't see how you could find anything at all on ground like this," DeQuince said. He stooped to examine the wound.

"Maybe she was shot by someone in a tree," Deputy Pryde suggested.

"No, the shot went level," Eagle said. "It passed through her heart, then struck a tree breast-high." He indicated the bullet hole in the tree.

"Easy to dig out the slug," Jarlow said. "But where's the gun?"

EAGLE took them to the gun. The fingerprint man handled it first. He quickly reported that the weapon had been wiped free of prints.

"Proves she didn't shoot herself," Pryde said, "even if she could have tossed the rod this far. She's not wearin' gloves, I notice."

"The girl lived alone with her father?" Eagle asked.

"Most of the time," Pryde said. He had known the Sawyers well. "There's a son named Floyd Sawyer. But he

doesn't stay home much. Haven't seen him since last Christmas."

"Alvin Sawyer is a widower?"

"Yes. He came here from Nebraska, where his wife's buried. Alvin brought up Flora and Floyd right on this farm. Floyd, he's a born tramp. Always driftin' around the country. Comes home about once a year and holds down a job a little while, then off he goes again."

"The girl and her father got along all right?"

"Sure. Alvin thought the world and all of her. Don't be gettin' the idea he shot her, Major. Alvin Sawyer'd 'a' cut off his right arm first."

"Flora kept house for him the year around, did she?"

"All but the summer months. July and August she had a job as kitchen maid at the Seebree's."

"You mean Wayne Seebree's country house three miles on down this macadam?"

"That's it. But the place is closed up now."

"How do you know?"

Pryde shrugged. "It always is, this time a year."

Jarlow waddled up. "Looks like a jealousy shooting to me," he said. "She was probably keepin' company with two men, an' one of them got sore about it."

Eagle returned to Sawyer and made further inquiry. The farmer emphatically denied the theory offered by Sheriff Jarlow.

Nevertheless the sheriff clung to it. "Might 've been one o' the summer servants at that big house down the road. She was kitchen maid there, I understand."

"Do you know any of the Seebree household?" Eagle asked Sawyer.

Sawyer said that he did not. He had never paid any attention to those city folks, he said. "Floyd, last time he was to home, got a job drivin' a car for one of 'em. But it didn't last long."

"You mean your son used to be chauffeur for the Seebrees?"

"No. The name was Chardell, I think. They come avisitin' the Seebrees last summer, these Chardells did, and Flora came home one night and said she heard Chardell wanted someone to drive his car. Floyd applied for the job and held it down awhile last fall."

Eagle left the group and walked to the Sawyer farmhouse. A rural telephone was installed there. Ringing Central at the county-seat, Eagle asked to be connected with the Wayne Seebree country place.

"You mean Jersey Elms?" Central asked. "I don't think anyone's there, but I'll try."

A persistent ring failed to bring response from Jersey Elms.

"Very well," Eagle said. "Please put through a call to Wayne Seebree's residence in New York."

"I'll have it through in a shake, Major," Central promised.

EVERY particular of the dead girl's background must be inquired into, Eagle decided. He was thorough always, and had the racial patience of an Indian. He could begin with Mrs. Wayne Seebree. If the girl had had either a quarrel or a sentimental intrigue with one of the other summer servants, Mrs. Seebree might know of it.

Waiting on the call, Eagle looked about the house. There were only four rooms. A bedroom each for father, daughter and son, and a kitchen. The father's bed was disarranged, the daughter's not. The son's

room seemed not to have been occupied for many months. The kitchen was tidy.

On the kitchen table lay a card, blank except for a number written in pencil. The number was N.Y. 88-7753. An automobile license number, Eagle supposed. Without any expectation that it would mean anything, he nevertheless made a note of it.

In a short while his call to New York went through. Riggs, the Seebree butler, spoke to him.

"I'm Eagle," he said, "district attorney at Kittatinny. Will you please call Mr. Seebree to the telephone?"

"He just left for his office, sir," Riggs said. "The madam is here, though."

Corrine Seebree was promptly on the wire. And Eagle, after introducing himself, asked, "You employed a kitchen maid last summer named Flora Sawyer?"

"You mean out at Jersey Elms? Why, yes. That is we had a country girl named Flora. I never did hear her last name. She's worked for us there the last three or four seasons."

"She was shot last night," Eagle announced.

"How awful! Is it serious?"

"She's dead."

"Oh! I'm horribly distressed to hear about it. Poor Flora!"

"I'm trying to find out all I can about her, Mrs. Seebree. Can you help me?"

"No—o, I'm afraid not, Mr. Eagle."

"She had no trouble of any kind last summer?"

"None that I was aware of."

"Love affairs?"

"If so, they escaped me."

"No one has been at Jersey Elms since last August?"

"Not a soul, Mr. Eagle. That is, not until last night."

"Last night?" Eagle asked quickly. "Who was there last night?"

"Mr. Seebree discharged his valet, a man named Slake. Slake said he had a few things to get at Jersey Elms, and would go out after them."

"Did he go?"

"I suppose so. Wait, I'll ask Riggs."

After a delay Mrs. Seebree returned to the telephone.

"Riggs doesn't know. He says he hasn't seen Slake since supper time last evening."

"Is Slake there now?"

"He's not here. I've really no idea where he is. All I know is that Mr. Seebree gave him a month's pay in advance and told him he could leave immediately."

"May I ask why Mr. Seebree discharged him?"

"Because I've been asking him to do so for a long time. I simply didn't like or trust Slake."

"You believe that Slake went to Jersey Elms last evening and has not returned?"

"He told my husband he was going there and he's not here now. That's all I can say, Mr. Eagle."

"If he came out to Jersey Elms, would he drive or take a train?"

"He might do either. I'm sure I don't know."

"Thank you, Mrs. Seebree."

EAGLE left the farmhouse and returned to the scene of Flora Sawyer's tragedy. There he called Sheriff Jarlow aside and gave him the information about Slake.

"A valet, huh?" Jarlow said. "Then it looks like I had the right slant, Major. The valet was fired.

Let's say he had an affair last summer with a good looking kitchen maid. This farm was right on his way to Jersey Elms. So he stopped by and tried to get her to go along with him. She wouldn't. They quarreled, and he shot her."

"We can see if there's any evidence that he arrived at Jersey Elms," Eagle suggested.

Leaving Coroner DeQuince in charge here, Eagle embarked in a car with Jarlow. After a three mile drive they were at a tall, white country house with green shutters, wide lawns, tennis courts, and completely surrounded by woods.

"Look!" cried Jarlow. He pointed to a thing on the porch steps.

A dead man lay sprawled there. Cards and letters in his pocket identified him as Wayne Seebree's valet, Slake.

CHAPTER V.

THE CRIMES CONNECT.

JARLOW stood with pursed lips, staring at the corpse. "I guess I was wrong, Major," he admitted. "But wait. No, I was right. Slake shot the girl, then came along here. The girl's father followed and shot Slake."

That, Eagle conceded, might account for his vague impression that Sawyer was holding something back. If Jarlow was right, Sawyer could not be expected to admit his own part of it. He would naturally report the death of his daughter. Beyond that, if he himself had killed the killer, he would say nothing.

"He was shot through the back!" Jarlow exclaimed.

And Eagle saw a key which was clutched in the dead man's hand. Probably it was the key to this house. The entire picture looked very much as though Slake, chased by a vengeful pursuer, had been racing up these steps to take shelter in the house. The key was in his hand, ready to unlock the door.

But the pursuer must have been close on his heels, Eagle thought. For Slake was not only shot in the back, but the shot had been fired almost at contact.

Eagle tested the rigidity of Slake's arm. Rigor mortis had set in many hours ago, he decided.

"We'll have to ask the coroner about that. But from the look of him Slake had been dead longer than the girl. If so," Eagle continued, "he couldn't have killed her."

"There's where the bullet went in, Major." Jarlow was pointing to a hole in the porch wall. "We can dig the slug out, then frisk Sawyer's house for a gun to fit it."

"Possibly it will match the gun we've already found," Eagle said. "But first we must fix the time of Slake's death. Will you please get DeQuince here right away?"

"Okay, Major." The sheriff hoisted his bulk back into the car and drove toward the Sawyer farm.

Eagle, left alone, examined the gravel drive for tire tracks. He saw one set of them, aside from the tracks just made by Jarlow's car. Recently another car had been parked in front of these porch steps. Eagle saw that it had turned around and driven back to the macadam road.

Eagle felt sure that either Slake or Slake's murderer had arrived in that car. Since the car was gone and Slake were here dead, it seemed clear that Slake's murderer had driven it away.

Mounting the steps, Eagle rang the

doorbell. No one answered. The door was locked. Eagle had no doubt but that the key in the dead man's hand would fit it. But he preferred not to touch that key until it was seen by the coroner.

From his pocket the district attorney produced a skeleton key. It did not fit the front door of this house. But it did fit the rear door. Eagle entered by way of the kitchen.

He found the house gloomy, with all shades drawn. Rugs were dusty, as would be expected of a house closed since August.

Eagle went forward to the front hall and lighted it by raising a shade. What he wanted to know was whether Slake had been shot before or after entering the house. According to Mrs. Seebree, the discharged valet had come here after sundry of his personal effects.

Dust on the front hall rug revealed that a man had entered by the front door. The footprints were incomplete and faint, but the keen eyes of Eagle were able to trace them. They led directly from the front door to a closet under the stairs.

THE knob of the front door was shiny, fingerprintless. Eagle made certain of that before touching it himself. Then he opened the closet and looked in. He saw a small trunk, two suitcases and three Gladstone bags. A baggage closet. Slake, he presumed, had come here for a bag of his own things.

If so, where was it now? Had a murderer made off with it?

The two suitcases in the closet, Eagle found, were empty. So were the Gladstone bags. All bore the initials of Wayne Seebree, which was to be expected. The trunk was packed with window curtains.

Dust tracks of the intruder could only be found between the main entrance and the closet door. It checked with the testimony of Mrs. Seebree. Slake, last summer, must have left a parcel of his belongings in this closet. Being discharged, he must have come here for it. But it did not check with Jarlow's idea that the father of a murdered girl had chased Slake, catching up with and shooting him on the porch steps.

Eagle withdrew from the house by the back door, locking it after him. He found the garage empty. No tire tracks in the dust indicated that a car had entered or emerged from it last night. Eagle circled the house for further evidence of any kind, but found nothing.

Then Jarlow drove up with Coroner DeQuince.

"Here's the bullet in the Flora Sawyer case," DeQuince announced. He displayed a mushroomed slug. "I probed it out of that tree."

"The bullet in the Slake case is just as accessible," Eagle said. "But first, how long has he been dead?"

DeQuince set to work. In a little while he reported: "I'm not more than an hour wrong when I say this man died between ten and eleven last night."

"And Flora Sawyer?"

"Death in her case occurred between three and four o'clock this morning."

"Which proves that Slake, being dead himself at that hour, did not kill her," Eagle said. "Now about the bullets. Let's get them under a glass as soon as possible."

"I'll have this other one in jig time," the fat sheriff said. He was already digging at the hole in the porch wall.

DeQuince searched the pockets of

Slake without finding anything of interest. Finally he took the key from the dead man's hand and tried it in the front door of the house. The key fit.

"But the key doesn't connect him with the Sawyer girl," he muttered. "I'll bet the two jobs are connected, though, some way."

It was an astonishing coincidence if they were not, Eagle thought.

When DeQuince had completed his examination, they put the body of Slake in an automobile and drove back to Sawyer's. Flora Sawyer by then had been removed from the woods and placed on a bed in the farmhouse. Alvin Sawyer sat by her, dazed and dejected.

"Did you hear a car pass during the night?" Eagle inquired.

THE farmer looked up, stared dumbly for a moment, then shook his head. "I work hard and I sleep sound," he said.

"Was Flora up when you went to bed?"

"Yes, she was reading in the kitchen."

DeQuince and Jarlow also had questions, but they were fruitless.

An hour later Eagle was seated at his desk in the courthouse. Before him lay four exhibits.

One was the .38 revolver picked up about twenty paces from the body of Flora Sawyer.

The other three were mushroomed bullets.

The bullets were labelled one, two and three.

"Number one," Eagle explained to Nell Hope who stood at his elbow, "is the bullet that killed Slake. Number two killed the girl about five hours later. Number three is a test shot, from this same .38, which Jarlow fired into a sack of cotton waste."

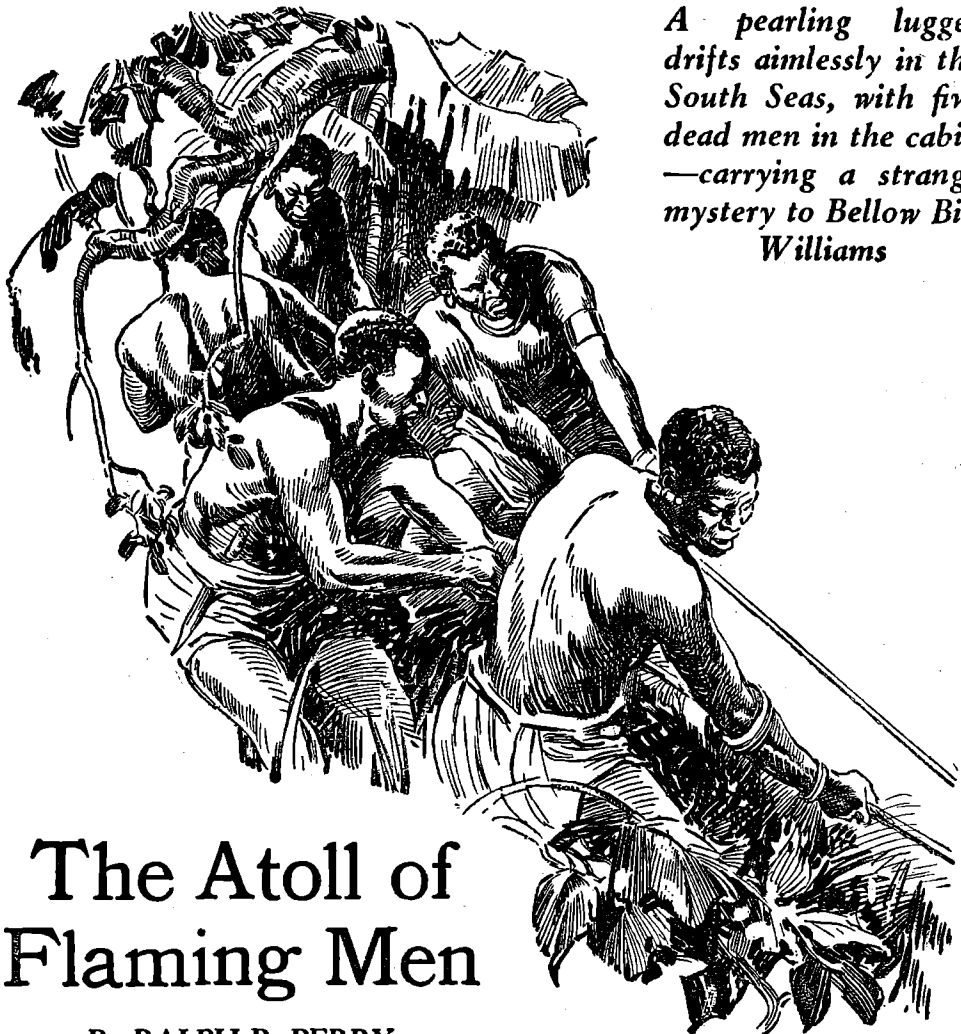
The county's ballistic expert was out, but Eagle had borrowed his tools. Before him was a powerful microscope which Eagle's keen eyesight made even more efficacious. Under its glass he inspected the bullets one by one. He noted every ridge in each surface. No mark of deformation, however slight, escaped him.

After lengthy inspections he said, "The same gun killed both of them, Miss Hope."

"Are you sure of it, Major?"

"Yes. And the gun is this .38."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



A pearling lugger drifts aimlessly in the South Seas, with five dead men in the cabin —carrying a strange mystery to Bellow Bill Williams

The Atoll of Flaming Men

By RALPH R. PERRY

Author of "The Golden Oyster," "Fangs of the Fetish," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE CABIN OF GREEN FIRE.

BELLOW BILL WILLIAMS used every sailor's trick he knew to reach the derelict before sunset. But he could not make a breeze, and the sun was low when he sighted the pearling lugger—hove-to, as though there was a hand at the wheel, drifting slowly to leeward with a diver's life line and air hose angling over the side, as though the lugger was on the pearling grounds and the diver was walking along the bottom snatching up shell with both hands.

But this was not the pearling grounds. It was the open sea. If that diver was on the bottom he was five hundred fathoms down. He wasn't, of course. He was twisting round and round at the end of that life line, drowned and dead, with a blue face and popping eyes.

Something had made his shipmates abandon him—suddenly. Even the most callous and brutal murderer would have hauled up that dangling body that was twisting slowly round and round—to dispose of its mute accusation, if for no other reason. And no partner will desert an air pump while he can move a finger.

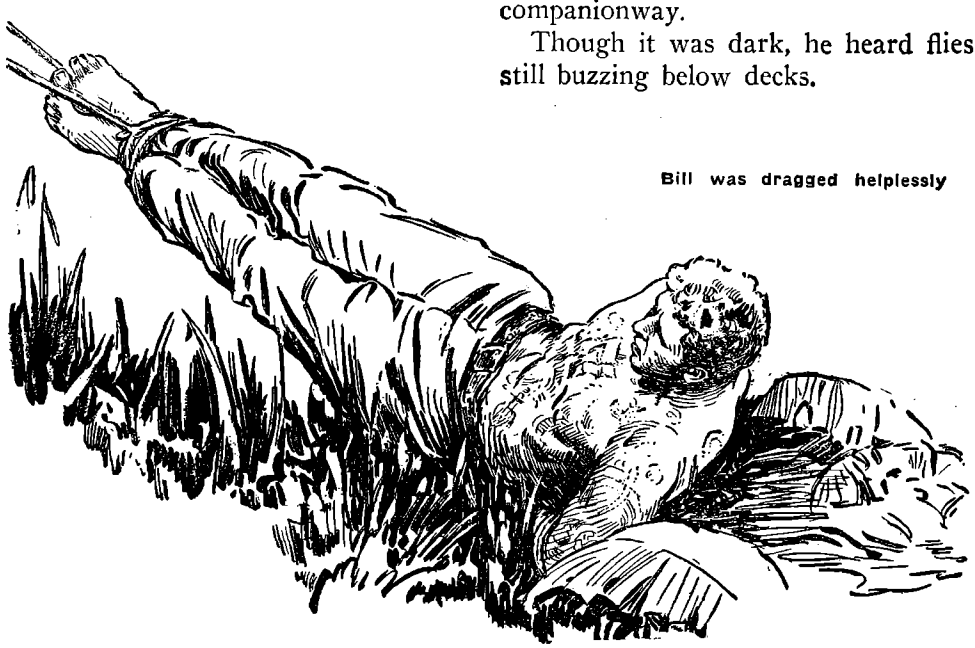
Yet that something had not damaged the ship. She sailed on, though her bow was pointed toward no port in the South Seas. Behind her the sun, setting through cirrus clouds, streaked the sky with bright red knives and patches of scarlet. Jet-black against the sunset that revealed every rope and spar, the lugger drifted along alone.

Bellow Bill was alone. He was a big man, with a voice that boomed like surf. A curly-headed, blue-eyed pearling skipper; six foot three and broad as a door, tattooed from wrists to shoulders and waist to chin with designs that did not leave a square inch of him undecorated. He could say, as a simple matter of fact, that he had never met a stronger man. He could boast—which he did rarely, and only when he was very drunk—that he liked going where other men wouldn't. He knew the South Seas from New Guinea to Papeete, and there were many scars in his tattooed hide, from bushmen's spears as well as white men's bullets.

But he did not want to board that lugger in the dark if he could help it. However, the sun dipped below the sea before he could bring his own schooner alongside, and the prompt darkness of the tropics left him no choice. A few stars were out when he hauled in the life line—finding, as he had expected, a man at the end of it. Bill did not unscrew the face plate. Time enough for that. He moved, with a reluctance that was pure instinct, toward the open companionway.

Though it was dark, he heard flies still buzzing below decks.

Novelette—Complete



Bill was dragged helplessly

"Not storm, or the ship would be smashed up. Not pirates, or the crew would have died on deck," Bill rumbled in the booming voice, like the low notes of an organ or the mutter of distant surf, which had given him his nickname. He wanted at that moment to hear himself speak, for most clearly he realized what any sensible sailorman ought to do.

Slide the hatch on that companionway and lock it. Tow the lugger back to the nearest port, and turn her over as she was to the authorities for investigation. Runaloro, a small atoll that was a pearler's rendezvous, was within three hours' sail. Why stick a nose into an ugly business that was no concern of his?

"Since when did that bother you? Get down there, you tattooed ape!" Bill growled at himself, and swung down the companionway—landing, for all his bulk, as lightly as a cat, with bent knees and doubled fists. He was expecting something out of the common. But nevertheless—

"Hell's *fire!*" he roared.

AT first glance it seemed exactly that. In the pitch darkness of the cabin, scattered on the deck close to his feet, floating in mid-air as high as his waist, unearthly greenish lights glowed and waned, as breath comes and goes upon a window pane. Those points of chill green flame outlined faces in the dark—the faces of three dead men.

Bill reached down. His groping fingers touched a naked shoulder, oily and cold. He started as though he had touched a snake, stepped carefully over the prone body, and with fingers that shook, lighted the hurricane lantern that swung over the table in the center of the cabin.

As the wick spluttered and caught, it revealed, not three corpses, but five. Seated in a chair facing Bill across the table was a young white man with blue eyes and sun-bleached hair. He was handsome, and not over twenty-five.

The other four were all sprawled on the deck, and were natives. But—what made the muscles along Bill's back crawl—of the five, only one bore a visible wound. That it should be a relief to look at a man shot twice through the chest seemed strange, but it was a fact.

That was at least comprehensible—the rest was not.

Bellow Bill Williams reached for the fine-cut chewing tobacco that he carried loose in his hip pocket and filled his cheek. He could reconstruct the scene, up to a point. Beyond that even his vast knowledge of the *devil-devil* societies of Melanesian villages, which are founded and supported by murder and grisly superstitions, offered no parallel. Something here was new, and neither civilized nor savage, but the worst of both.

For the blond white man was bound in his chair. His right shoe had been ripped off. Scorched skin between his big and first toe, and the charred mark of a cigarette on the deck, was evidence of torture that had succeeded in its purpose.

For his last act had been to open a secret drawer cleverly concealed in the cabin table. Near his hand was a cloth bag in which pearls—big pearls and an astonishing number of them—nestled in a packing of kapok.

So far so good. Pearl pirates and torture. Ugly, but simple.

The native who had been shot had evidently been manning the air pump. He lay there where the impact of the bullets had knocked him, close to the

foot of the companionway. That he had heard the noise when his skipper was attacked and rushed below, trusting to the reserve pressure in the pump to sustain the diver for a few minutes, was a simple guess.

Everything else was a headache. Three powerful and ugly-looking pearl pirates had been in complete control of the lugger after those shots were fired. Then they had died, suddenly. It was as though a giant hand had flung them in three different directions away from the table. And there wasn't so much as a pin scratch on any of them, for Bellow Bill looked with grim care.

PUZZLE NUMBER TWO was that the pirates had smeared their faces with some queer stuff that glowed greenishly in the dark. It had been wet at the time, for it was curling away from their skin now in strips.

The deck was littered with broken bits of the stuff. It was translucent and curled up at the edges like a thin sheet of dried gelatine. They hadn't come aboard with that stuff on their faces. The greenest pearling skipper would not have let such visitors on his lugger. And where was the boat they'd come in, anyhow?

Bellow Bill gave that one up, too. He put the bag of pearls in his pocket, and searched for the lugger's log. There wasn't any. There wasn't even a letter or ship's clearance papers to identify the dead skipper, and there wasn't anything in his pockets except a package of cigarettes and the broken half of a sixpence with a hole drilled through it so that it could be worn around the neck. English sailors frequently break a sixpence and give the other half to a girl.

The murdered deck hand wore a crescent-shaped piece of green glass—probably the bottom of a beer bottle with the edges smoothed by being tumbled about by the waves on some beach—thrust into the elongated lobe of his right ear. Which wasn't much of a means of identification, either.

The men with smeared faces wore nothing but *lava-lavas,* and a Melanesian doesn't remove his amulet unless he's under the protection of some boss devil. He believes too implicitly in too many evil spirits. Of the three, one had a skull that came almost to a point under the frizzled, kinky hair. Some one at Runaloro might know who Pointed Skull was.

Or might not, or might be afraid to say. There would be no British Resident on so small an atoll. Probably no official at all; and the lack of a log book—which could hardly have been destroyed by the pirates—was as startling to a sailor like Bellow Bill as the cold green light that had illuminated the faces of the corpses.

Pearlers were careless, but not that careless.

Bill shifted his quid. The face of the blond young Englishman, staring at him rigidly from across the narrow table, had a mute and desperate appeal. It was a decent, likable face. "I held out as long as I could, white man," it seemed to say. "They were a slimy gang, and they jumped me so suddenly I didn't know what to expect."

"Lad, you got nothing on me," Bill rumbled aloud. "I don't know what to expect, either, but I'm carrying on." He grinned, and into his blue eyes came dancing golden flecks. He smelled battle, and long odds, and a wily, diabolical enemy.

The prospect appealed to him. "But I think, fella," he remarked in the straightforward tone that he might

have used to a living man, "that I'd better not work along normal lines, either. There's so many queer slants in this that I'm going to put in a few more."

CHAPTER II.

THE SHIP FROM NOWHERE.

HE began by closing the secret compartment in the table and putting the bag of pearls in their kapok packing in his pocket. Next he cut the lashings that bound the dead Englishman, but left him sitting in his chair.

Finally he went on deck, threw the lashings overboard, disconnected and coiled the life line and air line, and carried the diver down to the cabin. Bill left the corpse, still in its suit, sitting on the deck with its back against the forward bulkhead. When he left the cabin he closed but did not lock the companionway slide.

On deck, after this was done, the lugger looked normal in every respect. Below decks—Bill's neck crawled at the memory of what the first person to go below would see. He planned, moreover, that that person would be utterly unprepared for the sight; and he had removed everything that gave a reasonable explanation of those glowing, scabrous corpses.

What in hell made that cold green fire, anyhow? Why were the faces smeared with such stuff? Bill chewed over that all through the night, while he sailed toward Runaloro with the lugger in tow.

The distance was not great. In the dark hour before dawn, when sleep is deepest and men suddenly awakened are least likely to have their wits about them, he made out the white line of the surf on the reef of the atoll. It was a half mile or so ahead. The land itself he could not see, and even in the starlight his schooner and the lugger behind it would be invisible to the keenest eyes ashore. Bellow Bill Williams grinned like a small boy about to play a particularly startling practical joke.

He hove-to, boarded the lugger again, and trimmed the sails and lashed the wheel so that the lugger moved slowly ahead. As it gathered way he dove overboard and swam back to his own schooner, but the lugger sailed on in the gentle breeze.

No hand on the helm...a crew of corpses in the cabin, three of them with faces that flamed...he could still call to mind a vivid picture of the face of the native with the pointed skull. The lugger would crash on the reef, of course, and the population of the atoll would come to examine the wreck. If those who had guilty knowledge could keep a poker face in that cabin they were superhuman.

Grinning, Bill swung over the rail and picked a pair of binoculars from the rack. They were the best glasses in the South Seas. Their previous owner had waited at the top of a shaft, with a gun and a pack of dingoes, for Bill to climb to the surface. That had been a narrow squeak, but those glasses gathered every faint glimmer of light, and seemed to bring the line of surf within a hundred yards.

Bill watched the lugger sailing on, saw it strike with a crash that must be audible on shore, which was to leeward, though he could not hear it. He waited for a lantern or torch to appear on the inner beach.

Waited...and waited. After a half hour the sky commenced to pale. The lugger, pounding gently on the coral,

had only swung broadside to the reef. The thing was unnatural. Those men ashore were nine-tenths of them sailors. The crash of a hull against the reef would certainly have awakened some of them. Could they *all* be in a drunken stupor?

No—*for suddenly the lugger began to move!* Suddenly the bow turned into the wind, which was a job for a powerful boat's crew. Ghostlike, the sails shifted and the lugger moved again toward the open sea. Not a pin point of light had shown until then, but suddenly there was a red glow. Not on the lugger's deck, but in the cabin. A curl of flame that licked through a seam, caught on a tarred rope and twisted up the rigging.

WITH an oath Bill dropped his glasses and got his schooner under way, but the fire had been set far too well for him to have any chance of getting alongside and extinguishing it. Within minutes that twist of flame became a column that roared upward through an *open* companionway. Sails blazed and fell in a shower of sparks, lighting the sea so that Bill's schooner was revealed.

He sailed as close to the lugger as he dared, as though he were trying to give aid or effect a rescue, but even he did not care to board. Grim-faced, swearing under his breath, he hove-to until fire was gushing from every hatch and porthole, until it was obvious that the lugger was going to burn to the water's edge and then sink to the bottom because of the weight of her ballast. The water off the reef was deep—too deep to recover even a charred body.

"Some one was damned wide awake, and able to get plenty of help," Bill rumbled. "Well — what made you think this was going to be simple, you damned fool?"

He steered his schooner toward the entrance to the harbor. There were lanterns and torches moving along the beach now—plenty of them. As he entered the lagoon he noted that there were many of the dugouts and outriggers used by native skin-divers in pearl fishing, but no luggers or schooners that would presumably belong to white men.

He dropped anchor. "Ahoy!" he sung out in his enormous voice. Far away a bird, roused by that stentorian hail, squawked an answer. "Did the crew of that lugger swim ashore all right? I was cruising by, and no one left her at sea."

On the beach there was a long pause. Lanterns and torches drew together.

"What crew?" a man's voice shouted back in English that was slightly but curiously and definitely accented. It was as deep a bass voice as Bill's own, and he could not place the singsong accent. It was not Chinese, nor Australian, nor native.

"The crew of that burning lugger, of course!" Bill boomed. "What ship was that, and who owned her?"

"How do we know? Didn't you see the name on her stern?"

"Painted out," roared Bill. "Hell, man, didn't you recognize her? She sailed from your lagoon, didn't she?"

A pause. A very brief pause while the owner of that bass voice filled his lungs.

"Why, no. She was skirting the reef when we caught sight of the fire," he lied. "We thought you'd pick them all up, or we'd have been out in outriggers. Didn't even one of 'em get clear?"

"Nary man. Blind drunk, I guess," Bill shouted cheerfully. In the dark

his big head, with its thatch of curly blond hair, canted to one side. Oh, yeah? Skirting the reef, hey? That guy ashore had the gall of a Liverpool monkey.

And —not one voice on the crowded beach was raised to protest that amazingly brazen lie! Did they take Bill for a simple sailor who happened to be cruising past Runaloro? Or did they guess pretty accurately at what he was? They must have seen that some one had carried that diver in his suit down into the cabin after the strange massacre. . . .

BELLOW BILL WILLIAMS grinned in the darkness. Any sensible sailor in his position would slip his anchor chain and get out of that harbor as fast as the wind would carry him. Better to lose your anchor than take a chance on your schooner and your life. Instead Bill prepared to go ashore. His only preparations were to slip a revolver into his right hip pocket and put on a belt.

The gun, though loaded and in perfect order, was a decoy. Bellow Bill was a rotten shot, perfectly capable of missing a man with all six bullets at any range greater than fifteen feet. Of course, most practical revolver shooting is done at less than fifteen-foot ranges, and when a man carries a gun that is the weapon which strangers watch. Bellow Bill actually relied upon his strength and his startling and unexpected speed.

A two-hundred-and-forty-pound man ought to be slow, and by the same token a lion ought to be slower than a jackal. But isn't.

And Bill's belt, though it looked merely like a wide and thick affair of leather, was specially made of flat two-inch links of steel, covered with thin kidskin. The links were studded, so that they would never tangle or kink. The studs were solid gold—part of a cargo of Spanish gold that Bill had raised from the coral where it had lain hidden for centuries. A grateful young man and his fiancée who had learned what a terrible weapon a length of chain was in Bellow Bill's hand had given him that belt. Five pounds of steel, two pounds of gold, and a heavy square-edged buckle that would cut as well as crush. Bill patted the buckle, touched the bag of pearls, the broken sixpence, and the native amulet of glass in his pockets, and paddled ashore. He was chewing tobacco slowly as he sauntered into the light of the torches and lanterns on the beach. He looked like a big, gentle, slow-witted bull chewing placidly on the cud.

"How are we going to report the loss to the authorities if we don't know the lugger's name, huh?" he complained.

He addressed the only other white man present among that crowd of nearly a score of natives merely because the man was white, and so, by South Seas etiquette, the leader. But from the first instant Bill's attention was on three other men—who were black.

Black and as alike as three black vultures. Tall, powerful statues in ebony, with muscles corded on their folded arms and naked chests, who stood in the rear of the crowd, and yet dominated it.

To encounter twins who are full-grown and cannot be told apart is rare enough. These men were triplets. The same hooked nose, the same thin lips, the same jutting, craggy eyebrows. Only in the way they wore their hair was there a difference. The men on the right and left had the drizzled top-knot of Melanesian savages, but he in

the center sported a shaven skull. Three vultures—one bald-headed.

Bellow Bill licked his lips. The mystery remained, but he had come face to face with his enemy.

The white man in front of him, meanwhile, was thrusting out a dirty hand. Mechanically Bill grasped it.

"I'm Owsley, the trader," the man was mouthing in a slurred tenor voice. "Titus Owsley—Titus by name, and tightes' by nature." He laughed shrilly at his own pun. "The drunkes' trader south of the equator. Neve' been north of the equator. Can't say about that, but bet I'm the tightes'. Come have a drink. Lugger burned... forget lugger, eh? 'Ave drink..."

HE was shaking like jelly, and he was drunk, very drunk, no doubt of that. His eyes swam in the flickering torchlight. He breathed hard, so that his cotton singlet, soaked with sweat, clung tight to his sagging belly. Yet it was not liquor that made him quiver, but fear too abject for alcohol to drown.

In the blurred and swimming eyes Bellow Bill read the panic-stricken realization that they were two white men surrounded by a score who were pressing closer.

"Drink?" boomed Bellow Bill. "Say, that's the word I want to hear!" He slapped the trader mightily on a soft, sweat-soaked shoulder, and as Owsley staggered back he cleared elbow room for Bill in that pressing crowd.

"Have you got a bottle?" Bill rumbled. He saw the neck of one sticking from Owsley's pocket. "No man can say he's the best in the South Seas till he's drunk with me."

He took the bottle, which was a good three-quarters full of gin, and gripped the neck in his teeth. For the first few swallows he steadied the bottle with his hand. Then, still biting on the bottle neck, he hooked both thumbs in his belt near the buckle. Slowly his head went back. Swallow by swallow, steadily, the gin disappeared. With a twist of his head Bill flipped an empty bottle onto the sand.

"Can you match that?" he rumbled.

His eyes were on the face of the vulture with the bald head. The crowd murmured. They eased back, waiting for Bill to stagger... they would wait without seeing it... but not a muscle of that black, powerful face changed. He was wondering whether Bill would be easier to seize when that prodigious drink had time to take effect. Only that, and Bill knew it.

"Gotta have another bottle," Bill growled. "Got it at your godown, I suppose?"

"Y-yes," chattered Owsley.

He started to turn away, but Bill gave him a powerful, seemingly negligent shove toward the three silent men. At that moment neither white man could have turned his back on the crowd and lived to walk ten yards.

"Wait—we got to have a light!" Bill roared.

He thrust himself forward and snatched the torch nearest the three, but it was not the flaming stick of wood that he wanted.

On the dark and muscular arm of the man with the shaven head was a fleck of something that gleamed coldly, even when the torchlight did not fall upon it.

Deliberately Bellow Bill picked it from the dark skin. His knuckles, as he held it, were less than a foot below the big man's jaw.

"What's this?" he roared drunken-

ly—and waited. If it was to be a fight for his life he could knock out the triplets before the crowd closed in.

"A fish scale, isn't it?" replied a bass voice in English. The folded arms never stirred.

"Of course! Sure it's a fish scale!" Bill whooped. He snapped the little fleck of gleaming stuff away with a contemptuous thumb. It was not a fish scale, and he knew it as well as that staring, uncertain crowd. "Well—good fishing. Come on, Owsley, let's get that drink!"

He seized the trader's arm and strode away, swinging the torch over his head. Gage of battle had been offered, and declined. For a moment or two it was safe for a white man on Runaloro to turn his back.

CHAPTER III.

ARANO, BUNO, AND COARO.

OWSLEY guided him past a deserted bungalow to a shed of sheet iron, and unfastened the padlock on the door. The heat of the air inside the place made Bill gasp. It was wet and hot as a steam-pit. Behind him a bar was slid to bolt the door. Owsley lit a candle, and crossed the room like a panting dog to paw for a bottle of gin.

Bill reached for the water jar and drank deep to stop his head from spinning. Three-quarters of a bottle had been a terrific dose even for his huge frame and iron head. He wiped his lips and moved to unfasten a shutter to get air.

"For God's sake, no!" Owsley squealed. "They've followed us. They are outside now—with spears, arrows, bullets! I haven't dared open a window after dark for weeks!"

"Have they got any way to kill a man without leaving a mark?" Bill rumbled.

The watery, terrified eyes of the trader rolled in bewilderment.

"No?" Bill purred. "Now, that's interesting. Who's 'they'?"

"Arano, Buno, and Coaro!" It was a chant of despair.

"The Black Alphabet, eh?" Bill purred. "Those are Melanesian names, but a savage mama doesn't know her A B C's, mister. There's a white man's brain behind that."

"No!" Owsley denied, and gulped raw trade spirits. "I—I didn't name them. I swear it. I've been sweating here for weeks waiting to be speared. They—*they've taken my guns away!* What did you come ashore for? Were you crazy? Couldn't you see that you were going to get us both speared? I tell you they're waiting outside for either of us to show our faces!"

"Sure," Bellow Bill agreed emphatically. "About twenty of them, aren't there? That makes Runaloro ninety-five per cent black, and five per cent pure yellow. Ain't there any Dutch courage in that gin you swill?"

Owsley flushed.

"He can still get mad," Bill rumbled in a tone of wonder, as though he were speaking to himself. "Maybe he ain't the biggest coward south of the equator." And in a harder voice, "Well, mister? *I've* seen—too much since sunset. What do *you* know about tonight?"

"I—I heard the lugger strike. But I didn't unlock the door. Till Arano came and ordered me to come out. You were sailing into the lagoon—"

"Why didn't you unlock the door?"

"Because I knew the Flaming Men must be at work!" Owsley yammered in despair. "God, don't look at me like

that! What can one unarmed man do against twenty? They paint their faces with some kind of devilish stuff that burns cold and green—"

"That stuff is phosphorus from the heads of common kitchen matches, I've figured," Bellow Bill remarked calmly. "Only it's mixed with some kind of seaweed jelly—agar-agar, for a guess—that keeps it moist and makes it last. It's the *devil-devil* magic of a Melanesian secret society. Witch doctors are getting up-to-date these days. But—damn your yellow soul—can't you see that the jelly stuff is beyond a savage's brain?"

"Arano was educated by missionaries," Owsley explained sullenly. "He comes from Malitia. The island that's so savage it's never been thoroughly explored."

BELLOW BILL had been farther into the interior of Malitia than any exploring party. He remembered a tribe dancing around a headless corpse, roasting slowly before the embers of vast fires. He had run for his life down the bed of a jungle creek. No doubt at all that Malitia was savage. . . . He kept a poker face.

"The idea was that Arano could do missionary work where a white preacher couldn't stay alive," Owsley droned, pitifully eager to explain his own surrender. "But he said there was no money in that. He's the one with the shaved skull. He came here and offered me ten pounds sterling a week for a partnership in my trading station. He was going to do all the work, too. I—I could just sit on my veranda and drink, and go to Sydney once a year to buy the supplies. Ten pounds was twice what I was clearing myself. It looked to me like a jolly deal, all round. Runaloro is a small atoll, and isolated. There's practically no copra. But why shouldn't I take his money while it lasted?"

There was a hint of aggressiveness and defiance in the swimming, drunken eyes. Bellow Bill nodded. What he thought to himself was, You besotted fool. . . couldn't you see that all Arano wanted was a white man as a front?

"He paid the ten pounds every week," the slurred, drunken voice droned on. "But he never even tried to gather copra. His two brothers arrived. Buno and Coaro. Plain, uneducated, unwashed savages. He didn't fish hard for pearls, either. The lagoon here was fished out long before my time, of course, but he said he'd found a new, rich, untouched virgin bed off the reef. He's paid my ten pounds every week, so I guess he did—"

"You lie! You dirty murdering coward, you *lie!*" snarled Bellow Bill under his breath. "I can see the whole scheme now, by God! Guess, do you? *The rumor of the richness of the new pearl beds at Runaloro has gone all over the South Seas!* What do you think brought me sailing here? What will bring every other pearler that's a free agent and not tied to one spot by fishing grounds he's leased? What but the hope of a pearl bed that *isn't* fished out—grounds where a man can bring up a hundred pounds in an afternoon, like in the old days. Why, all the free-lance pearlers—all the little fellows that are broke and ready to take a chance—are sailing to this out-of-the-way, God-forsaken atoll. One by one they come, as the rumor reaches them and they act on it! Guess, do you? *How many luggers have come to Runaloro this season?*"

Bellow Bill was too strong a man to lose his temper often, but at the look

on his face, the sudden taloning of his tattooed hands, Owsley squealed and twisted into the farthest corner of that shed, with both fat arms thrown up to protect his throat.

"Ten, so far! You make eleven," he gasped. "But God help me, I didn't dare warn them. I tried to drink myself unconscious as soon as I sighted their topsails, for if I warned them the three black men would have painted their faces with fire and come for me! They'd have eaten me, Captain. It isn't just death—it's knowing I'd be *eaten.* I'd sit here without a gun, and in the dark they'd hammer down the door. Those green, flaming faces would peer in, and then—"

SHUDDERING, shrinking from Bill, Owsley started to crawl across the floor on hands and knees. His objective was the bottle. "You're right. *There's no new pearl bed been found at all,"* he whispered. "Arano and Buno and Coaro are pearl pirates without a ship, and every man on this island but me is in cahoots with them. They paddle up to the pearlers that come into the harbor and make friends with them like any other natives, and then they turn on them suddenly.

"Every lugger that comes has a partial load of shell that's been fished elsewhere, and a few pearls tucked away in a bag somewhere. I knew what was going on, but I never heard them at work and saw them burn a lugger before. Now they'll eat us, I tell you! We're both as good as dead men!"

"Shut up!" Bill growled.

Pirates—without a ship! It was a scheme appallingly novel. It was no wonder he had been baffled by the queer slant it gave everything on that lugger of dead men.

The pirates had painted their faces after they had boarded and captured the lugger, for instance.

And yet in spite of its novelty, it was a scheme as old as tribal murder in the South Seas. It was the overlay of an education on a savage mentality, the transfer of the customs of the deep jungle to salt water, that made the scheme so deadly. For in the jungle human heads are wealth. Every village builds man-traps on its paths and roads to slay the unwary stranger.

Arano had merely arranged a trap to catch ships and white men, and terrorized the natives of the atoll into acting as his executioners with painted faces of cold green flame.

Regretfully Bellow Bill thought of the rifles and the dynamite aboard his schooner. They might as well be in the moon. Yet he could not blame himself for failing to imagine that an atoll might be transformed into a pirate ship.

"Arano won't trust me any more, now that I've talked to you alone," Owsley was moaning. "You bluffed him on the beach, but he'll settle with both of us now."

Owsley, Bill thought contemptuously, was nothing but a lump of quivering fat, useless for any purpose. Not guilty of any crime himself. Merely totally lacking in courage. The pearler reached for fine-cut, shrugged, and strode to a shuttered window. He peered out through a crack in the boards.

Arano had certainly decided to sweep the atoll of white men. At the edge of a small clearing that surrounded the godown, close to the ground, were six severed heads.

Though they were painted with phosphorus, the features were indistinguishable. But one of the heads had a pointed skull that was unmistakable.

Here was what was left of the crew of the lugger, and the pirates who had attempted to capture it.

Attempted, and failed—which was queer. A white man bound in his chair had killed them instantly, leaving no mark upon them.

"Who was the skipper of the lugger that was burned tonight?" Bill rumbled.

"Fella named Shaunessy. Claimed to be a pearler, but he talked too educated," Owsley muttered. "His sister wouldn't even let me speak to her."

"Sister?" roared Bill. "Where is she?" He crossed to the cowering trader and kicked him viciously. "D'ye mean to say there's a white girl on this atoll and you've kept your slobbering trap shut about her?"

OWSLEY'S face was covered with his arms, but the head nodded. "Left a sister and a houseboy when he sailed for the pearl bed," he muttered. "They're holed up, like us, in a bungalow a couple of hundred yards farther down the beach. What was the use of talking?" he ended with a whine. "We'll never get out of here alive ourselves."

"I'd never get a girl aboard my schooner alive, and that's a fact."

The sudden disappearance of anger from his voice surprised the trader into lifting a face from the protection of his arms. This huge, tattooed pearler spoke calmly, almost as though he were amused. He stood with his thumbs hooked in the square steel buckle of his belt, staring into space with eyes that seemed to dance and gleam in the candlelight. Anyone who knew Bellow Bill would have recognized that look as the prelude to an act utterly reckless, but to the trader the expression seemed to be one of hope.

"You think—you and I could—"

"Why, sure." Bill was forced to rely upon a drunken coward for help. As he stood there he was planning tactics in which drunkenness and cowardice would be helpful. "Sure-ly," he rumbled. "Or at least, you can. That is, you can if you've got some of that native cord that's twisted out of coconut fiber in the store. Rope won't do. It's too strong."

"I've got some coir!" Owsley replied eagerly. He went swaying and staggering in search of it. While his back was turned, Bellow Bill pulled out his revolver, snapped all the cartridges from the cylinder, and put back one, returning the other five to his pocket. He turned the cylinder so that the trigger had to be pulled five times before the gun would fire.

Owsley, pawing in a box, never looked up until he straightened with a length of coir in his hand—half-inch, strong-looking rope, but actually only a quarter as strong as manila. Bellow Bill drew his revolver again, and laid it on the table.

"Right now Arano figures to cook you, all right, and why not?" he remarked coolly. "All you've ever done for him is keep your mouth shut—because you was scared to open it. That ain't enough. But if you were to walk me out of here, bound, and at the point of my own gun, you'd prove yourself the kind of Judas he admires. And you'd be saving him a lot of trouble. While he was dealing with me you could slip off to my schooner. Slip the anchor and trim the sheets—and none of the dugouts can catch you."

BILL'S eyes twinkled as he watched the idea sink slowly into the drink-sodden mind.

"You mean—you want me to pre-

tend to tie you, so you can run for it, too?" Owsley whispered.

"No," Bill contradicted. He extended his elbows behind his back. "You tie me up good and tight. Nothing phony about the knots at all. The girl and I are as good as cooked anyway, understand? But you sail to Sydney and tell them what you know, and the British will send a gunboat. That will square my account with Arano."

"The murderin' devil!" breathed Owsley piously.

He advanced with the cord, and drew Bill's elbows behind his back—as tightly as Bill would let him. Which looked as tight as possible, though it left the pearler a precious half-inch of slack.

Bill grinned as Owsley tied the knots — carefully and well. Those rough brown cords looked too thick for human strength to part. Actually, if you were abnormally strong and knew the trick of arching your back and adding the expansion of your ribs to the jerk of your arms, they could be broken in a second.

Bellow Bill meant to wait until Arano was within arm's reach. Natives who have seen their leader killed before their eyes never fight well.

Owsley picked up the revolver.

"Damn you! You double-crossing—" Bill roared suddenly in his enormous voice.

"I'll shoot!" Owsley squealed with a convincingness far beyond Bill's hopes. "Lie down, you big hellion!"

The pearler dropped heavily to his knees. They waited, holding their breath, until he nodded at the door. Owsley threw back the wooden bolt and flung the door wide open. The candle flickered, and a shaft of light leaped out into the darkness. Bill was slowly rising to his knees. Owsley, in his excitement, was jabbing him with the gun.

"I've got him—I got him!" he shrilled.

"Good!" said a deep voice from the shadows. "You'll be a man yet. Bring him out."

Bellow Bill stepped through the doorway. Instantly something tightened around his ankles and jerked both feet from under him. He was being hauled along the ground by half a dozen men before he realized that a noose had caught him. It was so sudden that Owsley did not even click the revolver. The pearler was dragged across the clearing and through a fringe of bush toward a tall figure that loomed huge in the darkness.

"Avast hauling!" Arano shouted. "Keep that line tight! Don't let him get up! Buno—Coaro—see if he has those pearls!"

As his brothers walked toward Bill, who was squirming helplessly on the ground, Arano laughed aloud. He had not moved. He was still in the fringe of bushes from which he had kept watch on the shed.

"I told you all he would have to come out of that door!" he gloated aloud. "Though I expected him on the run, shooting. Tie his feet when you get the pearls, Buno, and then we will all paint our faces!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SACRIFICE.

THE disaster was so sudden and complete that Owsley failed to react. Bellow Bill, peering upward, saw him still standing in the lighted doorway, with the wobbling revolver pointed at nothing in particular. Which was lucky, for if he had fired and the

gun had clicked harmlessly, Arano seemed to be a leader quick enough of wit to shoot Bill as he lay.

The pearler roared like a hobbled bull. He seemed to struggle desperately to get to his feet—with the result that the natives still holding the rope dragged him a yard or two farther toward the two big men who came swaggering toward him with drawn knives. He *seemed* to struggle—but did not.

Even in that horrible instant when his feet were jerked from beneath him, Bill had restrained the impulse to snap his bonds. He lay on his back, kicking and roaring profanity—and actually waiting, with cold and grim detachment, for *both* of the advancing brothers to get within arm's reach. He might be able to take the two to hell with him.

That was all he hoped for—and that, apparently, was too much. Even in triumph the brothers were wary. Buno walked up, kicked Bill in the ribs, and squatted beside him. Coaro remained standing and leaned over his brother's back. A hand thrust roughly into Bill's trouser pocket grasped the bag of pearls and jerked. The pocket ripped as the big black fist came out with the loot, and—

Buno uttered a coughing, strangled gasp. He swayed on his heels and clutched at his throat with both hands, the bag of pearls slipping through his fingers. Bill caught a whiff of a sharp and bitter odor. Low as his head was, the effect was as though a huge rotten peach were jammed over his mouth and nose and pressed there by the hand of a giant. He could not breathe, and with senses that suddenly reeled he fought to keep from breathing.

His nostrils were low. But that pungent, biting, deadly gas burst from the pearl bag close to Buno's face, and as Buno toppled forward Coaro leaned down to discover what the matter was. He must have drawn one deep breath of the gas. That was more than enough. He fell across his brother's body.

Bill snapped his bonds with a surge of strength born of the terror of a death that would come with a single breath. He snatched at the knife Coaro had dropped, and slashed blindly at the rope as he rolled over and over along the ground—anything to get even a foot farther away from that bag of pearls.

The natives were dragging him. That helped. Arano was shooting as fast as he could pull trigger. Sand showered Bill as the bullets whacked the earth all around him. He didn't care. He'd take a bullet rather than raise his head—yet. That damned stuff seemed to rise, and even in the open air a circle of death was spreading around the two big black bodies whose collapse must have seemed like magic to Arano. Once he whiffed that peach-like odor he would recognize hydrocyanic acid gas, and run. Bill's knife cut the last strand of the rope, but he kept on rolling.

"Back!" Arano screamed—at natives who wanted to do nothing so much as run. A huge tattooed giant was rolling at them with a knife that glimmered in the faint light from the open door. An enormous, fearless enemy who had left two corpses behind him that he had not touched with his hands.

"Run for the beach!" Arano yelled. "Don't let him get to his ship!"

BILL cursed the missionaries who had trained the brain under that shaven skull. That order saved him, for the moment; but had the po-

sitions been reversed he would have given it himself. It would keep Arano master of the atoll in the end—and never was an order obeyed more enthusiastically. With howls of fright the natives bolted for the beach.

"Owsley!" Bill bellowed.

No answer. The trader had also taken to his heels. Bill rolled through the fringe of brush, thrust his face against the good clean earth, and dared to draw a breath. The air was fresh. He leaped up and ran toward the interior of the atoll. The Shaunessy girl was in a bungalow a couple of hundred yards farther down the beach, Owsley had said.

Bill pounded along in the darkness under the palm trees until he found it. Not a gleam of light showed, but after the yelling and the shooting a girl and a houseboy must be awake inside, alert for a glimpse of an enemy. And they would be armed.

"Ahoy! I'm a friend!" Bill rumbled. He walked forward, acutely aware that his white ducks would make him visible. If the girl didn't believe him it would be just too bad, but he had no time to waste in identifying himself. The night must be nearly gone. Dawn in the tropics is as abrupt as sunset. At dawn Arano, with rifles and dynamite and over a dozen men, could easily mop him up.

The door of the bungalow swung open. Not a sound, not a word—only an oblong patch of deeper darkness. For Bellow Bill to step through it was to put his head in the lion's mouth, but the boards of the veranda creaked under his weight as he strode on with unfaltering steps.

"Good tactics!" he rumbled approvingly—and, as he entered, he stopped short. He was expecting the touch of cold steel. The revolver muzzle that was jabbed against his side was almost a relief—but at that instant there was a rustle of leaves and a hiccough from the clearing behind him.

Close to Bill two people caught their breath. That sound hinted at treachery. For all those two knew he had come ahead to clear the way for a charge, and the gun that touched him quivered as the hand that held it shook, uncertain whether to pull the trigger or not.

"Come in here, Owsley—damn your yellow soul!" Bill said. He was calm—the least show of excitement and he'd be a dead man. "He's nothing but a tool of Arano's, I think, Miss Shaunessy," Bill added. "Not quite innocent, but altogether innocuous, eh? I think so. Me, I'm different. I got a bit of bottle glass and a broken sixpence in my pocket."

The gun trembled. Across the room the unseen girl caught her breath.

"You—know what became of my brother?" she said.

There are voices that give a clear picture of the speaker. Hers was one. It was clear, imperious, and unafraid. She would be a tall girl, self-confident, a girl brought up in a big family of boys, who knew men and liked them. Bellow Bill thanked his lucky stars, for this was no time for a clinging vine or hysterics.

"Yes. He was a brave man," he answered, and let that simple statement announce Shaunessy's death. "He saved my life."

"I saw the flames—and guessed." She spoke quietly. Only a tremor in the tone told of grief, like a harp string plucked and instantly muted. "When? B-before he died?"

"Afterward. With those pearls he carried."

"There was nothing strange about those pearls."

"You're wrong," Bill rumbled. "Among them were some little bulbs of compressed hydrocyanic gas that could be broken with the fingers—or a careless fist—if necessary. Did he tell you the case was as dangerous as that?"

"He asked me not to come. But I'd gone with him everywhere before. I insisted. It was just a routine trip. The Commissioner at Thursday Island sent us to officiate at the new pearling beds. A white girl is safe anywhere—"

"With black men or white. This atoll's neither," Bill contradicted. "When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday. He told me to be careful and watch the trader. We couldn't conceive how a sot like Owsley—"

"That's still outside, afraid to go ahead or back," Bill grunted. "Say, tell your boy to take this gun out of my ribs, will you? We're wasting time."

"His name is Evishi. I'm Oreen Shaunessy."

"Thanks. Bill Williams—Bellow Bill—talking. And if we ain't off the atoll by dawn we're all long pig. How much time have I got?"

ACROSS the room the radium dial of a wrist watch flashed as Oreen twisted her arm.

"It's twenty after five."

"That leaves thirty-five minutes, about," Bill estimated swiftly. "And what weapons have you got—outside of the peashooter Evishi is still jabbing me in the side with?"

"Another revolver that I *was* pointing at you. You can put yours down, Evishi," Oreen ordered crisply. "They are both .32s."

"I'm an American, so nothing under a .45 seems to me like a gun," Bill rumbled. His voice had a taut, gay lilt to match the reckless gleam in his eyes. "It doesn't much matter. I'm a rotten shot, and I was hoping for dynamite..."

He dropped his voice to a low growl that was not exactly a whisper, yet which did not carry outside the four walls. "Owsley is afraid to go, or stay. He's useless—understand? And a real man in his shoes would have died days ago."

"I—"

"Listen!" Bill purred. His mind was racing. "I'm a good man in a fight, and I ain't bragging. . . . But—thirty-four minutes now to get rid of nearly twenty men? It can't be done with .32s. . . . That Arano hasn't lost a trick yet. He thinks like a whip, and because the man who holds my schooner is master of the island, that's where he'll be now. I'm not underestimating him again. He is waiting for dawn—and he's so right I can feel my head lifting off my shoulders."

"Are you trying to frighten me?"

"You aren't that kind. . . . I'm thinking out loud and counting on your nerve, girl. I'm hoping you'll see the answer as I see it. We can wait here and put up a swell scrap. In about—er—fifty minutes from now we get dynamited out with my own powder, damn it! If we're still livin' we watch Arano paint his face with green fire and settle down to enjoy himself with us.

"Or else inside of thirty-three minutes I've got to cut a quick-thinking black devil out from among his men. If I can get Arano I can handle the rest. *I've got to get him alone on the schooner*—and he's too smart to be alone. That is, unless—"

Bellow Bill stopped short. In the perfect silence he could hear Oreen's wrist watch tick.

"I—see," she whispered. "You—you do rely on my courage, don't you? But—if I succeeded, could you? You and Evishi—he's only a boy—against twenty?

"And Owsley," Bill purred with grim relish. "I aim to use Owsley, and how. Yeah, I can try. What's an extra half hour of livin' while you wait for the butcher? My way we both take the greatest gamble there is!"

"I want to see your face," said Oreen suddenly. She struck a match, and with the same motion snapped it out. Bill glimpsed a face with the clean-cut line that marks the thoroughbred. She was pretty. An English blonde who is pretty stops a man's breath. In darkness she crossed the bungalow floor. A slim hand groped for his own and pressed it firmly.

"You like the idea of fight," she whispered. "That's what I wanted to see! And so do I—so do I, Bill! You're on."

"Let's go," he said, and shouldered toward the door. She checked him.

"Have you any of the pearls my brother prepared for a desperate gamble like this?" she asked quietly.

"Not in my pocket, but I reckon the bag's still lying on a dead man's chest," Bill purred. "Think you could look at your brother's face again? It's there."

She caught her breath. She knew that Bill had avoided saying, "Your brother's head."

"I know I can," she answered. "I'd feel safer, later, if I had one of his special pearls in my mouth."

"Aye, aye," Bill admitted. "A quick poison is an antidote against Arano's devilment, sure enough. We've a half hour. We'll stop at the clearing and pick some up. But first—"

He strode out of the door and across the veranda.

"Hey—Owsley!" he called sharply. The trader came shambling forward in the dark, and Bellow Bill swung back his right fist. The blow landed on the button, its force nicely calculated. Owsley dropped as though he were pole-axed. Bill swung his limp figure over one huge shoulder.

"*He* won't know nothing for at least ten minutes," he rumbled with a reckless zest. "And that's the point of my whole scheme. Step along, Oreen. We'll gamble with split seconds for a chance to make a real fight."

CHAPTER V.

DEATH RIDES THE BOOM.

IN the east the stars had lost their brilliancy, and though the night seemed as dark as ever, dawn was not a quarter-hour away. On the beach near the harbor entrance a huge fire had been lit, and its yellow glare sparkled on the little waves that roughened the surface of the lagoon save when a huge black shadow leaped from shore to shore as one of Arano's sentinels walked in front of the blaze.

The shaven-headed pirate had planned shrewdly. Every dugout on the atoll capable of facing the sea had been shifted close to the fire, with a dozen men to guard them, and over the rail of Bill's schooner an occasional green glimmer, like the flash of a distant firefly, marked other lookouts whose faces were already painted in preparation for an early, easy triumph.

The tide was on the ebb. The schooner's bowsprit pointed inland, and in the stillness Bellow Bill could hear the thump and rattle of the main sheet blocks as a puff of breeze caught

the after sail, which he had left hoisted, but free to swing. He was alone, and unarmed unless his belt be counted arms. His chest heaved from a sprint under the coco palms that had brought him half way around the lagoon. He bellied across the beach, his eyes on the paling stars, and crawled into the water unheard, and unseen.

An instant later a large mass of seaweed started drifting away from the beach at the point where he had disappeared. It moved with the tide, yet all but imperceptibly faster than the tide. It headed for the point where the anchor chain of the schooner angled sharply from the water. It had, in its center, a bulge where Bellow Bill's forehead and nose floated above the surface, plastered thickly with seaweed.

At dawn keen eyes would notice that bulge, and the gleam of wet white skin beneath the brown-green weed. But dawn was fourteen minutes off, and the distance from shore to schooner was only a little more than two hundred yards. Save for the unavoidable guess at the exact moment of sunrise, Bellow Bill's attack was timed to the second and judged to the foot.

Half way around the lagoon, under a thick bush, Oreen was crouching. A pearl that was not a pearl, but Death, bulged her cheek. Her glance shifted between the second hand of a wrist watch and the patches of weed that drifted toward the harbor entrance with the tide. Less than twenty feet in front of her, at high-tide mark on the beach, lay two of the tiny dugouts that children use in the South Seas—the frailest apologies for boats. At her elbow Evishi was working frantically with a wet cloth to bring Owsley back to consciousness.

Courage and cowardice, split seconds and luck must join hands in Bill's attack.

"He groaned then," Evishi whispered. "He moved a little—"

"Then carry him out, as Bill told you," Oreen ordered tensely. "Don't let them see you, and don't forget his gun—"

"But I do not see the big tattooed man," quavered the houseboy.

"You fool, he said that he hoped we wouldn't!" Oreen snapped. "We've only a minute or two more . . . Go!"

The houseboy clasped Owsley's limp arms around his neck and crawled across the beach, dragging the half-conscious trader. Evishi's teeth were chattering with fright. He could see the savages whose faces were painted with green fire so clearly that he forgot it was the water of the lagoon that collected the light, that to them the beach was a gray black stripe beneath dead-black foliage. With a desperate effort he pushed the light dugout before him and dragged the heavy trader after him. Only ten feet to go, down grade, over sand packed by the tide.

OWSLEY groaned and stirred as the dugout slid into the water. Panting, Evishi dragged him over the gunwale, which was only inches high, made sure that the gun, fully loaded now, was in his pocket—and gave the dugout with its semi-conscious passenger a mighty push out into the lagoon!

Instantly there was a savage shout both from the fire and the schooner. Arano's deep-toned v o i c e brayed orders to launch a big dugout—to spread out along the beach to prevent a landing. But Evishi lay flat on the sand at the water's edge. Unseen, he crept backward. Panting, trembling, he huddled against Oreen.

"Well done!" she whispered, never looking at him, but at the second hand of her watch. "Now hide, lad. God be with you!" She pushed a .32 into his hands. His teeth chattered as he squirmed away.

Out on the lagoon a big patch of seaweed warped itself around the schooner's anchor chain. The bulge in the center rested against the chain itself, and remained there. Near the fire a big dugout was being launched with savage yells—and suddenly, from the tiny, drifting dugout came a scream of terror that rose to falsetto and broke as Owsley's breath failed.

Oreen pitied him. His silence had sent better men than he to their death. Her brother had been one—and yet she shuddered to think of what the return of Owsley's senses must have been like. He must have thought it a hallucination from the dugout's bottom. The fire—the dancing shadows, the heads of green flame along the schooner's rail, the bigger boat, shoving toward him with a yelling crew. He had screamed with realization that the scene was real.

Then he fled. He had a gun. It was a paddle he caught up. He might have shot his way past the dugout and made the open sea. But he whirled his little craft, anxious only to keep the greatest possible distance between himself and the boat that dashed for him, black against the firelight. Whirled toward the far side of the lagoon and paddled with the crazed strength of terror.

Instantly Oreen rose, walked across the beach, and launched the second dugout. She paddled straight for the schooner and the harbor entrance, which was a course at right angles to Owsley's line of flight. She was seen. Her heart hammered too hard to distinguish the orders Arano was braying. They didn't matter. She heard a deep voice that dominated and directed the howling savages, but the memory of other orders in the rumbling whisper of Bellow Bill filled her consciousness.

"... drive straight for the schooner ... don't let yourself be caught too easily ... shoot *at* them, but don't hit anyone. Arano'll order them not to kill you when he sees you are alone. And they won't, unless you madden them by drawing blood. ..."

Wouldn't they? She knelt, plying the paddle, the .32 lying ready in the bottom of the dugout. The first crew, after hesitating, had gone on after Owsley, lashed by Arano's roars. Another dugout was shoving off by the fire. But—the shaven-headed devil thought of everything—it turned away from her, blocking escape from the lagoon. It was with the cooler, more trustworthy men who were with him on the schooner that Arano was going to capture her. They were swinging out a dinghy.

They would intercept her if she drove straight on. They couldn't hurt her—not with what she had in her cheek—but within another minute she'd be dead. A longer life—a little longer—if she whirled her frail craft and paddled back as she had come.

She gritted her teeth, and drove straight ahead. In the mass of seaweed by the anchor chain the bulge had disappeared. She didn't see that. She'd never even seen Bill, save for an instant. Thick, curly reddish hair, a square jaw; blue eyes ...

"Drive on!" he'd said.

TWO oarsmen whose faces flamed rowed the dinghy at her. She caught up the .32 and emptied it high in the air. She heard their sav-

age, mocking yells. She wanted to scream that she'd have killed them both if Bellow Bill had not ordered her not to.

Then the prow of the dinghy struck and smashed her frail craft. She was flung in the water. A hand reached down and twisted brutally in her hair. She was dragged to the surface and held there, her outstretching chin against the dinghy's stern. A face of green fire bent down and leered at her.

"Good!" growled Arano. "Bring her to the schooner, and then go help them catch that other fool. I told you —they had no chance to escape at all."

He laughed. The sky had suddenly turned to gray, and as Oreen rolled her eyes to see the schooner she realized with despair that even now Arano had not blundered. Even now he had not stripped himself of guards. Behind his shaven head were the gleaming faces of two other savages. For an instant she believed they were his brothers. But they were dead. Like her brother. Like herself, in another minute. . . .

Bellow Bill Williams pulled himself hand over hand down the anchor chain to the anchor itself. He had waited only until the dinghy was launched without stopping Oreen's progress. By their voices he had counted the number of the savages on the schooner; he had never really hoped that Arano would send all his men away. The big savage was a flawless tactician. Too flawless, since his orders became predictable.

A fierce pleasure in Oreen's nerve warmed Bill's heart. She and Evishi had carried out their assignments. It was his turn now. He stripped off his belt. With its steel tongue he unscrewed the shackle that held the anchor chain to the anchor. Six or eight turns only—thirty seconds' work. Oreen, thank God, had driven her dugout almost to the schooner's side. They were carrying her aboard, now. Arano would order her carried below—and then like a flawless tactician, he would order his men on deck again to guide the chase after Owsley and keep watch for Evishi and Bill.

The chain jerked clear of the anchor as the shackle dropped and the tide caught the schooner. Bill was holding it with one hand. He was borne along. He worked himself upward while he waited to see which way the schooner would swing. For a boat set adrift in a tide swings broadside to the current. She fell off to starboard—and to the right, therefore, Bill swam for the surface like a shark that rushes from the depths to snatch its prize.

To Oreen, struggling feebly in the grip of the three who were carrying her down the companionway—to the savages in the dinghy and those others in the dugout, who were yelling in triumph as a well-flung spear struck Owsley's back and skewered him like a beetle—what happened next seemed magic.

It was nothing of the sort. Only a superb swimmer like Bellow Bill, only a man of vast strength and a seaman whose experience amounted to intuition could have performed the feat, yet it was the result of skill.

AS the schooner turned broadside to the tide the main boom swung out over the water, and the slackened main sheet became tight. A huge tattooed hand shot out of the water and gripped the main sheet below the block. With one arm Bellow Bill chinned himself. His tattooed body, clear to see in the dawn, seemed to be flung by invisible hands from the la-

goon to cling like some huge gorilla to the boom. A mighty pull at the sheet with his free hand started the boom swinging inboard, bearing him with it.

Over the water, over the rail, over the deck of the schooner he swung. The breeze was light. Its pressure against the sail could slow that movement, but not stop it against the mighty pull of Bill's arm. His belt, looped on a forefinger, dangled like a snake. Ponderously he swung toward three men, wedged in a narrow companionway. They dropped Oreen. They snatched at the weapons in their belts, but the swinging boom had carried Bellow Bill directly over their heads.

"Ahoy!" he roared exultantly, and flung himself down the companionway upon them.

Two hundred and forty pounds, falling a good five feet. Bill's weight knocked them down. In a tangled mass they rolled down the companionway, to tumble in a heap on the deck below. With arms and legs spread wide Bill hugged the three men to his chest. With a jerk of his wrist he wrapped the belt around his left fist. A knife, half drawn, was cutting into his thigh. Arano's head was under Bill's left arm. The savage burrowed to bite at the soft flesh of Bill's belly.

Bill's left fist smashed on the back of the shaven skull. The blow did not travel six inches, but the bone crushed beneath it, and on the shaven skin remained the deep imprint of a square belt-link, as though Bill had struck putty. The next blow snapped the back of the savage straining to draw the knife. Bill rolled clear. The third savage leaped up—and the flying belt caught him across the forehead. The gleaming paint was wiped off in a black, square-edged streak. The forehead, when Bill leaned down grimly to touch it with a forefinger, was soft.

"It's the weight of the gold studs that does it," Bill rumbled. "It's better than a chain."

He stood with the belt dangling from his left hand, listening, staring down at three dead faces painted with flame. The savages in the boats must be still wondering what had happened. They hadn't even yelled yet. The actual battle had not taken twenty seconds.

Oreen, over whom the fight had rolled, lay on her back at the foot of the companionway, unconscious. Her lips were parted. Bellow Bill shuddered, and a perspiration which the fight had been unable to cause broke out on his forehead. Very delicately he felt inside the girl's mouth with a huge forefinger, and pulled out the tiny globule that looked like a pearl, and was Death.

"God, if you'd lost your nerve and put that between your teeth too soon! But you're thoroughbred," he muttered. He snapped the pellet up the companionway, and overboard, and lifted the girl onto his bunk. Her heart was beating strongly. She would come around all right.

Outside some savage uttered the first shout—of doubt, and alarm.

Bill crossed to a porthole. "Got Owsley, didn't you, you devils?" he rumbled. "Well, that saves the hangman at Thursday Island a job. . . . And you saw me swing aboard and now you don't like it. Heading for the fire, eh? Waiting for orders from Arano—the chief that's never wrong, huh? Well—you'll get them!"

Very careful not to expose himself, Bellow Bill crawled up the companionway and back again, dragging a bight of the main sheet. Into the loop of the

rope he tied Arano and the two savages, on whose faces the flaming paint still burned. For a moment he stood scowling, dissatisfied.

Then his face cleared. From a locker he took a can of red hull paint, dipped in his hand, and pressed his huge palm and five spreading fingers across each face. Then he hauled on the main sheet. One by one the three bodies were dragged up the companionway stairs and out to the end of the boom. Once again the boom swung, bearing with it three bodies whose bestial, flaming faces were all but obliterated by the red print of a white man's hand.

From around the schooner arose a cry of abject terror and surrender. The sound brought Oreen back to consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Bill! Bill!" she cried out in desperate appeal.

"I'm here," he rumbled. "It's all right, Oreen. Rest easy, gal. The fire on Runaloro is put out."

THE END

Prehistoric Tramps

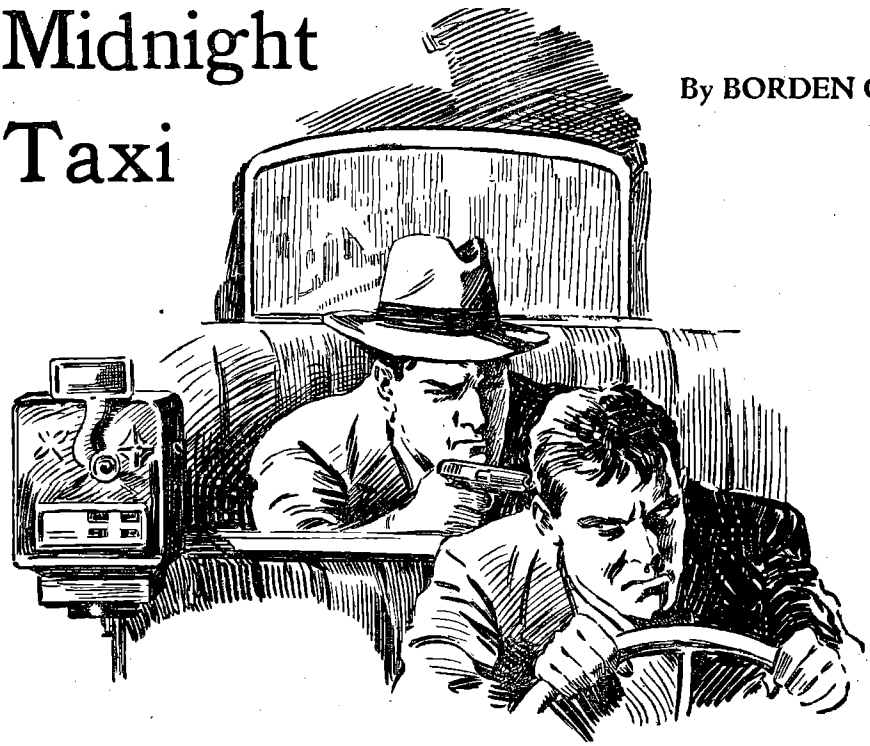
LIFE in ancient America seems to have been one great tour. Aztec copper bells have been found in graves 1,000 miles north in New Mexico. Turquoise from Arizona, on the other hand, was found by an American archeologist at Chichen Itza. Natural black-glass souvenirs from Yellowstone have been turned up as far east as Ohio. Beads of abalone shell from California are strewn along the southern route halfway to Florida.

This archeologist (Dr. Anne A. Morris) points out that Mediterranean sea-shell ornaments have been uncovered in Stone Age graves of Norway. Bronze daggers of Scandinavia, on the other hand, have reached the Black Sea. More strange, when Pizarro landed at Peru he found the natives worshiping a familiar bird—the European hen. Either the hen had crossed several thousand miles of jungle on foot—which would be a miracle—or it had been brought by touring natives. She concludes, "A transcontinental walking tour was evidently a matter of no great importance."

—*J. W. Holden.*

Midnight Taxi

By BORDEN CHASE



"You're first, Eddie," Smooth said quietly

It had been a polite little game of life and death as Smooth Kyle trailed a New York narcotic ring, but when they kidnaped the girl he loved—

THIS STORY HAS JUST BEGUN—START IT NOW

TEN years after Peter Kyle, known to his friends as Smooth, gave up driving a taxi in New York, he was back on the job. This time, however, it was as a Federal Operative, working under Chief McNeary, attempting to round up a large narcotic gang.

Smooth, who knew all the ropes, got into the good graces of Bet-a-Grand Rudd, gambler and dope addict, and managed to become Rudd's steady driver.

Smooth wasn't sure just how big a shot Rudd was in the dope racket, but he intended to stick to him until he found the higher-up.

Smooth became acquainted with Dorothy Manning, a good-looking actress, when he saved her from the unwelcome attentions of Slug Conners, one of the gang headed by Big Spanish, boss of the West Side. Smooth killed Slug in a gun fight, and immediately had the entire Big Spanish gang on his trail.

By making Rudd think that Big Spanish had double crossed him, Smooth precipitated a war between the two gangs. When Spanish sent a carload of thugs out gunning for Smooth, the latter, who was driving Rudd, managed to kill off all but one of them, meanwhile making Rudd think that it was himself they were after. All this while, Smooth was working deeper into the confidence of Rudd, and learning more of his operations.

This story began in the Argosy for October 12

CHAPTER VII.

KIDNAPED!

THE soft hum of a distant buzzer announced someone at the door. Rudd was sitting silently behind the desk, his arms folded on the top and his head resting upon them. He looked up at the sound and waited, as though in expectation of an announcement from the butler.

"Answer it, Smooth," he said when the buzz was repeated. "Simpson must be napping. Guess I'm keeping too late hours for the old boy."

Smooth stepped through the foyer and opened the door a crack. Tout Ender, one of Rudd's men, grinned at him and flicked a thumb toward four men who were standing beside him in the hall.

"'Lo, Smooth," he said. "Met some of the boys on their way up here. Did the boss send for the reserves?"

"Maybe," said Smooth. "You come in, but the others can wait till I get an okay from Rudd."

"Don't you ever take chances?" laughed Tout. "They're friends of ours—take my word for it."

"Sorry," said Smooth.

Tout grinned and stepped inside. The others smiled also but made no move to follow. Smooth closed the door, followed Tout into the library and waited.

"Chick Binder, Bert Lovette, Augie and Little Tommy are in the hall," said Tout. "Your new butler won't let 'em in without a pass."

"They're all right, Smooth," said Rudd. "I sent for 'em. But thanks for being careful—I like smart guys."

Smooth nodded and ushered the men into the library. They took chairs.

"Let's have it, Tout," he said. "How many?"

"Grippo is through—took one right between the eyes. Scalise caught a couple in the chest and checked out before the ambulance arrived. They took Lunger to Bellevue—after they unwrapped him from the steering post. He may brighten up, but the chances are rotten."

"We'll make them worse," said Rudd. "What else?"

"Eddie Malloy scrammed—got away clean."

"Are you sure?" snapped Smooth.

"Positive! The cops know there was another man in the car; a couple of suckers who saw the shootin' spilled the works. But Lunger wouldn't talk and the others couldn't. Malloy made it in the clear."

Smooth glanced at a tall clock that stood in a far corner of the room. It was four thirty—more than an hour after the shooting in the park. Malloy had certainly been in touch with Spanish by this time. What would be their first move?

Spanish would send for Salters, thought Smooth, and would learn that his lieutenant was missing. For a time there would be confusion—but only for a time. Someone would report that Salters had been seen getting into a cab with Rudd. Lunger might get a message through to his chief. And then active warfare would start in earnest. Spanish was not the sort of man to take it lying down. He would fight back—hard. And his first move must necessarily be to secure information. Why? What had started it? What was the reason for Rudd's sudden fury?

THERE was one person in the city who could give him the answer.

Slug Conners, the first of the casualties, had wanted her to be his

girl. She had been talking to him on the night of his death. And Smooth knew that Big Spanish would want to talk to Dorothy Manning!

"I'm going to scram," he said. "There's a little job I've got to take care of, tonight."

"What's the idea?" asked Rudd.

"I wanna have a little talk with Malloy. I've got a present for him."

"Act smart!" barked Rudd. "That ain't a job for one man. Spanish would burn you down before you got to first base."

"Did I make any mistakes, yet?"

"There's always a first—and a last."

"I know it," said Smooth. "But this is my lucky night. I'll try one more job while the luck holds and I'll call you in the morning. Fair enough?"

"It's your body, feller," said Rudd. "If you want to load it down with lead—that's up to you. I'm not sendin' you."

"It won't break your heart if I put it across, will it?"

"See you tomorrow, Smooth," laughed Rudd, and fingered a few bills from the desk drawer. "Here—this is carfare. Good night, feller."

Smooth accepted the money, grinned to the men in the room and left. He drove to the park, cut through one of the crossovers and hurried toward Dorothy's apartment.

It was one of the less pretentious buildings fronting on the side street off West End Avenue. Earlier in the evening a doorman would have questioned him and probably would have sent him around to the servants' entrance. Now, however, there was no one to ask questions but a sleepy elevator boy whom Smooth shook to wakefulness.

"Whatcha want?" he mumbled.

"Take me to Miss Manning's apartment—quick, monkey!"

"Aw, what's eatin' you? She ain't awake this hour of the mornin'."

SMOOTH handed him a bill and the questions stopped. They stepped into the elevator and at the fourth floor the boy pointed to a door half way down the hall.

"That's hers."

Smooth rang the bell. He waited and when there was no answer, he rang it again. He pounded softly on the metal panel and shook the knob. There was no answer.

"Anyone come up to see her tonight?" he asked.

"Not since I been on."

"How long is that?"

"Since one o'clock—why?"

"Did a couple of fellows come in a while ago and get off at the third floor —or the fifth?"

"Yeah—just a few minutes ago—maybe a half hour. They was tough lookin' birds and shut me up when I asked questions. Gee—is anything wrong?"

"Did you see them go out?"

"I—I— Cripes! That's right! I did see 'em! They must've walked down the stairs because I didn't ride 'em down. I saw 'em just as they went out the door—and there was a broad with 'em. She had her coat collar turned up—maybe it was Miss Manning, eh?"

"Maybe it was," said Smooth dully and stepped into the elevator.

"I guess I should've asked, but they were such hard lookin' eggs I didn't want to start no trouble. Yeah, maybe I should've asked."

"You're lucky, kid. It might have been your last question," said Smooth.

He hurried to his cab and started downtown. And for the first time he realized the enormity of the game he was playing. The death of a few gunmen meant little to Smooth. He had been raised in a hard school and the streets of New York had taught him how cheap was the life of a gangster. The years he had spent on a cab had seen the rise and fall of a half dozen mobs.

The early period of Prohibition, when the racket chiefs were fighting it out for control of the trade, had been bad ones. There had been killings on Broadway and on every other street in the city. Gangsters had shot it out in night clubs and in hotels. Smooth had more than once been forced to hurry some wild eyed gunman from the scene of a killing. It was part of the routine of hacking—part of the job of dragging a living from the streets. He was used to that and had little respect or fear for the mobsters.

But now they had Dorothy. That was different. It ceased to be a game of wits in which the loser got killed. It was a cruel, filthy business in which there was no quarter and anything went. It was rough-and-tumble with a vengeance. Smooth had a definite job—he was to provide evidence for the wiping out of a dope ring. But that would have to wait.

DAWN was sending its slanting rays of red gold through the silent streets of midtown Manhattan when Smooth drew to a stop before a Forty-sixth Street hotel. He walked across the lobby, lifted the house phone and announced himself. A few moments later he was seated facing the chief of the New York Division. McNeary was in bathrobe and slippers and his fingers drummed nervously on the edge of a small writing desk as he listened to Smooth. At times he drew deeply at his cigarette. And when Smooth had finished his story, he flipped the butt from an open window and smiled—grimly.

"In other words, Kyle," he said, "you've started hell popping in New York. That it?"

"Just about."

"Well—consider yourself officially reprimanded." He extended his hand which Smooth grasped. "And personally congratulated for a fine night's work. Washington might not approve—in fact, I am sure they wouldn't. Or let's say, rather, that they would not want to hear about it—officially. They never will—officially. But let me tell you, son, this town has been ripe for a going-over ever since Repeal and it's going to get one. We'll crack down on those birds so hard it'll leave 'em gasping for breath—and most of them will be seated in the electric chair while they're doing their gasping."

"But I can't go through with it," said Smooth. "Don't you understand? This girl—Dorothy Manning—she had nothing to do with it at all. She doesn't know what it's all about. I let her in without meaning to and now Big Spanish has grabbed her. God knows what sort of a deal she's getting. And if you think I'm going to chase a bunch of hopheads around the streets of this burg and let her dig out any way she can—you're all wrong."

"You mean you're quitting?"

"Call it that if you want."

"Would it make any difference if I gave you a different assignment—temporarily?"

"What t'hell do I care about assignments?" snapped Smooth. "I've put that kid on a spot. It's up to me to get her off it, and damn quick!"

"I suppose you know the Bureau of Narcotics is out to break up a dope ring headed by Big Spanish," said McNeary. "Right now, Spanish is wanted for questioning. As the Supervisor of this District, I'd like you to devote all your time to that angle of the case. Break it—and just between the two of us"—he lowered his voice—"I expect to hear that Spanish and some of his boys have been killed, er—resisting arrest, of course."

"You're a swell guy, Chief," said Smooth. "A swell guy!"

"Forget it! How can I help?"

"First, I'd like to have you pick up a few of Rudd's runners. There's one in particular—Humpty, they call him. You'll find him in the theater district. He takes bets from most of the pit orchestras and some of the hams. Grab him fast, before he spills what he knows to Rudd, and don't let him get to a mouthpiece. Take in a guy called Guesser McCann. He works around Lenox Avenue and a Hundred and Forty-second, generally in the barber shops. Then there's Spot Martin—he hustles up near the Circle; and Joe Plender, a smart lad who makes the rounds of the ticket brokers."

"We'll take 'em tomorrow," promised McNeary. "What's the reason for the roundup?"

"Rudd will figure it's Spanish doing it, and that's what I'm counting on. And then I want you to grab some of Spanish's men—for instance, Winkie and Grumbach. Get them quick, and a few more. Keep 'em a few days and by that time things will be going fine."

"It sounds like fireworks, Smooth," said McNeary. "But I like the idea. And now, what's your first move?"

Smooth had opened the door and was half way out of the room before he answered.

"Me? I'm going to have a talk with Spanish," he said, and slammed the door.

Within a half hour Smooth had cruised the entire theatrical district. At length he located Lucky Carmine's cab standing in front of a white tiled lunch room on West Forty-second Street. He parked his car, ordered coffee and seated himself beside the little hackman.

LUCKY was busily checking off the calls on his trip card and figuring his night's take.

"Where you been, feller?" he asked. "You look as though you were rolling plenty shekels."

"I took a long rip to Brooklyn and played there till a while ago," said Smooth. "How about you?"

"Aw, I was playin' Joe's place across the board *—nothin' much. But it was a big night in the burg. Couple of knock-offs in the park."

"Yeah?" said Smooth. "Who got it?"

"Some of the boys that run with Big Spanish"

"They did, eh?" He looked at Lucky with evident surprise. "By the way—where does Spanish hang out now?"

"I wouldn't know," said Lucky. "Why?"

"Oh, just curious. You were sayin' he had a piece of a few night clubs. Which ones are they?"

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* "Playing a place across the board," is a term borrowed from the slang of the race tracks. It means, to the hackman, to come back immediately to a certain place at the completion of a call, without doing any cruising.

Lucky went to the counter and came back with two more cups of coffee. He set them on the table, offered a cigarette to Smooth and flipped one into his own thin lipped mouth. He lit the butts, studied the flare of the match silently for a time and tossed it into the dregs of his emptied cup. Then he swung to face Smooth and hunched forward. When he spoke his voice was a whisper that carried less than a yard.

"I like you—see?" he lipped. "You and me always hit it off swell in the old days, or else I wouldn't be givin' you this steer. You wasn't in Brooklyn t o n i g h t—not any! You got jammed in a scrap with Rudd! Right?"

"If that's a guess you ought to hook up with a mind reader—he could use you to call the tough ones," said Smooth. He twisted the cup and watched Lucky. And as he watched he knew that the little hackman was not guessing. Lucky knew plenty!

"I click, don't I?" said Lucky.

"So what?"

"So lay off Spanish! Him and Rudd are goin' to town—all the smart boys know that after tonight. And if a guy like you was to stick his snoot in, he might get it shot off."

"What's the argument about?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. A dame, maybe. Anything could start those two mobs shootin'."

Smooth raised his eyebrows at the word "dame." He showed a little surprise, but not too much. There was just a chance that Lucky might be a friend of Spanish.

"Don't kid me," he said. "Would two smart guys like them get hot over a dame?"

"I wouldn't know," smiled Lucky, using the phrase that had kept him out of trouble for years. "It's just a guess. But if you're smart as I figure you—keep out of it."

"Thanks, Lucky—I'll do that little thing. Maybe you could tell me the spots to duck."

"That sounds like another way of askin' where Spanish hangs out."

"Why not?" said Smooth. "If you know I got jammed with Rudd, so do other people—Spanish, for instance. And I ain't anxious to bump into him if he's hot."

"Fair enough," said Lucky. "Maybe I'm sendin' you into a piece of lead when I tell you this, but if I don't someone else will. Spanish runs the Trocado C l u b in Fiftieth Street. There's usually a few of his boys there after show time and it's a good spot for you to keep away from."

"Much obliged for the tip," said Smooth. "That's one hack line I won't play."

Lucky smiled and winked in emphatic agreement. They walked from the restaurant, stopped at the curb to exchange a few words with two other drivers, and Smooth headed for his cab.

"See you tomorrow, Lucky," he said. "I'm callin' it a night."

"Be seein' ya, feller," said Lucky. "An' keep yer nose clean."

CHAPTER VIII.

RESCUE.

WHEN Smooth rolled up the garage ramp he noticed an unusual air of silence that was strange to the smoke filled building. The washers were busily engaged hosing down the incoming cars. A mechanic's helper was checking over the oil and water, and already a number of

men on the day line were swinging their cars into place before the gas pumps.

Usually at this hour of the morning there would be a group of night drivers standing before the office talking over events of the evening. But today there was only one and he was nervously answering questions that were being fired at him by two men whom Smooth instantly recognized as detectives from the Homicide Squad.

The cigar in Harry Tone's mouth was revolving at a rapid rate. He started slightly when Smooth rolled his cab to the wash stand and took the meter reading. The detectives, apparently satisfied with the driver's story, dismissed him and turned to Smooth.

"Let's see yer card, driver," said the taller of the two.

He was an old timer in the department and Smooth recognized him as Bones Haggerty, a man who could be tough when the occasion arose. He glanced at the trip card, held his thumb over one of the noted calls and stared at Smooth.

"Where was you at three o'clock this morning?" the plain-clothes man asked.

"What does the card say?" Smooth replied.

"Never mind the card—I'm askin' you a question."

"Well—to be exact, I was makin' a turn off Bergen Street into Flatbush Avenue, and my front wheels were just hitting the car tracks."

"Smart, eh?" barked Haggerty. "Would ya like a rap in the teeth?"

"No, I ain't bein' smart, I'm givin' it to you straight. I happened to take a look at a clock just then and almost got hit by a trolley car—that's why I'm sure of the time."

"Don't I know you?" asked Haggerty suddenly.

"Maybe," said Smooth. "I always buy tickets for the police games."

Haggerty grunted and his partner laughed. Tone had left the office and was standing beside Smooth's cab, which was now on the wash stand. Smooth saw him nodding in reply to some question that had been asked by the washer and then his attention was distracted by another question from Haggerty.

"What were you doin' in the park at half past three?"

"Headin' for Harlem," said Smooth.

"I thought you were in Brooklyn all night," snapped Haggerty.

"I was—all *night*. But I took a call to Harlem at half past three this afternoon. Look at the card—you'll find it there."

"All right, you'll do," said Haggerty, and turned to Tone. "Any more of 'em?"

"He's the last," said Tone. "All the other cars are in."

The detectives left and the taxi owner said nothing until they had walked down the ramp, then he jerked a thumb towards Smooth's cab and grinned.

"Did you get that broken window in Brooklyn, too," he asked.

"Yeah," laughed Smooth. "I got that turnin' back into Bergen Street from Flatbush Avenue. I was lookin' at another clock and another trolley car—"

"Gimme yer bookings and get the hell out of here," said Tone. "Every copper in New York has been in tonight. They're drivin' me nuts. It's gettin' so that every time there's a killin' they try to hang it on a hackman."

SMOOTH nodded, folded his cap and stuck it in his back pocket.

He picked up his black fedora that he had left in the taxi office, jerked it over his eyes and walked out into the street.

He was tired. So tired that every joint in his body was yelling in protest.

He hailed a cab and sank wearily onto the cushions.

"Fiftieth and Seventh—on the corner," he said to the driver.

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and tried to figure his next move. It had been a tough break for him when Eddie Malloy crawled out of that crack-up in the park and escaped. Smooth knew the gunman had lost no time in getting to Spanish, and he wondered if Malloy had pinned the shooting on Rudd or whether the gunman had seen who actually did the job. There was no doubt in Smooth's mind but that he was on the spot even without this additional indictment. Malloy had heard him identify himself as one of Rudd's men when Dorothy was stopped at the theater. He would be sure to pass this information along to Spanish and the word would go out to pick up Smooth.

As for the girl, Smooth realized she was having a bad time of it. Unwittingly he had also identified her with Rudd. It had seemed smart at the time but now he cursed himself for a fool. Big Spanish would try to drag information from her that she did not have and could not give him. He would want to know about the killing of Slug Conners — if Rudd had ordered it, and why. He would also want to know if Rudd intended to crack into the narcotic racket. The girl's inability to answer these questions would certainly be misunderstood by Big Spanish and his men. They would naturally attribute it to an unwillingness to talk on her part and they would probably admire her—yes, even respect her before they killed her.

Smooth paid off the driver at the corner of Fiftieth Street and walked slowly down the block. The early morning traffic was bringing New York to life, although the sidewalks were still practically deserted. There was a taxi garage across the street from the Trocado Club and Smooth stood by the door and studied the three story building where Dorothy might even now be getting ready for her last ride.

He thought for a moment of calling McNeary and asking for help but decided against it. Even if a dozen men rushed the Trocado and made their way to the apartments above, they would find no one there when they arrived. There must be a dozen ways to get out of that joint, thought Smooth, and after a play like that he would be spotted as a Federal man. The word would pass quickly and he would have Rudd's men as well as those of Big Spanish gunning for him.

As he watched the door of the club, it opened and Eddie Malloy stepped quickly onto the sidewalk. Smooth stiffened. Here was a break. If he made it to order it could not have been better.

A cab was standing a few feet down the curb and the driver was writing the meter readings on his trip card. Smooth stepped quickly behind him.

"Sorry, pal," he said and clipped the driver behind the ear. The man staggered and Smooth followed it up with another looping right. The driver went down and Smooth slid into the seat.

Malloy was walking quickly towards

Sixth Avenue and Smooth followed until he reached a spot where there were no pedestrians about. He pulled to a stop, climbed from the cab and slipped up behind the gunman. His gun was out and prodding Malloy in the ribs as he turned.

"You—"

"Shut up, heel!" snapped Smooth. "Take off your hat and get into that driver's seat or you'll get one in the belly sure as hell!"

MALLOY looked once into Smooth's eyes and did as he was told. Smooth stepped close to him took a gun from under his left shoulder, grabbed Malloy's hat and got into the back of the cab. Wearing a Fedora, Malloy would have instantly attracted the attention of a policeman, but bareheaded he would be dismissed as one of the hundreds of taximen who disliked to wear uniform hats or caps.

"Get over to Fifth Avenue," said Smooth. "Drive slow and listen. If you try to pull a phony I'll burn the back of your head off."

Malloy nodded and drove slowly.

"Where is she?" said Smooth.

"Come again," said Malloy. "I don't get you."

Smooth hooked the sight of his automatic below Malloy's right ear. He jerked the gun up and back and tore away a piece of flesh. Malloy flinched and cursed.

"Spit it out," said Smooth. "Where is she?"

"Up with Spanish—over the Trocado."

"She all right?"

"Ah, she got slapped a few times. She's a close mouthed dame. But nothin' else happened to her—yet."

"Where were you headed?" asked Smooth.

"Me? I was goin' home."

"Sure you weren't goin' to pick up a car?"

Malloy's head drew down slightly between his shoulders and the car lurched as his foot trembled on the gas. Smooth noticed the man's hands were white on the wheel, and when he spoke again, Smooth's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"I guess it, eh?" he said. "You stinkin' rat—you were on your way to steal a rig and take her for a ride. Tomorrow the cops would have picked her up in a sack. That right?"

"You got me wrong, feller," said Malloy.

"No—I got you right—right where I want you. Now swing back to Eighth Avenue and stop in front of a drug store. C'mon—roll!"

The cab cut across town, moving quickly through the early morning traffic. Malloy's eyes drifted at times to the sidewalks and Smooth knew he was weighing his chances of a successful break. But New York was not yet awake. There were no crowds to offer a shield for Smooth's bullets. Eighth Avenue stretched out before them as a deserted thoroughfare. Malloy drove.

"Pull over—by that drug store," said Smooth. "And listen close—damn close! We're goin' in and you're goin' to make a phone call. This rod of mine will be pointing square at the middle of your backbone. If you try a fast one, Malloy, I'll get you."

"I ain't no sucker," growled Malloy. "Don't tighten up on the gat. I'll play ball."

"You're damn right, you will," said Smooth and slipped the gun into his coat pocket. He stepped from the cab and motioned to Malloy. "Inside, punk—and straight to the phone booths."

They walked across the sidewalk and into the store. Malloy was careful to head directly toward the phones and he looked neither to left nor right. Smooth was just two paces behind him, his hands in his coat pockets and his eyes on the center of Malloy's back.

"Call Spanish," he said when they reached the phone. "Tell him you got a cab and you're heading toward the club now. And tell him to have the girl at the door when you get there. When you're talking, remember I'm prayin' for an excuse to give you the works."

MALLOY dialed the number and when an answering voice came over the wire, he started to close the booth door. The movement was instinctive and Smooth grinned slightly as he thrust his shoulder against it. He leaned forward and moved the receiver a short distance from Malloy's ear. Then he nodded.

"Eddie talkin'," said the gunman. "I gotta rig—a cab . . . Yeah, I know it ain't so good, but that's all there was . . . I'll be in front of the club in three minutes . . . No . . . No, I don't wanna come up . . . Have her at the door when I come through . . . 'Bye!"

"Nice work, Malloy," said Smooth. "You may get out of this alive if you play nice. Let's go."

"I got a grand to bet that *you* don't," said Malloy when he had seated himself behind the wheel.

"Too bad Rudd ain't here to take that bet. Now shut up and drive. And when you get to the club, don't get off the seat. Sit still and play dumb till they put the girl in—then roll."

Smooth could see a satisfied smile on Malloy's face when he glanced up into the mirror over the driver's seat. And he knew the gunman was thinking of the reception Smooth would get when the cab swung in before the Trocado. Smooth was also doing some heavy thinking and he did not look forward to the reception with any joy. But it was a gamble—and it seemed that his luck was in.

He crouched back in the corner of the seat as the cab crossed Seventh Avenue and he wished the manufacturers had been less generous with their window spaces. He seemed to be entirely surrounded by transparent walls of glass and as the car slowed to a stop at the club, he leveled his gun at Malloy's neck and looked up into the mirror. His eyes locked with the gunman's.

"You're first, Eddie," he said quietly. "Think of that before you do anything stupid!"

The door of the club opened slightly and a man stepped into the street. He glanced at Malloy, lifted his eyebrows in a silent question and winked when Malloy nodded. He opened the door wider and Dorothy stepped out beside him. Just behind her was another man.

Smooth drew back hard against the cushions. His eyes swung from the mirror in which Malloy's face was visible, to the tableau at the club entrance.

"Tell 'em to hurry," he whispered.

"Make it snappy," growled Malloy. "Get the dame in first."

Smooth's fingers tightened on the gun. That last remark had tipped Malloy's hand. With Dorothy standing in the line of fire, his gun would be useless. Spanish's men had no such scruples. It looked to Smooth as though this were going to be a one-sided game, with him on the receiving end. But there was just a chance that Spanish's men would not start a jam

in front of the club—a very slim chance.

He caught a glimpse of Dorothy's face as she walked toward the cab. It was deathly white except for a vivid streak of red across her left cheek. Smooth noticed that her left eye was slightly puffed, and he hoped that one of the three men before him had delivered that blow. Then the door opened and she was stepping into the cab.

"Oh—you?" The cry was short—shrill with surprise. Her hands went to her mouth and she drew back.

"Get in!" cried Smooth. He reached forward, gripped her wrist, and yanked her toward him. Another downward twist sent her to the floor of the cab. "Stay there!" he snapped.

Malloy was out of the driver's seat and sprinting toward the door of the Trocado. The other two men were backing away from the cab, guns in their hands and expressions of bewilderment on their faces. Smooth jerked the door closed, opened the one on the far side and scrambled out into the roadway. He ducked around the rear of the cab and started toward the driver's seat.

"Get him, you fools!" shrilled Malloy. "Give it to him—quick! He's one of Rudd's mob!"

THERE was a split second's hesitation on the part of the two gunmen—not much, but enough to give Smooth the break he needed. His gun was in his hand, it was leveled at the stomach of the nearer of the two, and as they hesitated Smooth squeezed.

The shot was flat and sharp. It sounded like a thin board hitting against the surface of a puddle. The gunman went down, his arms locked across his stomach and his legs thrashed. His heels drummed the sidewalk and tangled in his partner's legs, tripping him. There were a few curses, three shots that sailed harmlessly into the air, and Smooth tried one more shot at the writhing mass.

Malloy had scooped up the gun that had whirled from the hand of the first man to go down. He was standing rigidly against the building wall, his right arm extended and his heels together. A splash of flame jumped from the gun barrel, and Smooth felt a giant hand smash against his shoulder. It spun him against the cab and his knees buckled.

His gun weighed a ton and his arm was a feathery thing with no substance or power to move. His left hand gripped the edge of the cab window and something burned across his thigh.

His eyes would not focus, building walls were racing past in a mad dance, the sidewalk was turning and tilting. He searched for Malloy in twisting shadows. Suddenly the dance stopped and he spotted the gunman. His arm was still held rigidly before him, his eyes were smiling over the sights. Smooth tried to lift his gun. His arm would not move. He glanced into the little round hole that was the muzzle of Malloy's gun—and wondered if his shoulder would stop hurting when he died.

He heard a shot—three more, closely bunched, and then another. He grinned. It hadn't hurt—not a bit. Dying wasn't so tough, after all. There had been five shots, and he hadn't felt one of them—only that damn burning in his shoulder and thigh had not stopped.

"Smooth—are you hurt?"

He shook his head and tried to clear it. That had sounded like Dorothy. He

stared ahead and saw Malloy flat on his face and immobile. Smooth turned slightly. The cab door was open and Dorothy was crouching on the floor. In her hand was a gun—it looked like the one he had taken from Malloy.

Yes, thought Smooth, that was the same one. He had left it on the back seat. And she had used it—plenty!

"Close the door," said Smooth. "I'm all right, and we're goin' places." He lurched into the driver's seat and started the cab rolling.

A dozen cars had stopped at the corner when the shooting commenced. Now they formed a barrier that blocked the approach of a pair of radio patrol cars. Sirens were yowling and screaming, a police whistle shrilled, and to add to the general confusion the drivers of every car in the vicinity had clamped their hands down on the horn buttons. That section of midtown Manhattan was a raging madhouse.

And Smooth was in the middle. He jockeyed the cab around onto Sixth Avenue and raced south to Forty-sixth Street. It was an eastbound thoroughfare, but Smooth swung west, dodging a delivery truck and a street sprinkler. He fought the wheel with one hand and kept his foot on the gas. His thigh was burning and a steady, throbbing pain spread from his shoulder and sent hot fingers probing across his chest.

At the door of a hotel he kicked at the brake and stalled the motor. He lurched to the street, grabbed Dorothy's arm when she opened the door, and hurried her across the lobby.

"Where are we going?" she asked She was breathless and dazed by the crash and fury of the past few moments. "Smooth—tell me—where?"

"No time now," said Smooth. "Gamble with me—just for one more play. I'll explain—on the level!"

Two bell boys were standing near the desk and they hurried toward the disheveled pair. A siren screamed in the street, and the bell boys hesitated.

"What's the meaning of this?" cried the desk clerk. "Hey!—you can't come in here!"

SMOOTH ignored him and hurried Dorothy toward an elevator. He pushed her inside and nodded to the boy to close the door. There was an instant in which the boy glanced at Smooth's blood-soaked coat and at the bulging outline of a gun in Smooth's pocket, then the door was slammed shut.

"What floor?" he asked, and started the car upward.

"Eighth, sonny," said Smooth. "And thanks for being smart."

"Mister—I never argue with a guest. Watch yer step gettin' off."

Smooth limped along the corridor, an arm tightly linked through one of Dorothy's. He paused at the last suite and jabbed at the bell. There was a questioning growl from within, and the door swung back to reveal McNeary standing before them in pajamas and slippers, one hand on the door knob and a gun balanced lightly in the other.

"What t' hell is all this?" he barked. "Come in—you, too, miss."

He latched the door behind them, struggled into a bathrobe and pointed a finger at the stain on Smooth's coat. "How'd you get that?" he asked.

"T'hell with it," said Smooth. "This is Dorothy Manning—and, Chief, for the Lord's sake tell her who I am. The poor kid expects to get killed any minute."

"Hello, Miss Manning," said McNeary. "Pretty tough night, eh? Well, settle down and take it easy. It's all over now. I'm McNeary, of the Treas-

ury Department—Bureau of Narcotics. Smooth is one of my men. Here" —he reached into the pocket of his coat that was draped over a chair back and withdrew a wallet; he opened it and showed his credentials to Dorothy— "that make you feel better?"

"Well—I—I've wanted to faint for an hour," she said. "I've been afraid to, but now I—I—"

She staggered slightly and tried to brace herself against a table. McNeary jumped forward and eased her into a chair. He hurried to the bathroom and returned with a glass of ice water. Some of this he sprinkled upon her face and the rest he forced between her lips. She nodded, smiled, and pointed to Smooth.

"Hell!" said McNeary. "This nurse business! Now what's the matter with you, Smooth?"

"Got one in the shoulder, Chief. They creased my—my leg, too. But that'll keep. You're goin' to have a million coppers bangin' on that door in about two minutes. They're after me for a double-header on Fiftieth Street —two of Spanish's men. And they want Dorothy for finishin' off Eddie Malloy. Think you can handle 'em?"

"Get in the other room, both of you," said McNeary. "Close the door and call Doc Barnes. He's one of us. You'll find his number in here."

He tossed a notebook to Smooth and helped Dorothy to her feet. As they stepped into the bedroom, a furious pounding sounded on the hall door.

McNeary cursed silently, motioned them to shut the door, and left them. Smooth pulled the spread across the bed and turned to Dorothy.

"Still feel like fainting?" he asked. "If you do, make yourself comfortable."

"Don't be a fool," she said. "Call the doctor, or you'll be the one to faint. No—I'll call him. You lie down."

Smooth tried a sickly grin and found that it wouldn't work. The room was spinning and Dorothy's face was drifting off into a white blur. He eased himself onto the bed, saw the ceiling go into a mad dance, and slid into darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW ALLY.

HIS shoulder was bandaged when he awoke, and it was hurting like the very devil. He looked about and saw no one in the room. The shade was drawn, but an autumn sun was making a white splash against the linen. He tried to sit up, and a stab of pain tore through his leg. He cursed and lay back against the pillows.

"Hey!" he cried. "Where's everybody?"

The door opened and McNeary grinned at him. Behind the Chief, Smooth could see a glint of dark hair and a white forehead. He twisted to one side and saw Dorothy, smiling and coming toward him.

"Enjoy your nap?" she asked, and seated herself near the bed.

McNeary dragged a chair in from the other room and sat beside her.

"Pals, eh?" said Smooth. "What time is it?"

"A little after three," said McNeary. "Not that it makes any difference to you. You're not goin' anywhere."

"How about the cops? Did you get them straightened out?"

"Yes, I fixed that."

"That's good," said Smooth. "Information has a way of leaking out at the station house, and if the word was

passed that I was a Fed I'd be worse than useless. How about Dorothy—is she in the clear?"

"Oh, it's *Dorothy,* eh?" smiled McNeary.

Smooth smiled ruefully at the girl and attempted to thumb his nose at McNeary. When he found that his right arm wouldn't work he tried it with his left.

"I don't know," he said, and winked at Dorothy. "Is it?"

"I guess that's what it will have to be," she said. "You see—we're both working for the same firm now."

"*What?*"

"Take it easy," said McNeary, "or you'll be popping your eyes out. Miss Manning and I had a little talk while you were sleeping. I think I can fix things at Washington and hurry her appointment through."

"But I don't get it, Chief," said Smooth. "What does she want in an outfit like this? She had enough excitement last night to last her forever. Besides she's got a swell job in the show business—one that pays more in a week than we get in a month."

"Suppose you tell him, Miss Manning," said McNeary.

"There's not much to it, Smooth," said Dorothy. "In the first place, the Chief is a fine salesman, and in the second place I was anxious to be sold. When a mob can start backing shows on Broadway, buy up hotels and run the night clubs, it's time something was done about it.

"The people in the profession are the ones to suffer most. I've had to put up with more insults and abuse in the past few years than I ever expected in a lifetime. And if I can add my little bit to change things, it's okay with me."

"You mean that?" asked Smooth.

"Sure I do," she said. "Do you think I'll make a good partner?"

Smooth grinned. He looked at McNeary and his smile widened. "We're goin' places now, Chief. Gimme that phone."

McNeary put the instrument on the bed and lit a cigarette. He passed it to Smooth and listened with a quizzical expression upon his face as the call was put through.

"Hello...Lemme talk to Mr. Rudd ...This is Smooth..." He winked at McNeary, drew deeply at the cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke about the telephone. "This you, Rudd?...Oh, I'm all right...Picked up a slug in the shoulder, but nothing serious...Did you hear about the argument?...You did, eh?...The girl? Oh, she's a pal of mine. She's takin' care of me now ...No, I don't need anything...I'll be up tomorrow—limpin' a little—but still hittin' on all eight cylinders . . . 'By!"

He handed the telephone to McNeary and leaned back against the pillows. Once again he blew a satisfied stream of tobacco smoke toward the ceiling and winked at the Chief.

"And that makes little Smooth the fair-haired boy with the Rudd outfit," he said. "Now, Chief, where do we go from here?"

"It all depends," said McNeary. "Those two mobs are hot. Rudd is strong, and he's got a fine organization. But Big Spanish is no slouch. I can't quite figure him, Smooth. He was never long on brains, but for the past year or two he's been making some very clever moves. This business of moving in on the dope racket and using show business as a front is too wise for Spanish. There's a smarter man doing the thinking for that mob."

"Who, for instance?" said Smooth.

"I wish I knew. And it's our business to find out. The men who are putting out narcotics in New York must have a foreign connection. The Department has been working on that for months without any success. If this fight with Rudd's mob doesn't give us a lead I'll admit that I don't know just where to turn."

"How do I help?" asked Dorothy.

"Don't be impatient," said Smooth. "McNeary will probably have you driving a hack tomorrow."

The Chief laughed and patted Dorothy's hand.

"You might do a better job of it than Smooth," he said. "But, to be serious—if Rudd intends to cut in on Spanish's dope racket, he must know of some source of supply. That's where you fit in, Smooth. Do you think you can locate it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Chief," said Smooth.

"And my guess," said McNeary, "is that you can. Once we know that, we'll make short work of both outfits. Because it's the same old routine that the mobs used during Prohibition. They've got to derive an income that's steady. Bootlegging used to provide the bank roll—now it's dope."

"I don't quite understand," said Dorothy. "What do you mean by the 'same old routine'?"

"Simply this—organized crime is Big Business," McNeary said. "The pikers—that is to say, the individual holdup men and dozens of other varieties of small crooks—are not difficult to cope with. The municipal and State authorities can handle them very nicely. But when an organization is formed, that's different. They hire lawyers and political fixers; they make loans to judges and members of parole boards, and never demand payment in cash. The police make arrests and in an hour the criminals are out on the streets again. *That* costs money—big money."

"But I thought all that was done away with when Repeal went into effect," said Dorothy.

"So did a lot of other people," laughed McNeary. "But you can't legislate crime out of existence. When the booze racket went to pieces, the mobs turned to other sources of income. First it was wholesale bank robbery." He paused and winked at Smooth. "I think the G-men were supposed to have put a stop to that. And then it was kidnaping, not the usual type, but a systematic business of extortion amongst the gangsters with money. That was robbing Peter to pay Paul, and didn't get them anywhere."

"And now," said Smooth, "the mobs are peddling dope to finance all the lesser rackets. That's where the Bureau of Narcotics comes in. Simple, isn't it?"

"It's horrible," said Dorothy. "There ought to be some way of—of exterminating them—like rats."

"There is," said McNeary. "And as soon as your appointment is approved by the Treasury Department you'll be a member of this crew of exterminators. For that is really what we are."

"I—I don't exactly approve of the name," she laughed. "But it *does* seem to fit."

"Well, you've had your first lecture from the Chief," said Smooth. "Some of them are less instructive and more emphatic—especially when you've made a mistake. Now, what's your next move? Are you going to the theater tonight or have you quit?"

"We've settled all that," said Mc-

Neary. "Miss Manning will keep on with her work for a time. I'll detail a few men to the theater to keep an eye on her."

"Be sure they're *good* men, Chief," said Smooth quietly.

"They will be."

"And I suppose I stay on the hack, eh? Well, that means I've got to square myself with Harry Tone and take a few days off to heal up."

CHAPTER X.

GILDA GARLAND.

TWENTY-FOUR hours in bed was the limit of Smooth's endurance. McNeary argued, threatened and cursed, but at length helped Smooth into his clothes, adjusted his necktie, and stepped back to look him over.

"You'll do," he said. "A little pale around the gills, but not much the worse for wear. Now, how about this?"

He pointed to a shoulder holster that was hooked over the back of a chair. Smooth slipped the gun from the leather, dropped it into his left coat pocket, reached for his hat, and tossed a salute to his Chief.

"There's times when I can almost forgive Kennedy for those workouts he gave me on the pistol range," he said. "That mick was the toughest instructor I ever ran up against. If he'd had his way he'd have made us rookies learn to shoot with our feet after he taught us to handle a gun with both hands."

"You learned to put one where it counts," said McNeary. "Stop weeping—it came in handy yesterday."

Smooth adjusted the sling around his right arm, walked to the elevator, and pushed the button. The same boy who had taken Smooth and Dorothy up the previous day answered the buzz. He glanced at the sling, winked, and closed the door.

There was a cab at the door, and Smooth directed the driver to a cigar store in Times Square. He sent him in after cigarettes, and when they rolled again he changed his mind a half dozen times as to their destination. Each change sent the cab doubling and twisting through traffic, and Smooth was convinced that no one could have trailed him when he at length paid off the driver a block from Rudd's apartment.

The gambler seated Smooth in an easy chair, poured him a drink, and demanded the story of the shooting in front of the Trocado Club.

"Nothin' much to it," said Smooth. "I promised to get Eddie Malloy, and I did."

"Who was the girl?" asked Rudd. "And where does she fit in?"

"She's a pal of mine. She's workin' in a show that Spanish is backing, and he's got a yen for her. I asked her to put the finger on him for me, and she didn't quite make the grade. But what t' hell—she gave me Malloy, and he's next best."

"So you were after Spanish, were you?" smiled Rudd. "You're a tough kid, Smooth. Plenty of guts. I checked over that song and dance you were giving me the night I met you, and it don't click. You been doin' something for the past few years, but I can't get a line on it."

SMOOTH rubbed his cigarette out against the bottom of a silver ash-tray on Rudd's desk. He slipped his hand into his coat pocket as though looking for another and fumbled with

the butt of his gun. Bet-a-Grand Rudd was treading on delicate ground when he talked of the past few years. He might know something—and if he did, Smooth wanted the satisfaction of taking him along when the guns went off. His eyes locked with Rudd's.

"So what?" he snapped.

"Don't get hot, kid," laughed Rudd. "Your business is none of mine. If you been doin' a bit, that's your hard luck. I'm not interested. But if you play ball with me, you'll never do another."

"Are you a magician, or do you own the keys to the jails?"

"Neither. I'm a business man, and I take care of my employees. Just now, business is good and it's goin' to get better. How about it—do you sign up?"

"I'm in," said Smooth.

"Fine! Now let's get organized. In the first place, does Spanish know you?"

"Never met the guy. I've heard what he looks like—tall, big shoulders, and thin around the hips. Wears a dinky little mustache. That him?"

"Just about. How about his mob—they know what you look like?"

"That's a laugh," said Smooth. "The only ones in his outfit that ever got a squint at my pan are dead. Think it over—Grippo, Scalise, Lunger, and Malloy. Then there were two other punks with Malloy in front of the Trocado, and they're out. That makes it a full house, if you come through."

"What do you mean?"

"The last I heard, Lunger was in the hospital. Is he still there?"

"He's in the morgue."

"Fair enough," said Smooth. "The boys took Joe Salters for a ride, I suppose, and that just about winds it up. If you ask me, Spanish is goin' to be short of men in a few days."

"What do you know about Slug Conners?" asked Rudd suddenly.

"Never heard of him."

"He was one of Spanish's mob. Someone gunned him near the Fort Lee ferry house. It wasn't any of my men. Who was it?"

"I pass," said Smooth. "Who?"

RUDD toyed with the ashtray. He twisted it slowly along the desk top, drew patterns in the ashes with a burnt match, and studied them intently. Smooth noticed that his fingers were as delicate as those of a woman. The skin was white and soft, and through it showed a fine tracery of blue veins.

There was a deftness to the touch of the match that characterized the man. Smooth's eyes drifted upward to Rudd's face. The features were aquiline—a prominent and hooked nose, small ears, and eyes that seemed like bits of glass. At times they softened and became those of a dreamer. And at such times the man was as deadly as a cobra.

"I've tried to piece out the pattern, Smooth," he said. "There's only one answer—someone in Spanish's mob is trying to step up."

"Any idea who it is?"

"I wish I knew. Whoever it is, is the man who's been supplying the brains to that outfit. That greaseball Spanish is just a front. He's tough and he's a pretty good mobsman, but that lets him out. There isn't a dime's worth of brains in his skull."

"For a dumb guy, he's been doin' all right, so far," laughed Smooth.

"Yeah—but he's not the guy I'm after. I've got to get the brains, Smooth—the *brains*. Then I move in!"

"No use moving in if you can't give

'em what they want," said Smooth. He slipped a cigarette between his lips, lit it and allowed the smoke to drift about his face. "Where you goin' to get the junk—big chunks of it, I mean?"

He watched Rudd closely through eyes that were screened with smoke. For an instant he thought Rudd would curse him and tell him to mind his own business. Then there came a slow smile and a far-away, dreamy wink.

"One thing at a time, Smooth," said the gambler. "I'll cut you in on that deal—later. First, there's a little job for you."

Smooth smothered his disappointment with a yawn. He set his butt in the ashtray, downed a drink, and twirled the glass. One word from Rudd would have cleaned up the case. And Smooth had been close—so close that he felt like choking the word from Rudd's throat.

"What's the gag?" he asked when he was sure his voice was steady.

"Can you get along without that sling, or is the shoulder too bad?" asked Rudd.

Smooth untied the sling and lowered his arm gently to his side. At first, there was a twinge of pain that sickened him, but it left and he grinned at Rudd.

"It doesn't exactly tickle," he said. "But it'll do. What's the hurry?"

"If you could drive a hack," said Rudd, "I'd tell you to hit the line in front of the Trocado and see what the hackmen knew. They're a smart bunch. They keep their ears open and don't talk too much except to their own kind. You could hear things the man on the street would never get in a thousand years. But that's out for a while. Instead, I want you to take that dame of yours and buy a little wine there. Spend plenty—and learn something."

"I don't like to mix the kid in it," said Smooth. "She's in a tough spot now without lookin' for more headaches. Figure it out for yourself. She puts the finger on Malloy, and then you want to send her in to take one in the chest. Not so good!"

"You're right. That's out! But how about the show—is she quitting?"

"No," said Smooth. "That would look bad. Spanish might think that shootin' was an accident, but if she checked out of the show, he'd get wise in a minute. She stays in the show."

RUDD lifted the phone and dialed a number. He nodded to the decanter in suggestion that Smooth help himself. Again his thin fingers guided the match through a series of intricate designs in the ashtray.

"That you, Gilda?" he said when a voice came over the wire. "Rudd speaking...Busy?...Fine! Come right up."

He pushed the instrument across the desk and drew a few bills from the drawer. He flipped them to Smooth and looked him over carefully.

"She's a nice-lookin' number, and she doesn't talk," he said. "She'll do what you tell her. Now stand up and walk across the room."

Smooth did as he was directed, turning and seating himself when Rudd ordered; and he grinned when the gambler nodded his approval.

"You're okay," said Rudd. "But that rod is too heavy—it drags your coat. Let's have it."

Smooth hesitated an instant. He knew Rudd was capable of playing a game with the finesse of an expert. Suppose the gambler knew him to be a Federal man? All this talk might be nothing more than an elaborate setup. That phone call might have been

a signal to the mob—the notice that Smooth was ready for his last ride. And this careless request for his gun?

The wheel was about to spin, and Smooth held his last chip in his hand. It was time to quit or lay it on the line. He grinned, drew the gun from his pocket and slid it across the desk.

Rudd dropped the gun into the open drawer and from beside it drew another automatic. Smooth's teeth clicked shut. The chances were a million to one, now. One arm useless, no gun—and Rudd facing him with a load of death in his hand.

For a moment Smooth was sorry he had ever drifted from the taxi trade—the Bureau of Narcotics could have gotten along nicely without him.

"Better use this," said Rudd, and extended the gun. Smooth's fingers closed around the barrel and his chest swelled with new life at the feel of the metal. "A twenty-five is smaller," Rudd continued. "I always use 'em. They don't drag your clothes out of shape and they make a big enough dent when you hit the right spot."

"Thanks," said Smooth, and tried to draw back the slide to see if a shell was in the chamber.

He made a bad job of it, and Rudd threw it back and showed him a seated shell and full clip. He dropped the gun into Smooth's pocket and glanced at the door where the butler was standing.

"What is it, Simpson?" he asked.

"Miss Garland, sir."

"I'm expecting her," Rudd said, and turned to Smooth. "Like blondes?"

"At times," laughed Smooth.

He looked at the doorway and saw that Rudd might be conservative in his tastes in many things, but that women were not included in this category.

Gilda Garland had passed the blonde stage and entered the platinum. Her hair was a fluffy mass of silvery ringlets, and beneath it were features that might have been chiseled from white marble.

Her eyes were wide, blue, and strangely innocent. Her nose was straight and slightly flared with nostrils that dilated imperceptibly when she breathed. And Smooth noticed that her mouth would have been equally beautiful without the perfectly applied make-up. But it was also this mouth that gave the lie to the innocence of her eyes.

"Hello, Gilda, my dear," said Rudd. "I want you to meet Mr. Kyle—he'll be 'Smooth' to you."

GILDA extended a firm hand and her eyes did not miss a detail as they ranged over him. Smooth would have sworn she knew the caliber of the gun and the amount of money in his pocket.

"Is that a promise?" she asked.

"A name and a promise both, if you like," said Smooth.

"And where do we go, and when?" she laughed.

"Smooth and you are going to spend a little money at the Trocado tonight," said Rudd. "Your job, my dear, is to be charming—both to Smooth and anyone he may suggest during the evening. And for that you will probably add another stone to that ever-growing collection of diamonds you keep in the vault. Satisfactory?"

"Quite," she said. "You're a dear, Rudd. Sometimes I think I could even stand you as a husband. Is Smooth as nice as you?"

"Suppose you tell *me*, later in the evening," suggested Rudd. He turned to Smooth and his fingers drummed rapidly on the desk top. The light from

a huge gem flashed myriad light reflections across the backs of his fingers. The drumming stopped, and he glanced at the stone. "Sometimes, Smooth," he continued, "I wonder at the beauty of women, and I compare them with the other gifts of nature. Gilda, for instance—scintillating, brilliant, flawless and invaluable—a perfect match for this stone."

"Thank you, Rudd," said Gilda. "I'll consider that a promise."

Smooth glanced at the ring and smiled. The stone was a trifle loose.

"Shall we go?" he said, and extended his left arm.

Rudd waved toward the door in a gesture of dismissal, and they walked to the elevator. Smooth was conscious of a deep, heady scent, rich but intangible, that suited Gilda to perfection. It was one he had never known, and he fixed it quite automatically in his mind.

In his trade he had been taught to remember and index things that might seem inconsequential at the time but which were apt to be invaluable later.

TIMES SQUARE was a shifting mass of solidly banked taxis when they rolled across town. It was the theater hour, and a long line of cabs fed toward the door of each showhouse. Men and women in every degree of dress and undress poured from the cabs and wiggled their way through the sidewalk throngs to the entrances. They made a colorful sight, one that had held a fascination for Smooth from the day he first became a part of New York's night life.

He glanced from the window of their cab and watched the flaring panorama of flashing electric signs that gave to this section of Manhattan its name—The Gay White Way. Reds, blues, opalescent greens, and glaring whites mingled and fluxed. A myriad of hues danced into the night sky, coloring it, giving it life and substance. They formed a man-made Aurora Borealis that spread a flaming canopy above the heart of New York, cloaking in beauty the follies of its side streets.

From all about there arose the whir and hum of speeding wheels. Horns blared and brakes screeched. There were muffled curses that sprang from the thin lips of drivers. Street cars rattled and clanked. Traffic officers ripped through all other sounds with shrill blasts of their whistles.

The steady tide that had rolled through east and west-bound channels was suddenly stilled.

"No matter how you spell it," said Smooth, "it's a great town."

"The battle cry of the New Yorker," laughed Gilda. "Sure it's a great town, but where do we go from here? It's too early for the Trocado—the place will be a morgue until showbreak. I've had my dinner, and I don't think I could sit through the supper show in that place—so where?"

"There's a grand show at the Clinton. Dorothy Manning is the lead. Want to look it over?"

"Let's go. Manning is always good."

"You're telling *me?*" said Smooth before he realized the words were out. He stopped at the ticket broker's and spent some of Rudd's money for two orchestra seats. He smiled at the thought and realized that even a Federal man might find some compensation in a tough assignment.

The curtain was up when they reached their seats, but Dorothy had not as yet made her entrance. Smooth helped Gilda to remove her wrap, draped it over the back of her seat,

handed her a program, and promptly forgot that she had been born.

He was sure that Dorothy saw him during the second act. In fact, it seemed that her eyes had met his just before she missed a difficult step in her tap routine.

He waited for some little sign of recognition, but it did not come. He shifted slightly and dislodged the hand that Gilda had rested upon his shoulder and was rewarded by an innocent stare from her wide eyes.

"Do I annoy you?" she whispered.

"No—not at all," he lied. "It's this metronome in front of me. He's bobbing around as though he were sitting on ants."

"When did you learn to speak like that?" she asked. "A while ago you were giving me 'dese,' 'dose,' and 'dem.' How come?"

"Sssh!" laughed Smooth. "It's an act—I'm tryin' to be a gentleman."

GILDA said nothing, but throughout the remainder of the performance her attention was equally divided between the stage and her escort. There was an enigmatic smile twitching the corners of her mouth when he helped her into her wrap and offered his arm as they walked up the aisle. She watched him closely as he handed her into the cab and was still smiling when they reached the Trocado.

"What's the laugh?" asked Smooth.

"You," she said. "I've met quite a few of Rudd's friends and each one surprises me a little more."

Smooth's fingers tightened on her arm. They were walking behind the head waiter toward a table in the far corner of the club, and Smooth slowed his steps until there was no danger of their words being overheard.

"Beautiful," he said, "if you'd like to stay healthy—forget that name tonight. You don't know him, and neither do I, except by reputation. Now, are you as smart as he says you are—or are you going to ask questions?"

"The orchestra blares so," she said. "Darling, don't you think we could get a table nearer the wall—without any windows behind it?"

"We think alike," said Smooth, and touched the head waiter's arm with a folded bill. "That table over there—near the wall."

"Sorry, sir; that's reserved. But would the one beside it be quite all right?"

"It would."

"Thank you, sir," said the head waiter, and held Gilda's chair.

Smooth ordered, choosing the wines carefully and disregarding the price list. He asked the head waiter's advice at times and flattered the dignitary by accepting his suggestions. Gilda distributed her glances equally among the women seated at the surrounding tables and received frigid stares in return—but those from their escorts were warmer.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

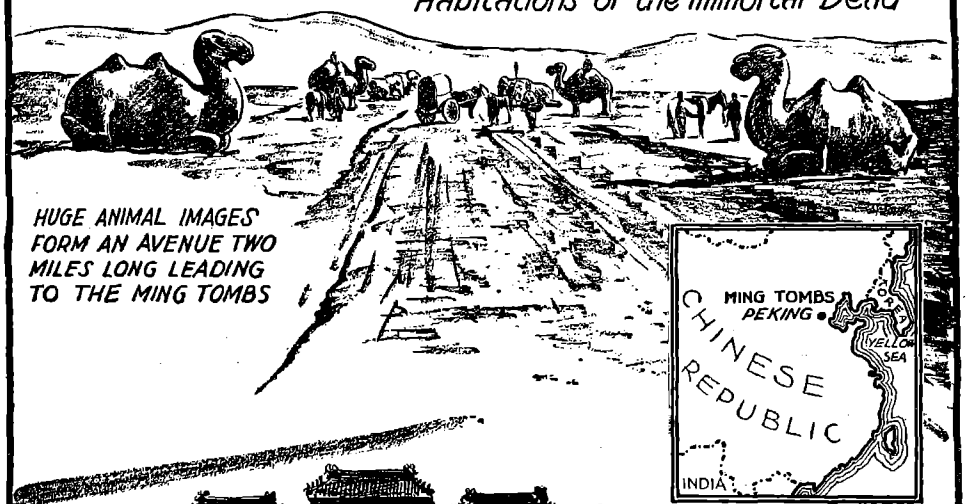
Happy Hunting Ground

MORE furs are trapped in Louisiana than in all of Canada. Most of them are muskrats, taken from thousands of marshy acres leased to trapping interests and regularly patrolled.

—*Delos White.*

The MING TOMBS

"Habitations of the Immortal Dead"



HUGE ANIMAL IMAGES FORM AN AVENUE TWO MILES LONG LEADING TO THE MING TOMBS

THIS FIVE-ARCHED MARBLE GATEWAY WAS ERECTED IN 1541 - THE PRINCIPAL ENTRANCE TO THE TOMBS

IN a peaceful valley some thirty miles northwest of Peking, the sacred remains of thirteen out of sixteen monarchs of the Ming Dynasty are interred. The thirteen tombs are merely huge mounds of earth with apparently no entrances, each with a twenty-foot retaining wall around the half-mile circuit of its base.

Leading to the tombs is a magnificent gateway of white marble and red tile, with five openings. It is fifty feet high and eighty feet wide, perhaps the finest in China. This stands at the head of an avenue two miles long which is guarded by colossal stone figures of weird beasts. These marble effigies represent, as it were, all the animals of the world mourning the death of the Mings. There are four images of each animal, two standing and two sitting.

The Ming Dynasty was founded by a farm boy, Choo, too delicate for hard work, who had been placed in a monastery to become a monk. He did not aspire to the priesthood, however, and left to join the army, where he rose rapidly. After marrying a rich widow and becoming still more ambitious, he headed a successful insurrection. Leading a dissatisfied rebel army, Choo seized the imperial throne. He and his descendants then ruled China for three hundred years.

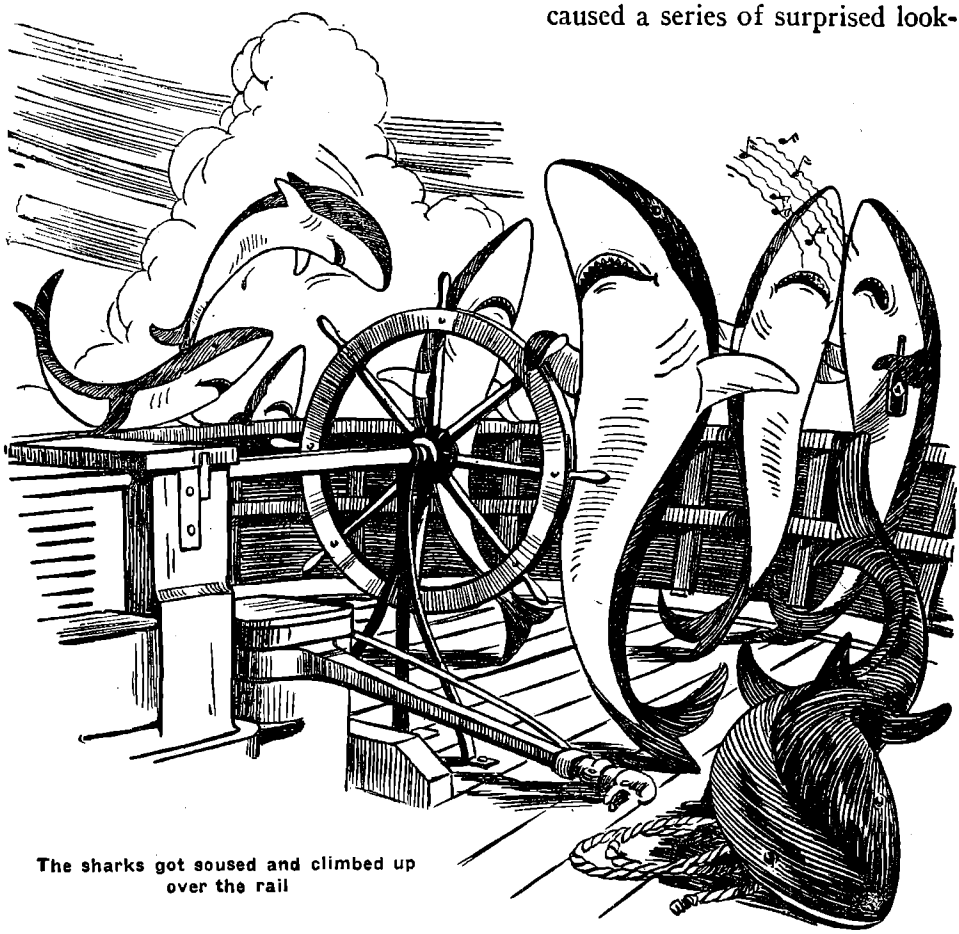
Nothing but the Truth

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

Meet Swiveltongue Saunders, the seafaring prevaricator —in other words, the biggest liar unhung!

SWIVELTONGUE SAUNDERS, basking in the tropical sunset, came suddenly erect as clear to the fo'c's'le-head of the freighter Ainault (Lagos to Beira) reached the noise of argument in the galley, profanely and emphatically disturbing the peace of the second dog watch. Others might raise on one elbow from their mattress, or even get up to peer midships and mutter inquiries back and forth. Swiveltongue Saunders only smiled and allowed his faded blue eyes to grow wide and innocent.

His toothless gums clamped the more kindly on the stem of his short clay pipe, while benevolence lifted his fringe of white whiskers and caused a series of surprised look-



The sharks got soused and climbed up over the rail

ing wrinkles to slide in view across his sunburned baldness. Rubberneck Billson was in trouble and Swiveltongue was invariably pleased when such a thing happened. It eased his rheumatism, made him feel younger. A liar and an upstart like Rubberneck deserved to be in trouble. Swiveltongue cleared his throat, spat from a slit beneath his whiskers, and out of deference to an ancient shellback, and from long custom the fo'c's'le-head turned as one man to listen.

"There ain't no manner of use in arguing with cooks," stated Swiveltongue as Mr. Billson shot from the galley and slammed against the main deck rail. "For that matter wot's a few cockroaches? They eats the same grub as us an' they're tender t' munch on. Rubberneck's getting old and finicky, that's wot!"

It had been a matter of cockroaches swimming in the evening soup, and Mr. Billson had taken a spoonful midships to show the cook. From the sound of things the cook had defended his art by hammering on the range with an iron frying pan, and the whole ship had heard his indignant declaration that he had been extra careful in straining the roaches out of the soup before sending it for'ard. He may have become exasperated by Mr. Billson's spoonful of evidence, or possibly found himself unable to cope with that ancient's language. In any event the frying pan clanged against the main deck rail just a fraction of a second after Mr. Billson had hurriedly vacated the spot, and it was thereupon tacitly understood by all hands that the matter had better be dropped, cooks being what they were, and touchy.

Mr. Billson came muttering for'ard, quite briskly for a man of age and with a gammy leg, and from the manner in which he was chewing his grizzled buffalo-horn mustaches the fo'c's'le-head judged his annoyance was considerable. Swiveltongue Saunders spat with relish and eyed his foe with tolerant scorn.

"Getting soft, that's wot," he said distinctly. "Getting finicky! . . . Now, a 'undred years ago . . . when I was a boy . . ."

RUBBERNECK BILLSON seated himself on a coil of hawser, worried a chew from a gnawed tobacco plug, and glared his wrath.

"Was you ever a boy?" he demanded bitterly. "Then you ain't growed up yet. 'Oo's getting soft?"

"A 'undred years ago . . . when I was a boy," Swiveltongue went on remorselessly, "we didn't mind a few roaches now and then. No, sir! We didn't have no such grub as you get now. Nary any soft bread. Nor fresh beef nor such. Nor spuds an' greens. Nothing like that at all . . . Salt 'orse we had, an' pickled beef. You could open a 'ogshead aft and the smell'd knock a man off th' bowsprit. I seen it happen many a time, an' once we lost the 'eadsails when the old man pried th' top off a keg of Chinese sardines 'e'd bought cheap as a experiment. Laid up for a month 'e was, an' his face never did get t' looking right again. Sort of greeny."

Mr. Billson snarled.

"Like th' time, I suppose, you navigated through th' fog by the barnyards ashore," he said sarcastic. "Every barnyard different an' you had 'em all named and numbered on th' chart."

"Correct," agreed Swiveltongue mildly. "There was them as smelled of 'ogs, and them as smelled of 'orses, and them as smelled of sheep, and we allus knew just where we was by tak-

ing a good long sniff . . . But to resoom . . . We didn't 'ave much else beside salt 'orse and such when I was a boy . . . a 'undred years ago . . . except maybe Liverpool pancakes. Big as a dinner plate they was, an' twice as 'ard. Every time you'd pick one up th' weevils'd stick up an' look at you, an' there was some ignerant crews as would spend 'ole watches below trying t' pick 'em out. I 'ad a trained louse myself, named Oscar, an' 'e'd go in after 'em and chase 'em out jest like a ferret chases rabbits . . . Ah, me . . . Times ain't wot they was. We 'ad *men* them days. Now we gotta listen to a lot of belly-aching over a few poor cockroaches."

"If that's meant for me—" said Mr. Billson belligerently, but Swiveltongue beat him down by the sheer power of an eye that did not blink.

"It ain't meant for no one," he said calmly, "unless it splices on t' your particular 'awser. I was jest getting around to a yarn or so. Speaking of th' men we 'ad, see? . . . Take Larry Costain now, on board the Ainault here. He ain't a day over seventy, yet when 'e busts his finger in a winch 'e has to lay up for a week, which is a cruel 'ardship on his shipmates wot has to stand 'is wheel and lookout. Can't work, poor old man. Jest turns into a bunk rat an' starts sending roots down to his mattress. If them fo'c's'le mattresses are stuffed with what I thinks they is 'e'll be sprouting oats mighty soon. An' there he is. Got th' skipper an' mate a-tying of him up and a-wrapping of him around. Enough stuff on 'is finger to make oakum for all th' poop deck seams."

"It ain't his finger," objected Rubberneck Billson, squirting tobacco juice through the rail. "It's his 'ole blinking arm wot 'ad to come off."

"No matter," said Swiveltongue loftily. "It wouldn't 'ave counted no more than a finger a 'undred years ago . . . when I was a boy! Why, I can remember, when I was cabin boy on th' Bluenose Annie, old Doublejaw Murphy fell from the yard a-trying to blow 'is nose on the reefed tops'l. Came down awalloping 'e did, and as luck would 'ave it the cook 'ad left a big meat 'ook lying around. Poor Doublejaw couldn't miss it and it caught him fair an' tore him all open.

"Now Doublejaw weren't no sort of man t' make any fuss about a little fall from th' tops'l yard, but it was misconvenient to be a-walking around with all 'is innards tangling up 'is feet. The old man...that was Sarsaparilla Jones, what maybe you've heard of, Rubberneck . . . The old man, as I said, didn't know anything much about innards an' nor did the mate. So I said to 'em—Doublejaw being a special friend of mine—an' me being leading seaman—"

RUBBERNECK choked. "I thought you was cabin boy on the Bluenose Annie. Now it's a leading seaman you were."

Swiveltongue eyed him glassily.

"Them was the days when you 'ad to be a leading seaman to be a cabin boy," he explained. "Now where was I? Oh, aye, I said, sez I, 'There ain't no use letting poor Doublejaw run around like that. We've gotta stow 'is innards back where they belong and make 'em fast.' 'I ain't never sat for no examination that 'ad to do with stowing innards,' sez the old man, 'but I guess we'll have to makeshift somehow.'

"So the old man an' the mate an' me goes to work, an' we coils down Doublejaw's innards the way it looked

they ought to go . . . th' small ones going down left-'anded . . . same as a log line . . . an' the big ones going down right-'anded . . . same as a heaving line. The only real trouble we 'ad was with his stomach . . . that being quite a size . . . but we got it shipped 'ome at last with some handspikes and a watch tackle, an' then we got our palms and needles and sewed poor Doublejaw up, as fancy a bit of cross-stitching as I ever see He was very proud of it afterwards.

" ' I don't know as I feels jest right, boys,' he sez when we'd got through. ' Seems like there's a bit too much cargo to starboard.' It was a fact, I gotta admit, that 'e had a bad list, but that couldn't be helped seeing 'ow little we knowed about stowing innards."

" So 'e got better, did 'e?" said Rubberneck with skepticism. " Wot a yarn!"

" I said we was men them days, didn't I?" Swiveltongue observed amiably. " Of course 'e got better. 'E was up and working the same as ever not an' hour after we'd got through with him. There was only one funny thing 'e used to do afterwards, an' I always said that was because we'd maybe got 'is stomach wrong side up.

" But 'e'd never let us have another crack at it."

" What was it?" Mr. Billson demanded. " Did 'e have to eat through the keel instead of the main hatch?"

" He did not," stated Swiveltongue dispassionately. " But every time 'e sneezed 'e sneezed through his ears!"

MR. BILLSON coughed and meditated for a long time.

" Y'know," he said at last, stroking his buffalo-horn mustaches, " I ain't sure but wot you're sometimes right, Swiveltongue. It ain't often you are right, but I suppose even you 'as to be right now an' then. I calls to mind that men did used to be men sixty or seventy years ago, when I was in my prime. An' that little blizzard I jest went through with the cook 'ere reminds me of a man jest like that Doublejaw M u r p h y who sneezed through his ears."

" This ain't th' one about the skipper wot died?" demanded Swiveltongue suspiciously. Mr. Billson looked hurt.

" Wot skipper 'oo died where?"

" The Scotch skipper they 'ad to get a glass cutter for, to get th' whisky bottle outer 'is clenched hand afore they could bury him."

" No," said Rubberneck disgustedly. " This ain't that one. You mean th' skipper who was so full of rum when they dropped him overside all th' sharks got soused and climbed up over the poop rail! . . . This one's about a cook, a cook as was a cook an' a man as was a man."

" Proceed," said Swiveltongue, magnanimously bending his bald head. " It's probably one of me own stories mistreated, but maybe not." Rubberneck Billson strangled back some profane language and then cleared his throat.

" It was in th' days when I was seventh mate of th' 'Andmedown Gaffer," he said defiantly. " Out of Archangel fer Wapping Stairs—"

" Jest a minute," Swiveltongue interrupted. " Seventh mate did you say? When was you ever a mate? An' a seventh mate at that."

" When I was a younger and 'andsomer man," said Rubberneck coldly. " Round seventy years ago. And that ship was a bigger packet than you've ever seen or will see. Eighty thousand tons an' full-rigged on nine masts."

" We'll take that up later," declared

Swiveltongue ominously. "A bigger ship than I ever seen, hey? Yes, we'll take that up later . . . Square away an' get along."

"To be sure," Mr. Billson agreed, squirting tobacco juice through the rail "It was a cook, then, on board th' Andmedown Gaffer—when I was seventh mate—and 'is name was Plumduff Rollins."

"I know 'im," agreed Swiveltongue. "We was shipmates on th' Legs Eleven . . . th' time old Cap'n Throttleneck caught th' green whale . . ."

"If it ain't too much to ask," said Mr. Billson," I'd like to make a few remarks about Plumduff Rollins."

Swiveltongue blinked and waved for him to go on, and Mr. Billson spat again, disgusted.

"Well," he said, "we was comin' south from Spitzbergen one time, when we raised a big shark lying off t' port . . ."

SWIVELTONGUE ruffled his whiskers.

"A Spitzbergen shark, hey? That reminds me—"

"No!" Mr. Billson blared. "This was a ice shark. Th' sort wot knocks th' bergs over after eating all the bottoms away. An' as I said, we lifted sech a shark south of Spitzbergen, and jest about then th' fool cabin boy drops a crate of apples over th' side which th' ice shark gollops down as sweet as you please. Th' creature was sort of 'ungry from the way it kept alongside us, an' a while later, when th' mate's cleaning off a chair on th' poop, the chair goes accidentally overside and I'll be caulked down if the blamed ice shark didn't swallow that too.

"Now, I ain't quite sure 'ow long after that it was, but about a couple of watches later Plumduff Rollins, feeling kind of sickish, leans over th' rail to discharge, an' being the man 'e was 'is first heave takes him clear into th' drink, an' I'll be double-damned if the shark doesn't get *'im* as well. Sorta making a day of it, see?

"'Well,' sez the old man. 'We can't stand fer that sort of thing. Th' next we know th' ferocious animal will be taking chunks out of th' Andmedown Gaffer. We gotta stop it!' So 'e sends me an' the bosun down into the lazarette an' we bring up a couple of salted 'ogs which we spears to th' flukes of the port anchor . . . th' ice shark being some considerable size an' we not having no hooks on board bigger than a fathom across.

"Well, Swiveltongue, we'd no sooner got th' anchor baited than th' blasted shark 'eads away to the south'ard as fast as 'e can go. There were some of us figured that ended the business, an' we'd have to say good-by to poor old Plumduff Rollins. But th' old man was as obstinate as a barnacle. 'E sez, sez 'e, 'No nice shark's a-going to have th' laugh on me an' get away with th' best cook the Andmedown Gaffer ever had, even if Plumduff *is* cross-eyed.'

"So we gets all sail on th' Andmedown Gaffer—and we carried moons'ls, winds'ls and stars'ls above the skys'ls, ten yards to a mast—an' we chases after th' shark. Followed 'im for seventeen days, we did, tacking clear across from Cape Race to Cape Town an' back, an' at last we jest naturally wears th' beastie out. We come alongside 'im then an' dropped the anchor with the salt pork right under 'is nose, and 'e opens his mouth and swallows the lot as lively as you please, 'im being somewhat 'ungry again since we'd given him no time to stop and eat.

"We 'ad to play him for another week after that, using the big towing wire for a line along with the anchor cable, an' when we lifted 'im aboard it took all 'ands—three 'undred and fifty-two men—an' all th' tackle we'd got to 'oist him clear. Then of course we cut 'im open an' there was Plumduff Rollins in th' middle of 'is stomach, a-sitting on th' chair as lively as you please. 'Adn't lost any sleep nor any weight either, but 'e was a mite grieved we'd kept 'im waiting so long."

Mr. Billson paused to eject tobacco juice and wipe his mustaches.

"'E was a man," Swiveltongue conceded judicially. "A real man—such as we 'ad when I was a boy. I presoom 'e kept hisself alive eating th' apples wot the cabin boy 'ad dropped overside."

"You've near guessed it," agreed Mr. Billson. "But 'e was a bit choked up and there was a fathom of roots growing out of 'is scuppers. Y'see, being cross-eyed 'e'd been eating the cores of the apples and throwing th' proper part away, an' the seeds 'ad sprouted inside him. Wot was worse, 'e'd got to doing 'is daily constitooshunal up an' down the ice shark's belly, and 'e'd mashed the apples all down. When we got 'im loose 'e was soused to the gills, hiccupping all over —a-sitting on his chair an' up to 'is knees in 'ard cider!"

SWIVELTONGUE SAUNDERS carefully refilled his pipe, lighted it and let the rank smoke trickle down his spongy red nose.

"Fair," he conceded graciously. "Pretty fair for th' likes of you, Rubberneck. I ain't th' man not to give credit where credit is due. Plumduff Rollins was a man *an'* a cook. But 'e wasn't th' man nor th' cook old Haddockface Scroggins was—the same 'oo was cook on the Bluenose Annie when I was bosun of 'er."

Mr. Billson almost swallowed his quid but saved himself in time.

"You was cabin boy afore," he said indignantly. "Then you was leading seaman. Now you sez you was bosun on the Bluenose Annie. Ain't you got no memory?"

"Bosun I said an' bosun it were," declared Swiveltongue, his eyes fishy and cold. "The old man—Sarsaparilla Jones like I said—made me bosun after I'd saved all 'ands an' the ship, wot time we 'ad a hepidemic of whale fleas on th' run from Jerusalem to Nome. Big as chickens they were, 'opping all over, 'an when they bit they meant business—I'll give you th' rights of that yarn sometime, Rubberneck— But to resoom. Haddockface Scroggins was cook of the Bluenose Annie when I was bosun.

"Now, it's a peculiar thing, Rubberneck, but just like th' Andmedown Gaffer, the Bluenose Annie lifted th' mains'l fin of a shark one day, one of them big bull sharks. 'E was about seven 'undred feet over all, I'd judge, with a 'undred foot beam an' a draft of some eighty feet er so. You know, Rubberneck, one of them bull sharks wot feeds on them ice sharks you was speakin' of.

"Anyway, jest about the time we spots this whopper, old Haddockface Scroggins lets go a box of onions which 'e was bringing along to the galley from a deck cargo we 'd stowed on number fifteen 'atch. The onions jest slipped out of Haddockface's arms and through a port—the Bluenose Annie being rolling sixty degrees or more—an' getting all excited what does Haddockface do but dive right through th' port after them. Of

course that was criminal suicide, for the bull shark jest gives a beller an' swallows Haddockface and the onions an' all.

"I was standing near th' galley at th' time, an' Haddockface being an old shipmate o' mine I gets excited m'self and heaves a frying pan at th' shark t' try and scare 'im away. Then th' old man—Sarsaparilla Jones—goes and 'eaves a cracker box, but it weren't any use at all. The bull shark jest swallows whatever's coming and the old man decides we've gotta finish the shark, same as your skipper decided on th' Andmedown Gaffer."

Mr. Billson spurted tobacco juice, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and squinted at Swiveltongue.

"There ain't," he announced, "no anchor built wot'd hook a bull shark. So wot?"

"We didn't use no anchor," explained Swiveltongue gently. "We didn't need t' use nothing. Right as soon as th' bull shark got Haddockface properly swallowed 'e jest naturally up and died. Thems the sort of men we 'ad in those days . . . an' that was the sort of man Haddockface was. The bull shark jest died."

"All right," conceded Mr. Billson. "We'll say Haddockface was so tough th' bull shark jest died. But Haddockface was gone. 'E was gone in th' shark's stomach."

"Now you ain't giving me time t' come in and dock," Swiveltongue protested mildly. "I didn't say Haddockface was dead an' gone. Nor 'e wasn't in no stomach. Nothing of th' sort. 'E was jest naturally rank poison to anything wot swallowed him. We got th' shark alongside an' we dug into 'im. Took us five days, using dynamite an' drills to get down to 'is innards. 'E was quite a tidy size, like I said. But we did get down, an' wot d'you suppose we found?"

Mr. Billson was sarcastic.

"I suppose you found Haddockface a-running round and round chasing them ice sharks wot you said th' bull shark feeded on!"

SWIVELTONGUE allowed himself a seraphic smile.

"Nothing of th' sort, Rubberneck. I can tell you ain't been around much, t' be so ignerant. Bull sharks jest chew up th' ice sharks so there'd be nothing left t' chase . . . No, sir! We found Haddockface squatting down in th' middle of a couple of acres of liver 'e'd located. An' there 'e was, close to a fire 'e'd built from the cracker box, a-cooking liver an' onions in 'is frying pan an' looking as 'appy as you please. Shark's liver an' onions, Rubberneck, fried by a cook as was a cook, an' a man as was a man . . . All 'ands et nothing else fer two months and outa that bull shark's backbone we got a cargo of eight thousand, four 'undred and twenty-two walking sticks which we traded to th' Fiji Islanders fer muskrats."

Mr. Billson swallowed hard.

"Muskrats?" he said incredulously. "In the Fiji Islands? An' wot would you be wanting muskrats for?"

"Well, y'see," explained Swiveltongue patiently, "these was special muskrats an' being in th' tropics as they were their fur 'ad become sort of bronzed. Very valuable fur. Then the old man—Sarsaparilla Jones—'ad some queer ideas. 'E liked to make money on th' side an' 'e was always raising something. This trip 'e had th' whole of number twelve 'old filled with white Eskimo cats wot 'e was raising for their 'ides, an' fur of course. An' he figured 'e'd raise these bronze musk-

rats too. That was th' way 'e solved perpetual motion."

Against his will Mr. Billson's eyes popped out and he was distinctly shocked.

"Per—perpetual motion," he mumbled inarticulately. "What?"

Swiveltongue waved his pipe.

"Oh, I didn't expect you'd ever 'ave heard of it, Rubberneck. It's a sort of thing that goes on and on or something. Anyway, Sarsaparilla Jones claimed 'ed got it when 'e started raising 'is Eskimo cats an' 'is bronze muskrats. You see, 'e killed 'em off when they was fur ripe, an' 'e fed th' cats to the rats an' the rats to th' cats, so 'e had never a bit of grub to buy, an' th' fur was all clear profit. 'E was a clever man, Rubberneck. A very clever man."

MR. BILLSON moodily chewed on his mustaches and was temporarily crushed. Swiveltongue smiled, munched his toothless gums on the stem of his clay pipe and ploughed remorselessly on.

"Maybe I should tell you some more about Sarsaparilla Jones an' the Bluenose Annie, Rubberneck. Specially about th' Bluenose Annie. I seems to recall 'earing you remark, a little previous, about a packet called th' Andmedown Gaffer wot you stated, off'and like, was eighty thousand tons an' full rigged on nine masts.

"Now I wouldn't dream of questioning that statement none, none at all, Rubberneck, but you went on to make the insinuation that 'twas a bigger ship than I ever saw or was ever like t' see! . . . There's times when I'm surprised at yer ignerance, Rubberneck. There ain't a fo'c's'le but wot knows the Bluenose Annie was th' biggest ship ever built—saving for th' Yankee Doodle, which I'll tell you of later—The Bluenose Annie was jest a 'undred thousand tons an' she was special built. She was th' only ship I ever sailed wot could make her way on nothin' but a 'eavy dew, 'aving been designed with no draft at all, which was some ways convenient an' some ways not."

Mr. Billson made a desperate attempt to rally.

"Did you never 'ear of th' time th' Andmedown Gaffer got into that fog?" he said. "Off Cape Race it were, an' when it cleared she was sailing fifty feet above th' water—'aving lost 'er bearings an' being able t' navigate on a mist. I'm telling you, Swiveltongue. Did you never 'ear of that?"

Swiveltongue nodded amiably.

"I'll take that up some time," he agreed. "A 'undred years ago . . . when I was a boy . . . such doings was common. But fer now let me tell you of th' big storm th' Bluenose Annie got in once. We was sailing from Denver, Colorado . . . or maybe it was Winnipeg . . . I misremember . . . Anyway we was bound for Moscow with a cargo of whisky so th' Laplanders could civilize th' country . . . an' right off Cape Souser we ran into th' worst gale I ever seen . . . an' I been to sea, man an' boy, fer nigh on a 'undred an' twenty years.

"I've 'eard you, Rubberneck, boasting of light airs you'd known wot took th' hair off th' old man's chest and took th' kinks outa of th' mate's corkscrew when he was tryin' to open a bottle on the poop deck. But that's childish, Rubberneck. Our old man, Sarsaparilla Jones, was real 'ard. The 'air on *his* chest was like towing 'awsers an' when it blew real good all wot 'appened was that you'd see sparks flying out

from th' friction. The worst wot ever did 'appen to 'im was after one bad blow when 'e got rid of all 'is dandruff, an' when it was over 'is ears, wot 'ad stood out like stuns'ls, was permanent flat against 'is head.

"However, that ain't the story. Th' one gale I wishes t' recall blew all th' seams outer the decks, an' the paint was just slicked off like it 'ad never been put on. Poor Haddockface Jones—the same wot invented fried shark's liver an' onions—was standing outside th' galley when one extra big gust came, and 'is false teeth went clear down 'is throat. 'E couldn't eat a thing until after 'e'd drunk a gallon of castor oil from th' medicine chest an' got 'em back, an' th' while 'e was waiting for that you could 'ear 'em chattering all th' way through 'is innards.

"Well, along about th' second day of this gale I'm speakin' of old Sarsaparilla Jones decided 'e might as well make use of so much wind—seeing it wasn't fair for our course—so he 'ad all the cargo shifted aft t' bring the Bluenose Annie's 'ead up, and as soon as th' wind got under 'er it lifted her 'alf outa the water. We let 'er stay that way for a day or so an' then we put 'er about and shifted the cargo for'ard t' bring 'er stern up."

"WELL," demanded Mr. Billson, "wot was the idea of that?"

"The idea," explained Swiveltongue, "was that we was pretty foul along th' bottom so we jest let the wind careen her. Blew off all th' grass and barnacles as slick as if she'd been dry-docked an' scraped. An' let me tell you, th' Bluenose Annie's barnacles was something to 'andle. A fathom across, the most of them. Sarsaparilla Jones got so tired of 'aving to clean 'em away at last 'e trained 'em instead. Taught 'em all to come out and wriggle, sort of, an' help push the ship ahead. We got three more knots an hour out of 'er that way."

"Ah," groaned Mr. Billson. "Wot next?"

"I ain't a-going t' tell you no lies," Swiveltongue went on complacently. "We didn't lose no masts and spars an' such in that gale. The Bluenose Annie was a bit too big t' be bothered much save for her small gear. Maybe perhaps we 'ad good luck. Sarsaparilla Jones was 'andicapped some though for a spell when 'is shadder blew away, an' I do recall th' mate 'aving his socks taken clean outa 'is seaboots an' off 'is feet and all. But things like that we jest took as a matter of course on the Bluenose Annie.

"I sorta forget how long it was that gale lasted, but anyways we got clear of it at last and Sarsaparilla Jones decided we ought t' lay up somewheres and overhaul a bit. So we put in for th' coast an' runs inter jest such a fog as you was speaking of, Rubberneck—when the Andmedown Gaffer found 'erself sailing fifty feet above the water. I was at th' wheel at the time we got inter this fog, an' it was fair thick, I can tell you. Couldn't see outa your eyeballs even, but the old man didn't fret none nor stew around same as some would 'ave, though it was that bad 'e had to 'ave two men on th' poop a-cutting a road for 'im so 'e could walk up an' down as 'e was habited to.

"Figuring, naturally, as 'ow the Bluenose Annie had been built t' sail on a 'eavy dew 'e knew nothing wouldn't hurt us unless we ran smack into a cliff or something. An' as it 'appened nothing did 'urt us. We sailed on as fair as you please, until th' fog got so

'eavy it jest sank down outer sight . . . an' when that 'appened and we could see, where d' you suppose we wus?"

"Climbed up a mountain, I suppose," said Mr. Billson wearily.

"No, no!" reproved Swiveltongue. "You're exaggerating. We was fifty miles up a dry creek an' still making seven knots!"

Mr. Billson shook his head. "I ain't never 'eard of that," he confessed.

"There's a lot of things you ain't 'eard of," Swiveltongue reminded him. "Like you makin' such statements that the Andmedown Gaffer was th' biggest ship. I've told you th' Bluenose Annie was bigger by twenty thousand tons, and until we built the Yankee Doodle—I was 'ead-rigger on that job, seeing Sarsaparilla Jones wouldn't trust no one else—she was th' biggest packet afloat. We found 'er pretty 'andy though when we built th' Yankee Doodle. Sarsaparilla Jones didn't want to break her up."

"Why didn't 'e want to break her up?" Mr. Billson demanded sarcastically. "I should think 'e'd want t' try and find 'is shadder what 'ad been blown away. Maybe it was down in th' olds, 'iding out on him."

"No, it wasn't that," said Swiveltongue gently. "The shadow was picked up at sea by the barkentine Wobbygong an' shipped by express back to Sarsaparilla. 'E didn't want to break up th' Bluenose Annie because she was so big an' it'd take so long. So 'e jest put 'er on board th' Yankee Doodle and used 'er for a lifeboat!"

THE END

* * *

The Adder Boy of Chuangchow

FROM the hills of eastern Fengtien, near Mukden, Manchukuo, comes the strange story of an "adder boy." Natives of Chuangchow told authorities of their search for a missing seven-year-old boy of that community after four people had died of poisoning after he had bitten them.

The father of the adder boy verified their story. He said that his son, from birth, had resembled an ape. The child was never normal mentally, but it was not until two visiting relatives and a neighbor's daughter were bitten by the boy did they consider him dangerous. For within twenty-four hours after the boy had bitten his three victims, they were dead.

The boy's father immediately locked the ape child in a cage. After due consideration, he concluded the only solution was to put the child to death. The next morning, when he went to the cage to carry out his plan, the boy was not there. He had broken out of his prison and escaped.

Some days later, authorities learned of a woodcutter who had found the strange adder boy wandering alone in the forest of eastern Fengtien, crying bitterly. The woodcutter had taken the child home with him, fed and tried to console him. The child had repaid the woodcutter's kindness by biting him. The woodcutter had died of that bite within twenty-four hours just as had the other three victims of the strange boy.

Reports from Mukden say that homes in Chuangchow are being closely guarded until the strange boy is again located, as he ran away after he had bitten his fourth victim. —*J. T. Champion.*

MEN of DARING

by STOOKIE ALLEN

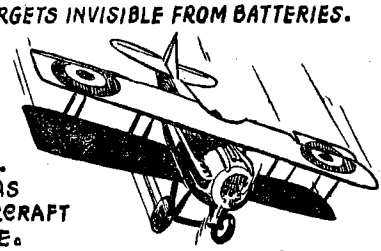
PIONEER ARMY AIRMAN

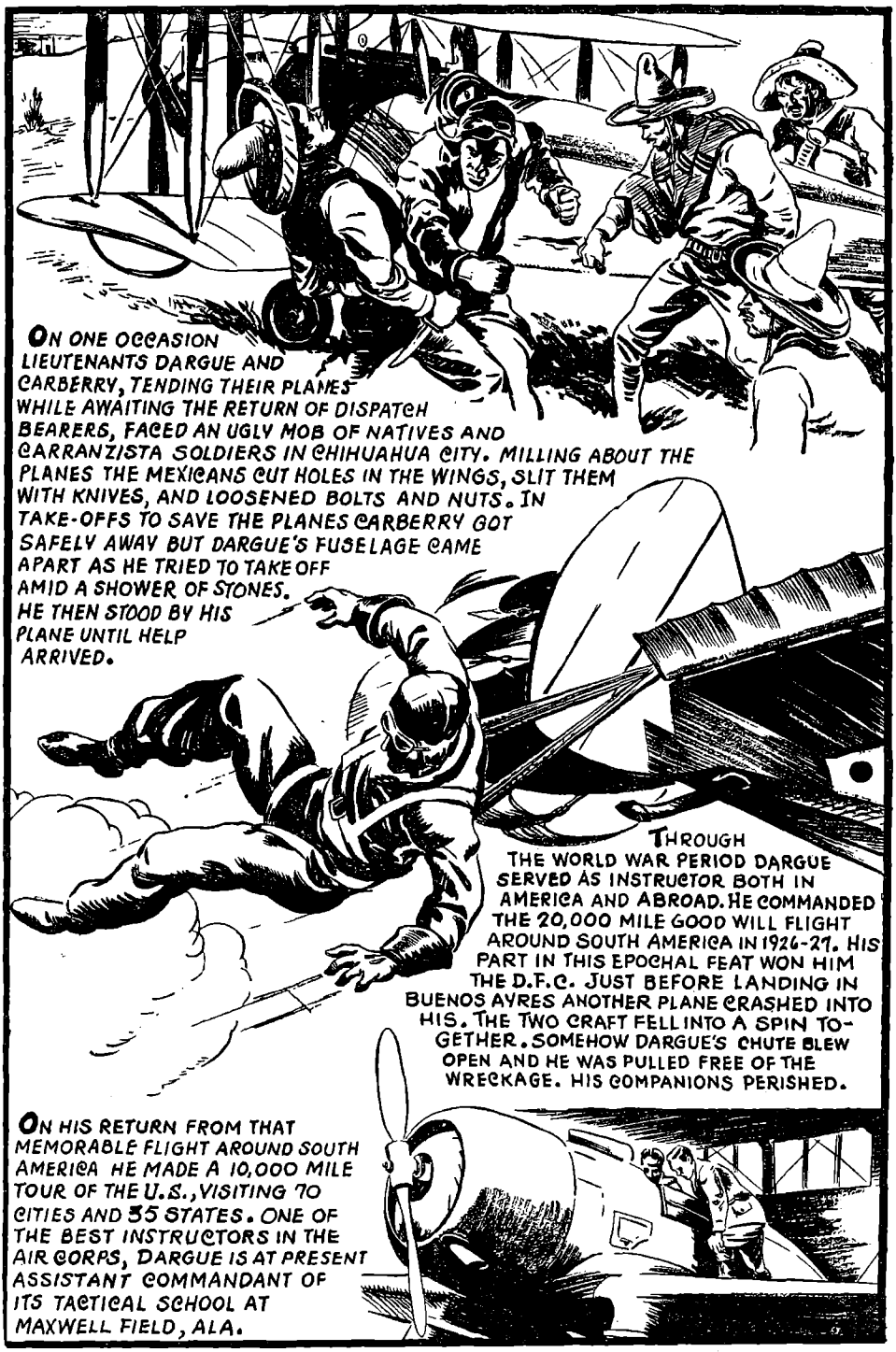
NUMBERED AMONG THE SMALL GROUP OF AIR CORPS OFFICERS WHO HAVE BEEN IN ARMY AVIATION FROM ITS START, MAJOR HERBERT A. DARGUE HAS CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO ITS DEVELOPMENT. HIS FLYING TIME, EXTENDING OVER 3 DECADES, TOTALS 5000 HOURS. HE HAS HAD HAIR-RAISING EXPERIENCES APLENTY AND SOME VERY CLOSE BRUSHES WITH DEATH.

AFTER A COURSE IN THE McKINLEY AVIATION SCHOOL DARGUE WON THE RATING OF MILITARY AVIATOR. IN HIS FIRST YEAR AND A HALF AS AN ARMY AVIATOR HE MADE 189 FLIGHTS FOR A TOTAL FLYING TIME OF 73½ HOURS, AN IMPRESSIVE RECORD IN THOSE DAYS. HIS SERVICE WITH GENERAL PERSHING'S EXPEDITION INTO MEXICO IN 1916 WAS ESPECIALLY EXCITING. PILOTING THE FRAIL AIR CRATES OF THAT DAY WAS EXTREMELY RISKY. THERE WERE NO ENEMY AIRCRAFT TO BATTLE YET TROUBLE LURKED EVERYWHERE.

MAJOR HERBERT Dargue

BORN IN BROOKLYN IN 1886, DARGUE WON AN APPOINTMENT TO THE WEST POINT MILITARY ACADEMY IN 1908, AND IN 1911 WAS COMMISSIONED A LIEUTENANT FOR DUTY WITH THE COAST ARTILLERY IN THE PHILIPPINES. EARLY IN 1913, WHILE DETAILED TO THE AVIATION SECTION OF THE SIGNAL CORPS AT FORT McKINLEY, LT. DARGUE TOOK OFF IN A RECONDITIONED HYDROPLANE TO ASSIST IN LOCATING TARGETS INVISIBLE FROM BATTERIES.





Next Week: A. Henry Savage Landor—World Roving Artist-Explorer

Red Wolf swerved and snatched up Josefa

Bowie Knife

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Santa Anna sends Hugh Kenly, in the face of imponderable forces, to the San Saba mines and to an unknown peril

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

HUGH KENLY, one time river pilot on the Mississippi, becomes embroiled with a party of roughnecks at the Hotel Beausejour in New Orleans. In 1835 this hotel was one of the toughest joints in town. The ruffians had been assaulting the attractive Señorita Conchita, who is seeking a map of the famous San Saba mines of Mexico. During the fight—in which Hugh kills a man—he also saves the life of the pock-faced Pablo, who warns him of the *señorita's* uncertain character.

The *señorita* in gratitude takes Hugh to the house of Captain Don Rodrigo. There he learns that the man he killed in the brawl was Jim Bowie, famous hombre of the frontier. Because he has killed the well-known Bowie, Hugh cannot go to Texas safely, as he had planned—to help in the establishment of Texan independence. And circumstances practically force him to ally himself with the Mexicans, who offer him an officership in the army. They are glad to welcome him, not only for his resourcefulness, but for his killing of Bowie, who had been a traitor to Mexico's interests. So, with a small number of recruits, gathered in by the

This story began in the Argosy for October 5

Mexicans, Hugh sets off on a ship with Captain Rodrigo.

The ship arrives at San Blas, and Hugh, with the Mexicans, proceeds to Goliad on the San Antonio River, the second largest fortress in Texas. On the way, they encounter William Barrett Travis, who notices Jim Bowie's knife on Kenly, and is curious to know how it came into Kenly's possession.

Later a party of Texans and Comanches attack them, but they get through safely upon giving Bowie's knife as a present to Red Wolf, the Comanche war chief.

Matt Devore, cunning trickster, proposes to Kenly that they leave immediately to strike out for the San Saba mines. Kenly refuses, and incurs Devore's enmity, who tries to kill him when they reach San Antonio. Kenly's nose is broken by the recoil of the butt of his gun during their fight and he is nursed by Pablo's sister, Josefa.

CHAPTER VI *(Continued).*

DOÑA MARIA.

"NATURALLY. At first—"

"So I told General Cos," she broke in, laughing. "You'll not be punished; not when you've suffered for me, *amigo!* The man you shot is a liar. Everything is understood. My poor Hugo!" Her hand brushed his forehead lightly. "I came to you when I heard of it. You must stay here until healed, yes. Then I'll send for you." She straightened up and turned. "See that this caballero is well taken care of, my girl. He is not what you think; he is not for you, but for your betters. *Adios,* my Hugo!"

And she was gone, like a ray of hot blistering sunlight out of a cool room, leaving Kenly flushed and uneasy, the dark, slim, lovely girl flushed and angry. She looked down at Kenly now, with a stormy pride and disdain and questioning in her dark eyes.

"She is a friend of your, *señor?*"

"Ask Pablo." Kenly smiled thinly. "She came from New Orleans with Don Rodrigo. Have you not heard?"

"Pablo talks less than he might, at times. So you took me for her? Why, I would not let her touch the edge of my skirt! And you took me for her!"

"Yes, I did," Kenly said bluntly. "Why not? It was dark. Any girl deviled by those beasts would have drawn the same help. Say no more of it."

She regarded him for a moment, her head on one side. Suddenly she smiled.

"Ah, your words are like bullets; they are well aimed, they fly true. Now let me bathe your face. Both Pablo and I are at your service forever."

Kenly saw her with new eyes, after the departure of the other; saw her with new and clearer vision. Vividly white and black she was, the loveliness of her face changeful as a mirroring pool that reflects the clouds and records every tender passage of the airs. After the hot sun of the other woman, her cooling touch was a very wisp of twilight, and grateful to the senses.

Kenly smiled and fell asleep, contentedly.

Later, toward evening, the mother came, and he looked up at her amazedly. She was a grenadier of a woman, with mustache dark upon her lip, a hoarse voice like that of a crow. A hard, alert, practical woman, yet gentle enough and very tender in the eyes.

Pablo came and sat down beside the pallet, with his homely grin.

"Ah, I have been busy!" he sighed. "Working. Wait till you see the Alamo, where the good priests once walked.

"We're tearing down half of it and building a ramp for heavy artillery to go on the roof. And the worthy *capitan* is gone, too."

"Eh?" said Kenly. "You mean our Don Rodrigo?"

"He, assuredly." Pablo glanced over his shoulder, found the others out of the room, and winked. "What did I tell you? Ordered away to Monclova in Mexico, where he'll get better treatment for his festered wound. So they say, anyhow. But he went alone, you comprehend? And you, *señor,* are to be brought to General Cos as soon as you're well. Those are the orders now." Pablo scratched his head. "It must be the San Saba affair. *Caramba!* The devil certainly hides behind the cross."

"And what do you mean by that, *amigo?*"

Pablo shrugged. "That Doña Maria. The business is changed now; it has too little of the *capitan* in it and too much of the *doña.* He is a man of his word, but she's a woman of many words. She's well received by the general—you understand? Trust her. She doesn't fling water from a window without looking first. And that cursed Indian!"

Kenly frowned at all this. "The young chief, you mean? He's not here?"

"Coming; they've given him safe conduct and an escort. Pray to the saints that the *capitan* returns ere long. He's a man of influence and family. Even the general would not trifle with him. Ah, well!" Pablo sighed. "I don't know what to make of it all. The world must be coming to an end. Some say that Santa Anna has come secretly. All say there is fighting everywhere outside this town alone. These accursed Tejanos! I'm glad you're an American, *señor.* These people of Texas—well, they are hard to keep down, whether they're of your blood or mine."

Kenly laughed a little, and Pablo said no more.

CHAPTER VII.

KENLY'S CHOICE.

PABLO stamped into the room where Kenly was resting.

"General Cos will see you at once, *señor,*" he said.

The bandages were but now removed. Kenly, gingerly fingering his hurts, found them fairly well healed, but the surface that remained was odd and strange to his touch. Josefa surveyed him anxiously.

"You must not handle your face, do you understand?" she cautioned him. "The bone is still soft. The hurt was deep."

"I must look at myself, Josefa. Have you a glass?"

"A mirror, *señor?* What would we do with a mirror? A girl like me, who washes the shirts of soldiers, does not use one." She vented a hard little laugh. "Well, I've washed your shirt, at least."

"Bah! Is my nose crooked?"

"How do I know, since I didn't see it before the damage was done?" she parried. "At least, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Eh, Pablo?"

Pablo looked a trifle startled. "*Caramba!* If we were all as handsome as Don Rodrigo, what were the use of good looks? Handsome is as handsome does," he added, then gave Kenly a scrutiny. "*Bravo, señor;* a lucky stroke was that! If ever you stole a horse, you can talk with the owner now. There are men who would prize that stroke, caballero; it is as good as a pardon."

Then sudden anxiety came into his face.

"They said you were to come to the general at once, *señor*. And Josefa too. I do not like this, not by half."

A cry broke from the girl. "To the general? I am to go?"

"Yes. To the Veramendi house; that's headquarters, until the work is finished at the Alamo. And what the devil does he want with her?" grumbled Pablo, with a glance after the flustered, scurrying girl. "He may give her a peso, but there are too many eyes in such a place, for a girl like her. Nothing more than a peso, I hope!"

They set forth with scant delay. And all the way to the Veramendi house was hedged with eyes; but for Kenly, rather than for the girl, as he became conscious. It must be his face; the eyes were sometimes astonished and sometimes mirthful, and he knew the story of his hurt must have traveled far.

They came to the great house at last, and the premises inside the sentry-guarded gate were aglitter with uniforms—queerly aglitter, with officers looking important and aides dashing about for no obvious reason. Here was all the air of something deep and mysterious.

Pablo was quickly dropped. Ushered on through an anteroom where the eyes of officers were not for him alone, Kenly found himself, with the girl, thrust across a threshold and posted with the words:

"The two for whom you asked, general. General Don Martin Perfecto de Cos."

The aide saluted again, wheeled about and in exit closed the door behind him. Kenly looked, not at one person, but at three seated here.

Doña Maria, sitting very much at ease, and two men behind the heavy mahogany table. They, also, were at ease so far as dazzling regalia would permit, with glory of gold and scarlet. And a fourth person—a private soldier standing with a countenance like a grotesque monkey-mask, featured as it was by a whitish paint band and a nose flattened askew. Kenly stared and then, in compassion, he shifted his gaze. The figure imitated, glanced back at him. He was looking at himself in a pier glass. The whitish band was the skin bleached by bandages; the nose was his nose. His fingers had truly reported, but the mirror was brutally honest.

"Come! What is your name?"

Kenly wakened from his stupefaction. He had been sharply addressed by General Cos, the heavier of the two officers. A man of abundant coarse, obstinate black hair, thick arched brows, oval face with straight nose and pointed chin. Not an unpleasant, although portly man; the face was intelligent; of a shrewdness that might mean anything or nothing.

"Hugo Kenly."

"*Dios!* It is he after all!" Doña Maria laughed in amusement that bit deep. "Why, his own mother would not know him, assuredly!"

The general smiled, leaned over to her, and spoke rapidly under his breath. The other officer, who had been gazing fixedly at Josefa, addressed her.

"Come, little one, and what is your name?"

HE sat higher than General Cos. He was of longer body, his smooth-shaven face of high forehead and fine hair brushed back. The large, full eyes and firm lips marked a face graven by passions; intolerance, craft, bold self-indulgence. He, too, wore the epaulets of a general.

"Andrea Josefa de Candelaria,

señor," replied the girl simply. Doña Maria turned.

"She is impudent! Girl, say Your Excellency. Ah, what ignorance!"

General Cos smiled indulgently. "His Excellency will pardon you, girl. Do you know who condescends to question you? His Excellency himself, El Presidente, General Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna."

Santa Anna! Kenly felt the name chill him with surprise and foreboding. The dictator of Mexico, the man who had swept aside all state rights and made himself supreme—and he, Hugh Kenly, summoned as if for conference, to a tribunal of Santa Anna, General Cos, and the fiercely radiant Doña Maria! This last sat there like a glowing fury, her blue eyes darting venom at Josefa.

"A condescension, upon my word!" she spat. "And all wasted, Your Excellency."

"Better bestowed on yourself, eh?" thought Kenly, as he eyed the beauty. Something in her manner, in her glowing regard, brought a shiver to him. But Santa Anna smiled at Josefa with an indulgence neither fatherly nor fraternal.

"But you are lovely, my little one," he said musingly. His eyes traversed her; they were oblivious of all the others. Kenly sensed that Josefa flinched under this regard. "I perceive, my general, that I shall have to change my headquarters to Bejar at an early date. If this little one is of the camp, as you say—then it's time I took to the field myself. She lives here?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," said Cos. "With her stepmother. Her half-brother is a private in the garrison; one Saccaplata."

"So. You have a lover, little one? Perhaps the man beside you?"

"No!" cried Josefa hotly. "No, Your Excellency."

"Be careful!" Santa Anna laughed at her flare. "*Caspita!* His nose is out of joint already. We'll find a better man for you some day. Well, well, there is business, my general; let us settle it first of all."

Cos nodded and bent his regard on the American.

"Your name is Kenly. Yes, Don Rodrigo Estramadura has spoken of you. You came here with more in view than simple service in the ranks; but this was necessary for a time. Well, that is all ended now—"

A knock interrupted. The door opened, and from the threshold an aide saluted.

"My general, the Indian is here."

General Cos, toying with papers before him, nodded. "Send him in. Wait; take this girl and see that she's conducted safely outside." Cos turned to Josefa. "His Excellency was pleased to be interested, upon learning how you nursed this man of the broken nose. You will be rewarded later. You may go."

The way was momentarily blocked. Red Wolf, the Comanche, was already in the room, wearing leggings but no paint, unarmed, his black eyes sweeping the room, flitting from person to person, pausing at last upon Josefa. She brushed past him for the doorway, and his eyes followed her until the door closed; so did the eyes of Santa Anna. Doña Maria glanced from one to the other, and laughed harshly.

"Reward?" she echoed. "I think, my general, she has already had reward enough—but she did not even thank you. She is a child without manners. Well, here is the *capitan grande* of the Comanche nation, Red Wolf, the war chief."

"Welcome," said General Cos, then looked at Kenly. "As you know, *señor,* we deal with the matter of the San Saba mines. Here is the map, of which you know also. Mexico desires to re-locate and re-open those mines of hers."

"Doubtless," commented Kenly.

"It is of importance to bring His Excellency here on a flying visit. But there is a more serious matter; that of the man you are said to have killed in New Orleans."

Kenly started. Again? Bowie still pursuing him?

"That was a mistake, sir. The killing was accidental. It took place far from Mexican soil, in any case—"

"No matter. Apologies following a blow do not mend it," Cos said drily. He drummed upon the table, then spoke abruptly. "We are accused of harboring a murderer."

"I don't understand this—"

"I'll be plain. The man you struck down was married into the Veramendi family. You are now a soldier in the service of Mexico. The Veramendi family see no reason why you should not be taken to Mexico City and tried for murder—perhaps shot out of hand."

THE atmosphere of the room had tensed. Kenly felt the eyes upon him, surveying him curiously; those of Doña Maria, of the two generals, of the impassive Indian. He himself was the center of everything. He felt as though some net were closing about him. It came to him from those other watching brains, so intent upon him. He sensed falsehood, treachery, some monstrous lie gathering imponderable forces around him.

"Why go into this matter?" he asked, a little scornfully.

"Because it is serious. There is a way out. The man Bowie was a Mexican citizen, although rebellious. You may have served Mexico in killing him, but the Veramendi family insist that Mexico punish you. He was deeply loved by them, and Mexico cannot disregard their influence. Is it not so, Your Excellency?"

"You speak well," and Santa Anna nodded. "Too many traitors are supporting these rebels already; we do not desire to alienate more of the old families here."

"But there is a way out," insisted General Cos smoothly. "This way carries to the New Almagres mines of the San Saba. Now, I should think, you need have no fear of being recognized by anyone on the outside, eh?"

"It would be unlikely," said Kenly.

"Good; the very point," and Cos smiled. "You shot a man of your own race who loves you not. He might send out word about you. We cannot have you depart alone on the mission we have in mind."

"You're talking in circles," Kenly broke out curtly. "Come to the point. What do you want of me?"

"A decision. Will you go as prisoner to Mexico City, or will you establish your worth by taking an expedition to the San Saba? You'll return with a few pack loads of silver. Thanks to Doña Maria, we have arranged with Red Wolf that the Indian country will be open to you."

Cos paused, glancing at the papers before him as though to refresh his mind. We have arranged! The words struck into Kenly with sinister meaning; later he remembered them more acutely. Then Cos pursued.

"His people control the mines. As a Comanche, he cares nothing about the silver. His mother was an Apache.

For yourself, I guarantee that your case will be settled with the Veramendi family by His Excellency. I'll appoint you a lieutenant on the spot, and upon your return you shall become a captain. Doña Maria has asked this favor. I grant it."

"Oh, la!" and Doña Maria laughed. "A captain, eh? Come, that will be interesting, very! Will it not, my Hugo?"

Kenly did not look at her. He ignored her words, her eyes.

"But these Texans?" he demanded. "If there is war—"

General Cos broke into a laugh, and looked at his brother-in-law, the thin and sardonic Santa Anna.

"Oh, the Texans!" he repeated, using the American word instead of the Spanish *Tejanos.* "They are to laugh! They fear to come near Bejar, and when the time is ripe I'll crush them with one regiment of dragoons and a couple of cannon. Wait until they have gathered all together; then they'll die all at once. Meantime, I keep idle men at work fortifying the city. However, if you're taken by the Texans you'll be shot; they'll not forgive you for killing Bowie."

Santa Anna intervened brusquely.

"I have no more time to waste here. *Señor,* do you go south with me or north with others? I hear you are a brave man. As president and general, I can be severe or generous. The answer is for you to make, at once."

Kenly shrugged. The net had been deftly drawn about him. The Veramendi family? He doubted this. He doubted everything. But he had no choice.

He hated every person in this room. The tense atmosphere reeked with falsity. Something here of Doña Maria's conniving; and the impassive, silent Indian was of it also. A cruel amusement in the blue eyes of the girl. In those of Santa Anna, the interested, slyly attentive look of a cat watching a mouse. The whole room was like a bomb set with slow but certain fuse.

General Cos spoke again. "Unfortunately, Don Rodrigo Estramadura, by reason of his wound, is deprived of the honor of this first expedition to the San Saba. That honor is your due, and so is offered you. Only you and he, outside these quarters, have seen this map. A matter of this kind is best handled with gloves. Which way, *señor?*"

"To the San Saba, certainly," said Kenly. And knew what he was going to do, as he spoke.

"Good. You will report to the Alamo at once for lieutenant's uniform and remain there. At eight tomorrow morning you will depart in charge of the expedition. You will find everything arranged. Here; take this copy of the map, and guard it well." He extended a folded paper to Kenly, who took it. Then he turned to the Comanche. "Here is the lieutenant who leads. Report to him at the Alamo, at eight in the morning."

The Indian's fathomless black eyes shot with mysterious glints. They focused upon Kenly with a contact, a tensity, that was almost physical. The steady gaze made naught of space, of flesh or bone. Then the Comanche uttered his only words: "Captain Flatnose."

Doña Maria tittered. A smile flickered upon the long countenance of Santa Anna, and twitched at the mustache of General Cos, who nodded and gave quittance.

"Vaya con Dios! Go with God, lieutenant."

Kenly saluted and turned to the

door. He left the room. He was just closing the door behind him when he heard Doña Maria's voice, carried on a burst of laughter:

"Captain Flatnose! Oh, *Santo Dios*, what a face!"

CHAPTER VIII.

EXPEDITION.

CAPTAIN FLATNOSE. Well, why not? It was a good enough name for a man damned. A harsh laugh broke from Kenly, as he headed through town for the Alamo.

He noted that the leading streets were being barricaded, the walls rimming the flat house-roofs being loopholed. These measures, portending of siege and active war, concerned him little; he was going on the morrow—and not returning.

His brain was active, bursting with suggestions and retrospect; he was proof against glances and remarks, compassion and ridicule, as he strode along. Apparently the prospective outcome of his mission was very simple, so simple as to have escaped the urbane General Cos, even the merry Doña Maria. She had cozened him cleverly.

Thank heaven that, at the last, he had given a good nose in behalf of a mere wanton! He was spared this trick of fate, else the disfigurement would have been galling. That Josefa and not the jade Conchita might justly claim the sacrifice, was some satisfaction. And once out of this place, he was gone for good. To the devil with all of them!

He came to the outskirts of town. Beyond lay the outskirts of Bejar, and just across the river, the Alamo walls uplifted, just now a hive of activity, for certain of the outer walls and buildings were being torn down and piled in a ramp by which artillery might be lifted to the roof of the stone chapel.

The Alamo—strange name! Once garrisoned by a troop of Indian fighters, the Flying Company of Alamo de Parras down in Mexico, it had retained the name, and was now simply the Alamo. For a long time it had been devoted to military purposes. Outlying to the left of the high stone chapel was the present barracks. The wide walled area was two acres in extent, premises one time dedicated by labor of priest, Indian, soldier and settler, enclosed stables, courtyards, ruins. Kenly eyed them all moodily. These precincts of venerable disarray, livened by the garrison, interested him now only as a point of departure. He was heartily sick of the whole place.

He obtained his uniform. The other officers took charge of him, celebrating his appointment. Two of them were Americans, sons of settlers below the line. Kenly found himself lifted to sudden gaiety, joviality. Not until dinner came, and darkness, was he free to cross town again and search out Josefa.

She was not there, nor the grenadier, nor Pablo; all gone, and the massive door locked. He turned away, uneasy, disturbed, and went back again to the Alamo and at length to sleep. His face hurt a little, burned by the sun.

Morning came, and Pablo shaking him awake, wearing corporal's insignia, but the pock-marked visage was glum none the less.

"Just time for breakfast, my lieutenant," said Pablo. Kenly came to one elbow.

"Josefa? I must find her, say farewell."

"No need," said Pablo, and made a gesture of caution toward the others

around. "Now the arrow flies," he added cryptically, and departed.

Kenly breakfasted, shaved, donned his lieutenant's uniform. A dragoon summoned him. Once again, as he came to the outer court beyond the chapel, where cannon were being mounted, the stifling sense of futility crowded upon him, the feel of having been wound in a net. "We have arranged—"

For here his expedition was assembled and mounting, and Josefa was here, with her mother and half a dozen other women. Fifteen pack mules, with complement of muleteers, a horse for himself, the road for the women, boots for the men; ten of them under Pablo. Devore and his two companions were of the ten, Devore limping and gaunt, venomous of eye, thinned by his hurt, yet bearing himself with an alacrity which was almost exultation. Why? Again Kenly found himself confused, groping for the force at work here which he could not discover. He went to Josefa and her mother with questions.

"Why? It was ordered. All women must accompany their men," said Josefa, and laughed. "Pablo is a corporal; well, why not? I long to see the prairies!"

No time for more. Orders? Whose orders? Kenly thought of the curling lips of Doña Maria, who had stamped this slender lovely thing with the name of camp woman. Anger rose in him anew. He curtly returned the salute of Pablo, announcing all ready.

"Then march. My horse? Good."

As by magic, the figure of Red Wolf appeared, on an Indian pony; armed now with lance and bow, the knife hung to the belt of his leggings. The silvered haft had been wrapped with a buckskin thong.

The Comanche led, unasked, unasking, taking his place in the van as by right. A clump of officers, with two aides of the general, looked on and laughed as they talked together. Kenly saluted and followed the Indian, the motley procession trailing along behind him.

They headed up the road to the mill, and on out through the fields to the northwest. The soldiers afoot, with muskets and cartridge boxes, jested and broke into song. The women trudged valiantly; now and again changing, as the humor moved them, to muleback. A brown lot, these women, brown and thin and savage. Kenly knew not half the words that flew about nor the jests.

Out toward the horizon they swung, and Bejar fell behind into a mask of green trees, and the scattered farms were gone with the river. Noon approached, and Kenly ordered halt at a stream. Fresh food enough just now, but later it would be sun-dried beef chips and what might be sent by God. Kenly sought out the Comanche.

"You know of the place whither we go, *amigo?*"

"Yes. Where the bracelet came from," calmly said the chief.

"And how far?"

RED WOLF signed with sweep of arm, counted by erected thumb and fingers; with an air of disdain, since Kenly knew not the sign language, he vouchsafed to speak.

"Six day marches."

Forthwith he drew apart, to sit upon his haunches, aloof and lordly. His gaze wavered not. The black eyes fastened upon the group of women, the group dominated by the raucous voice and grenadier figure of the *señora*, Pablo's mother. Not upon her did the

unwinking eyes settle, but upon the figure of Josefa in her plain yellow dress, her black mantilla.

Pablo came to Kenly, with pannikin and wooden spoon.

"A few beans for the lieutenant, from my mother," he said. "We have no fire, so if the lieutenant will not mind them cold—"

He squatted down. His voice came softly while Kenly ate, very softly.

"We're for the accursed silver, I know; we'll never get there. You'll never get there, or back either. Strangle the cock that crows!"

"Explain." Kenly darted a glance at him. "What mean you?"

"You know too much. I don't think Don Rodrigo has anything to do with this. You are not coming back, because you must run away; but do it in time! In a few days we'll be a long way from Bejar. But you must eat when the soup is hot, *señor;* the next day might be too late. Josefa wants to talk with you about it. Tonight, when we halt."

"You seem cursed gloomy," said Kenly.

"What else? We're all in the same boat. Those Americanos know about the map, so do I; the rest of those men are rascally fellows, poor soldiers, who could well be spared. It'll be either the Indians or the Tejanos."

Kenly caught his drift. "Nonsense; why, it'd be impossible! There are no Texans near here, are there?"

"God knows, not I," said Pablo. "There has been fighting. The dragoons have been whipped, and the general is preparing against an attack, so that he can kill all the Tejanos at once. You must run away quickly, and let us turn back for Bejar if that be possible. But come to our fire tonight; we cannot talk now.

"Josefa will have enough to say. Those three Americanos are dumb, stupid animals who suspect nothing. Why should I suspect anything?" He rose, took the pannikin again. "The vaquero can see the cows but he cannot see who drives them. May the devil requite that Doña Maria!"

Nooning was ended and march resumed. As Kenly rode, he thought upon Pablo's words. Yes; it was hard to see who drove the cows. Impossible to determine what lay behind all this. Had Santa Anna lied? Possibly. Not likely. It was all confusion.

All but his own part. He had planned to cut loose and strike for the Louisiana border, the settlements, anywhere. He could get back into Louisiana, with this new face of his, and shake off the dust of Texas forever. What of the others?

Kenly frowned. He could decide on nothing. Pablo's suspicions seemed absurd. General Cos was sending them after the silver, which he wanted—or was he? "We have arranged—" What was arranged with that dour, silent Comanche, whose black eyes glittered ever upon Josefa? What had passed between the Indian and Doña Maria? Kenly shivered a little at the thought, at the suggestion. Why was the Indian now intent upon Josefa, with passionate, unwinking gaze? It boded ill. The whole thing had a darkly sinister aspect as of cloaked deviltry in suspense.

"I'll clear out in good time," Kenly decided. "Pablo's advice scores dead center. The others can turn back safely. What's Devore doing here? Singular! Unless Pablo can be right about that as well. Can I leave them, if they're doomed? The affair's a cursed embroglio. Some deep rascality behind it."

He thrust everything away to await the evening, and information.

WITH sunset they came upon water, and struck camp. Little fires flickered up into the gathering dusk. For a space Kenly stood talking with the men. The Americans were a surly, brutal lot. Devore made no mention of the past, of his wound, of anything; he ignored Kenly and began to muzzle one of the women openly. At this moment Pablo came up, all deference.

"Shall I build the lieutenant a fire and send my mother to cook for him? Or will he share our fire and what we may offer? On the march it is all like one family."

"I'll go with you," said Kenly, and followed. When he came to where the two women were at work over a small blaze, the grenadier blared greeting at him.

"Welcome, *señor;* will you be pleased to sit down? Everything you see is yours. With a little patience, you'll be served. Ha! The soldiery is as much a part of the army as a general, and more. The general keeps his skin safe, but I can handle a musket as well as any man."

The four were somewhat apart from the rest, Kenly noted. Their simple meal was soon ready and set forth. Josefa sat beside Kenly; in the ruddy firelight the girl looked troubled and anxious. Presently Kenly addressed her.

"You have something to say, my dear?"

She nodded. "Once, before Señora Bui died," and the name of Bowie fell softly from her lips, "I was often a guest in the Veramendi house. The servants there know me. One of them talked with me last night, in warning. The general expects to see none of us back, nor any silver either. Or, if not the general, at least there was talk among the officers, and much laughter."

"But it can't be so!" Kenly exclaimed. "Why, it's impossible—"

"Bah! It's plain enough," spat out the grenadier mother. "You, *señor,* had best leave us at the first opportunity and ride for your life. We'll risk the Texans and turn back. I'll tell the general and *El Presidente* to go look for their own silver. Order me and mine off with the soldiers, eh? Like common women of the camp. Well, we can make the best of it, but anger grows in the heart. I'm not afraid of them."

"I'm afraid, though," said the girl simply. "And that Indian! He's looking at me now. I can feel his eyes all the time."

Kenly glanced around. He caught a reflection of the firelight; the Comanche was there, like a wolf indeed, watching, waiting his time to strike.

"That Indian won't trouble us, my pet. I'll twist his neck like a chicken's." With her two hands figuratively disposed of Red Wolf. Then she smoothed the edges from her rasping voice. "And *El Presidente* looked at you too, eh? Well, that would be a grand thing for us if he married you!"

"What?" The girl shrank a little. "No, no; he is already married."

"Well, the last wife need not worry about the others," said her mother with hard practical sense. "That is for his account. All can be arranged. Why is he president if not to take what he can get?"

"Bah! You talk of absurdities," struck in Pablo with disdain.

"Indeed not! She is poor, but he is rich; and she has the old blood of

Spain, which is more than Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna can boast. Well, we shall see. Perhaps if we ever get back to Bejar we shall end by living in Mexico City."

Kenly looked at the woman with astonishment and lack of comprehension. Then the girl beside him spoke with dark passion.

"Ah! I hope Don Santiago Bowie will come with his Tejanos and capture Bejar! Then it will be like the old days again. With Santa Anna there—"

"He's not there," said Pablo suddenly. "He left last night in a coach."

"No matter; others are as bad," said the girl. "When Texas is once more a state with its own laws, as it used to be, we'll breathe easier. That's what the Tejanos are going to fight for. God and Liberty!"

"God and Liberty!" cawed her mother in raucous mirth. "But think well of His Excellency just the same. An ass in golden trappings is better than a horse wearing a pack saddle."

In the morning, Kenly was roused from his blankets by a stir beside him. A fire began to crackle. He sat up to see Josefa there, and to meet her bright friendly smile, the touch of mockery in her words.

"You see, *señor*, I am only a girl of the camp! Well, I shall do my part, yes?"

She broke into a laugh, and Kenly with her. Then, as he passed to the water, Kenly saw that the Comanche was already up and watching. In their gaze his eyes were constant as the needle to the pole. But he remained silent as always. And today, Kenly noticed, the coppery features wore paint for the first time.

The march this day entered a rougher country, the onward vistas beckoning with mysteries, and Kenly looked to the out trail. Before another dawn he would be away. And Josefa? He frowned there. Well, she would understand. Pablo would understand. As for the Comanche, he might be disappointed, and might not. Whatever his thoughts were, or his instructions, they lay deep and voiceless like a stone at the bottom of a sunless pool.

But—Josefa? When Kenly's eyes fell upon her slender rounded beauty, upon the flash of the yellow dress under the mantilla, he frowned again. The simplicity of this girl was very lovely; it drew at him with invisible fingers. He had divined this fragile goodness in her from the first. No weakness in it: simplicity can be a very abrupt and terrible thing. And was he to leave her, then?

Perhaps this thought darkened everything. Yet, as the column advanced, the more Kenly felt that the trail sombered, even in the sunlight. Silence brooded vastly all around the horizon, silence broken only by the close sounds of hoof and sole, squeak of leather, piping voices and laughter; and this silence was like the brooding suspense of marshaled thunderheads. The air, to him, warned of quickening event.

NOON came, the nooning which was to be his last. Red Wolf led them to cunning water deep in a trickling wash below them, fringed thick with cottonwoods. They had barely unsaddled, when, without an instant's warning, the storm broke. Broke, with only one sharp yelp from the *señora*.

Amazingly sudden was the crackle of high fierce yells, the hiss and patter of arrows from the shrubbery. And in this instant of clamor and battle, as the

musket of Pablo roared forth, the worst happened.

Red Wolf vaulted astride with one bound, brought down his hand, and his pony leaped. In full course he swerved, leaned far over, and snatched up Josefa where she stood. Past Kenly in a brush of air, a thrust of the lance that missed, and plunging headlong into the brush.

With that one picture in his eyes and the one thought in his brain, Kenly was in the saddle. His horse leaped after, with frantic spur, leaped and hurtled into the brush and down the sharp slope into the wash. A red face, painted, rose, and Kenly pistoled the leaping figure in midair. Thank heaven, Pablo had charged his pistols! He let the empty weapon fall—there was another in the other holster—and settled himself to the pursuit. Everything else fell behind and was lost in tumult.

Red Wolf had gone charging up the shallow trickle of water. The current was still troubled; the very spray beaten by the flying hoofs seemed to hang in the sunlight. At a turn, Kenly sighted the quarry, sharply reining about to ascend the bank. With a heave and a lurch, the yellow figure of the girl clutched across his high knees, he sent up his horse, up and through the brush above, again disappearing.

Up went Kenly, but losing time at the scrambling ascent. Up, through the brush, and along the floor of a cañon which mounted to the arid mesa land above. The Comanche, flagged by that glint of yellow, was well in the lead but aware of pursuit. Kenly laughed grimly to himself as he settled down to the work. Were Doña Maria across the other saddle, would he spur so hard? Not likely.

The redskin's pony had the legs of him for the moment; he had expected this. A fast, showy mount, but with no stamina. His own horse was a hard, tough machine of bone and blood which could endure long and far. Content that they were not circling back upon the lost column, Kenly held his mount to a steady gallop.

Dry and arid, the upland appeared as they debouched from the cañon; sandy and stiffly brushed with mesquite. It stretched out far to eastern hills, toward which Red Wolf seemed to be making. Poor ground enough for fast riding, cut up by dry wash and arroyo and thorn.

Turned, rabbit-like, by these deep washes, the Comanche could not leap them with his double burden. He plunged into them, avoided them, doubled and rode like a madman, with skilled bridle; for a little he held well ahead. Kenly dared not take chances of crippling his horse with similar madness. The miles flowed past, foam began to fleck the horses.

On and still on, grimly hanging to the chase. Red Wolf pushed his steed hard, but the ground gave him the disadvantage. An hour passed, and another, before he bent back of the Comanche and the fluttering dress of the girl began to grow more distinct. Josefa lay lax, as though she had fainted. Her white face, her streaming hair, hung down from time to time.

Kenly's restraint, his refusal to accept the challenge to a madder pace, seemed to infuriate Red Wolf, whose bow was gone but not his lance. He lashed on and on with cruel hand. The horizon was clear of any other moving shape; if Red Wolf expected help to come up, he was mistaken. But the eastern and northern hills were closer now.

Not close enough for safety. The

pony was flagging visibly. Foam-flecked, the horse of Kenly had strength left and to spare, and gradually crept up on the other. To the right opened out a deep arroyo. Sighting a broken bank, the Comanche whirled and drove headlong down in a wild scramble to the sanded rocky bottom.

Kenly plunged after, then touched in the spur. Around a turn, and ahead showed the straightaway stretch that he wanted. His spurs drove in, he reached the pistol from its holster and waited. Closer they drew, and closer. The broad back of the Indian offered fair mark; above it the down-crouched head. Josefa hung down across the rider's knees; little enough danger of hitting her.

The distance narrowed. Fifty feet, then forty. Kenly threw up his long weapon, aimed carefully, and pressed the trigger.

EVEN with the belch of smoke, the recoil, his horse had slipped on loose rocks, with a falter and a flinch of pain. He clutched frantically on the reins. With one quick, savage yell, the Comanche whisked his animal around, and drove down with lance leveled, with ploughing sand and gravel, with fierce painted face intent.

Kenly was lost and knew it. He braced himself to parry with the pistol —then he saw the lax figure of the girl writhe and uncoil, as the lance came for him. Her arm moved, swung, plucking out the knife from Red Wolf's sheath, driving it in with frantic strength. Kenly sensed the effect rather than the detailed act; his blistered, sweat-blind eyes caught the movement, the flash of steel, the haft nestled against the glistening painted chest.

Down went the lance. The painted visage was caught in a sudden startled spasm; his pony bore him past the American, so close that the sweaty reek of him struck upon Kenly's nostrils. Like a horrid vision of paint and blood he swept by, the girl struggling to free herself from his convulsive grasp, and so was gone around the bend of the arroyo.

Spurs plunged. The horse leaped, and Kenly came upon them there a moment later. The heaving pony stood with legs apart, head hanging low, the Comanche lying beside him across the broken lance, face upturned. Kenly slid from the saddle to catch Josefa, who was scrambling dazedly from the sand where she had been tumbled.

"You are hurt?" he gasped, dry-throated.

"No, no!" Her wide eyes blazed with warrior fire. "There he is, look at him—ah, how was it ever done? How did I do it?"

She shivered as she stared down. Kenly turned and looked. The Comanche had one hand outflung. Fingers of the other fumbled at the jutting haft that rode his heaving chest. Then the fingers relaxed and slid away.

"*No bueno — maldita — maldita* Doña Maria—" And with that "damned doña" his fierce spirit burst free upon a surge of reddened spume, leaving his hot eyes cold and vacant. The eagle aspect of him remained. In death as in life he was proudly handsome; only, as he lay here after last confession, something cynical grew in his look, as though he had been mocked, and repaid mockery with scorn.

"*Dios!* He is dead—dead. We must go."

The girl's voice, her shiver, wakened Kenly to the situation. She was clinging to him, sobbing hysterically with the reaction. He patted her shoulder,

soothing her, holding her for the moment as she yielded gratefully to his arm. The sense of her brave loveliness stirred within him, he felt his pulses hammering; he knew suddenly how that Indian must have felt in looking upon her.

"Wait," he said, unsteadily, and loosened her arms. He went to the pony and reached for its dangling reins of plaited horsehair, brought the two animals together. His own horse stood with one foreleg flexed and trembling. That slip on the loose rock had caused the sprain.

Kenly swiftly rubbed down the two animals. Josefa came to him, pale now, wide-eyed, uncertain; he smiled and took her hand, and swung her up gaily into his own place. He stood laughing up at her, joying in her beauty, until color crept into her cheeks and a smile to her lips.

"My horse for you, the other for me," he said. She started suddenly.

"The knife, the knife! We may need it, *señor*."

Kenly grunted and stooped, stiffly, for he was saddle-sore. By that wet, thong-wrapped haft he plucked the red blade free, and hastily thrust it, unsheathed, through his belt. Then he swung up into the heavy Spanish saddle, the saddle of a chief; the pony obeyed the pressure of the cruel Spanish bit.

The two of them rode slowly down the arroyo.

Red Wolf made no protest; he was done with war and women. He stayed, with the broken lance for symbol of his checked ambitions.

"The horse is lame, *señor*."

"It will carry you," Kenly replied. "We cannot ride fast, but no matter. You saved my life this day, my dear—that lance was due for me."

She looked at him and smiled, and sobered again.

"God sent the time. I had been held too tight before; then God sent the time and gave the arm. Let's not speak of it again, Don Hugo. Where do we go?"

"*Quien sabe?*" and he shrugged. "Climb out of here first, and see."

"What of the others? My mother dead—and Pablo? But she would fight; she can fight like a man, she says."

Kenly shook his head, and lied a little.

"No danger. There were the soldiers and the muleteers. I heard muskets shooting hard, and those Indians don't like close work. No, we'll find them safe."

She brightened a little. The back trail led out of the arroyo. The sun was by this time lower than Kenly had expected.

The broken plain stretched afar, the girl's mount limped ever more pitifully, and there was no trail to follow; and the gray dusk fell.

CHAPTER IX.

GRAPE AND BULLETS.

THE cold gloom turned into cheer. Water and trees coming with the last fringe of daylight, and naught else needed. The fire flickered a little. From the saddle pockets, dry packaged meat-strips, hard and tasteless but good enough to serve.

And, like the exterior scene, Kenly's mental confusion slowly passed as they talked. Things came plain enough now, and the old bewilderment died. It started with a smile and a laugh, as she turned to him.

"And if it had been that Doña

Maria, that Conchita, would you have given chase so hard?"

"God forbid, *Josefita mia!* He could have carried her to the devil," and Kenly laughed with her. Then she sobered.

"It was the devil's daughter behind all this. She arranged it. I was his pay; I know it now. He told me as we rode. You understand? She hated me. She was jealous of me in that room when Santa Anna looked at me. She didn't like my caring for you. She even laughed at your face. She has no heart, that one!"

"You don't like my face, little one?"

"Bah! You have more to you than that. She has only her face. Yes; she planned it all with the chief. Red Wolf was to take me for his own, his men would kill the rest of you. And so, out of her way."

Kenly shivered a little. The night had thickened, the stars were bright, the air was chill. They had the saddle-blankets for warmth, and the little fire; they had no fuel or courage for a larger blaze.

Clever, this girl! And shrewd. She had not been fooled at all. Kenly drew her closer. She huddled against him, frankly.

"That's better; we'll stay warm, at least. Santa Anna did not know about all this; he would not have given me to the Indian. He had other plans, I think. Well—"

"You are afraid of him? Afraid to go back to Bejar?"

"Yes, and no. But you cannot go back there, Don Hugo," she said earnestly. "You have your own road."

"Whither?" And he laughed harshly. "No, my dear; I'll take you back, at least to within sight of Bejar, if we can find our way. With a lame horse, we've no haste. If we happen on the Texans, well and good; they'll not harm you. Undoubtedly Pablo and the others will have turned back ere this, and you'll find your mother there."

A comforting word and thought for her. Presently she was asleep, her face against his shoulder; and Kenly, wondering at the strangeness of it, passed into slumber himself. Thus the night passed.

The dawn broke fair and clear, although the season of rains was at hand. To their joy, the lameness and swollen fetlock of the horse was relieved; he scarce limped at all beneath the light weight of the girl. They breakfasted on water and the tasteless chips, made the best of things with a laugh, set forth and made good time into the southward.

The years fell from Kenly this day, until he was a boy again, jesting, laughing, as they rode under the southerly sun, that warmed them but did not burn. His face was tanning where the bandages had lain, and it was knitting, gaining strength. He felt more himself.

A joyous day in these empty lands, with never a sign of smoke or of man on any horizon. They were together in a new world, drawn ever closer one to the other, and Kenly marveled at the gay creature who shared this strange joyous new world with him. A tenderness was upon him when he spoke with her, when he looked at her; all his old roughness was swept away, until he wondered at himself no less than at her.

NO trail, no indication of man's presence, all that afternoon, as they pressed steadily and rapidly into the south. With the set of sun they mounted to a long roll of

higher ground, seeking water beyond and finding lush trees and a stream awaiting them. Then the girl's arm came up.

"Look!" she cried. "There, more to the east, past those trees—"

Kenly looked and beheld a grayness against the sky. "Smoke!" he exclaimed.

"Many smokes in one; the smokes of all Bejar!" broke out the girl eagerly. "And clouds coming up from the south. It will be raining there, in the country of many rivers, all this night. You shall see. And the cooking fires are burning so that the whole town sends up white smoke, and they are warming the houses against the rain and cold. Come! Come along and think of our own fire! There's wood in plenty—"

And they sent the horses down the long slope toward their place of bivouac.

With the darkness, the ruddy fire drew them close, held them entranced, and their hands trembled as they looked into the flames together. Kenly knew, then; knew without words, yet dared not venture words. He could feel how she was drawn to him, he knew how his heart trembled, like his strong fingers.

"A short ride in the morning, Josefita. Then it must be *adios*. I cannot go into the town, you know. There's no telling what might come up to crop me."

"Yes; you are right, you must leave me." Her lithe, sweet body quivered a little against him, as she sighed. "You must leave me in the morning, let me go on alone to Bejar. I am not afraid. Yes, you must ride fast and far, get rid of this uniform, go among your own people. Or perhaps," and she turned suddenly to look into his face, her eyes eager, "perhaps you will take me with you?"

Madness tugged at him. He would have liked nothing better than to part with all the past save her alone, and by holding fast to the present, shape the future from it.

But they had come too far; the trail had narrowed now. He stifled a groan as he thought of all practical commonsense matters.

"You are safer in Bejar," he said gently. "If you were with me there might be Indians, hardships, the Texans."

"You are not a Tejano, then?"

"Lord forbid!" and he laughed a little bitterly. "They've no love for me, nor I for them. I've naught to do with their quarrels; nor you."

"But you might join them," she exclaimed. "You might fight with them; I will go with you. Don Santiago Bowie will be with them, and **he is my** friend."

"Not mine," said Kenly grimly. "No; I must strike through Texas and back to my own country. And what waits for me there? Nothing. Less than nothing."

His voice, his heart, his soul, were all gloom and emptiness. The girl nestled closer to him.

"Oh, it is so hard!" she murmured. "It is so hard to understand the world and the ways of it, and why one must do thus, and another so. Pablo is so wise; he has a proverb for everything. But I have not.

"And it seems hard that everything cannot be so lovely and perfect, such as this is tonight—"

Kenly's heart shook. It had come; he knew it, he felt it. He turned his face to her, wordless, and her lips came to his. They sat there for a long space, silent, trembling. Her fingers

stirred at last and came to his face and touched it like a caress.

"My dear face!" she said softly, with fluttering breath. "When she, that other one, laughed at it—oh, I could have killed her! I love your face, my Hugo."

"And I you, my heart; yes, I love you, love you," he cried out passionately, desperately, despairingly.

All the frantic truth rushed upon him.

He had nothing, nothing to give her, nothing to offer her; he himself was hunted, harried, hopeless, a man broken and damned. Yet there were worse in the world. He caught her two hands in his.

"Oh, my dear! There are so many things I must do, there is so much I must accomplish—if I promise to come again, can you wait a little for me, with patience?"

Her lips lifted to his.

"What hurts you so, my Hugo? Your voice is terrible. Yes; whether you come, or come not, I shall keep myself for you alone. I swear it," and her words were steady, quiet, lovely to hear in their strength. "There can be no other man in my life, Hugo. I have thought so from the first. But yesterday, today—well, it is the same with you. I can feel it."

"The same," he echoed. "The same. Listen to me, Josefita. I've got something now to fight for, to conquer for."

"To conquer—what? Whom?"

"The devil," he said grimly. "The bad luck that's chased me, scarred me, bit into me. The folly, the roughness, the mad impulse. I've been a fool in many ways.

"Now I'm out to smash it all. I haven't much education, I've no friends—but I've got the strong hand under it all! And the will. That's the big thing; the will."

AND the stars saw, and perhaps the cold devils laughed as they heard his voice lifting upon the firelight. The will? It was far from him yet, though he knew it not.

Again they slept together this night, hand in hand for warmth and trust and love. With the gray dawn, Kenly loosed from her hand and was up and about, stirring the fire to life, and it was needed. A gray dawn, sunless, with all the sky to the south and east a white dim phantasy.

"Fog!" she cried, seeing it. "It is the mist that comes up from the rivers and the fields, my Hugo—Bejar lies there, indeed!"

"So eager?" he said grimly. She met his eyes and laughed, bravely.

"Eager, yes, for you to go and come again."

His heart warmed to her courage, though it were but the courage of youth.

They rode down and presently the thin mist was around them and on everything. A luminous fog, as though in testament that the sunny future, like the blue sky, was prepared in waiting. Kenly felt a keen exultation gripping him, bred perhaps of daring, perhaps of love and triumph, as he rode with the girl at his stirrup.

The mist brought forth faint distant sounds, tenuous as itself, but indicative of life.

And presently they came into a wagon-track, a road.

"We're not far now," she said, tremulous. "I can find my way onward. Go, ride off before the fog breaks! It will not last long—ah! Ah! What is that?"

The quiet of the blind way was sud-

denly shattered ahead. A shot, a cannon roar, then volley upon volley of musketry, sustained and long. Through it pierced sharper sounds—the thin, mad crack of rifles, the distant voices of men all together that lifted and died away into more firing.

"Battle!" Kenly's voice shook with excitement. "Fighting!"

"Then you must join the Tejanos!" she cried. "They are taking Bejar—you must join them, we'll join them together!"

If it were battle indeed, then it seemed a battle in the clouds. There were the sounds, but no visible sources. The cannon spoke once again, and twice, no more; the musketry volleyed fainter, the eager crack of rifles rose and rattled louder. Kenly hesitated.

If San Antonio were being taken, this was no time to ride in. If the Mexican troops were out, the dragoons riding down the Texans, this was no time to stop here. If the fields were aswim with grape and bullets in the fog, what to do? One's senses were confused like the medley of confused sounds.

"Whither, Hugo?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "Keep going slowly."

Rifles cracked again. Later, he learned of the picture that fitted the sounds. Ninety of those long rifles, cut off and surrounded in the mist by five hundred of the best Cos could send forth. Ninety of them, cannon crashing upon them, musketry hailing lead upon them, flashing dragoons charging down on them; ninety rifles cracking in the sunrise, blowing death upon the gunners, silencing the musket volleys, smashing the dragoon lines, cutting down the officers—charging the five hundred or what remained of them, and scattering them all to the four winds in gusty exultation and bloody rout.

But only the sounds came lifting upon the thinning fog, as Kenly and the girl beside him headed slowly on toward the city.

A last crack or two, and the rifles died out.

One side or the other, Kenly decided, was beaten. Even as he listened, keyed to seize upon the moment, the sun came thrusting through the mist; as though riven by clamors and golden rays, the fog went drifting in shredded filaments.

Through it lifted and grew San Antonio de Bejar, with its bell-tower of the great church wreathed by eddying wraiths. At the gate were streaming in soldiery, foot and horse in wild confusion, pack mules galloped hither and thither in disarray. Then a quick, stifled cry broke from Josefa. Kenly swung about. Through the mist close upon them appeared dim shapes. They took form. A party of horsemen; the long rifles and broad hats made announcement, but the hail came in Spanish.

"Surrender, you! Don't move—we have you!"

"*Los Tejanos!*" breathed the girl.

The leader came riding in upon them, sure of the rifles behind him. Kenly drew rein. The leader halted with sharp demand.

"Who are you, with this woman?"

From Josefa burst a glad, wild cry of recognition. Kenly sat there, words dying in his throat, a paralysis upon him, his heart failing. A dead man was staring at him; cold blue eyes, masterful visage, ringing voice. He was facing Jim Bowie, living, who had been Jim Bowie, dead.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Grainman

By

KIMBALL

HERRICK

Something bright flashed from Smith's coat

A Great Lakes grain elevator is a fine place for a murder — and equally good for retribution

IN the swift darkness that was settling over the grimy industrial skyline of South Ewing, the gaunt bare iron body of the ancient Adelia, the oldest and dustiest of all the giant grain elevators on the little Rocky River, rose monstrously above the flat-bellied Great Lakes grain boat floating low under the burden of three hundred thousand bushels of wheat at her crumbling black dock.

Like the hum of a huge insect before it strikes its prey, the cavernous rumble of moving power from within the blank-walled elevator laid a blanket of sound over the dock. Slowly, ponderously, the lower end of the marine leg, a long, iron-incased endless belt, was pushed out from the house over an open hatch.

The hundreds of steel buckets flashed incessantly around the drum at the open tip, greedily waiting to dip up the laker's cargo.

For an instant the whining belt in its long casing poised over the wheat. Then the whole body slipped swiftly downward, the open nose was buried in grain, the dipping buckets filled themselves one by one in furious rapidity and scurried slantingly upward on the eternal belt to dump their little burdens into the depths of the great house as they rounded the unseen upper end and hastened back for more.

Sandy Carson, lank, leathery superintendent of the old Adelia, nudged his foreman with an angular elbow.

"We're off, ye dumb-headed Dutchman," he sighed. "Now see if ye can lick out that cargo of Dakota berries and fill some nice little box cars by delivery time tomorrow. The big boss is short wheat in the pits, and he'll get an awful squeezin' if we don't deliver; and what's more, there'll be a brand-new foreman in this old dust house by tomorrow night. And this time, laddie, I'll get me a good Polack with a burr of brains in his cap."

Pete Verhoeven, as good a dust-breather as ever guided a cranky power shovel behind two tons of sliding grain, ambled his mass of rippling muscles across the deck in the wake of Carson's long, lean form.

The gentle blue eyes in his full, solid face brightened.

"And wouldn't you be in a mess now," he retorted, "with a new foreman and you not knowing a thing about running grain but to sit in the office and keep your panties clean."

SILENTLY the two men passed along the dock toward the little office building. The amused gleam faded out of the foreman's eyes and his broad shoulders hunched a little.

Suddenly Carson snorted impatiently. "Spill it, ye roundhead," he barked. "I got a feeling it's comin' on ye again."

Pete shrugged. "It's night again, Sandy," he said simply. "In the last three months we've run this house jest exactly six times at night. And them six times adds up to two men killed, three men hurt, and half a dozen accidents that jest don't fit in the swellest, slickest house on the river, run by the cream of South Ewing shovelers. It ain't just an accident, Sandy, a run of luck like that. And," he added prophetically, "I got a feeling it's goin' to happen again tonight."

Carson moved uneasily.

"Pete," he complained, "you give me the shivers. These all-day, all-night runs are just too tough on the old lady. She's too feeble. Can't you see that?"

An explosive protest from the barrel chest of Pete Verhoeven buffeted the iron wall of the elevator and bounced echoing out across the black, oily shimmer of the slip.

"Too tough?" he roared in indignant repudiation. "Sandy, you been working here with me twenty years, and you know we ain't feedin' men into a rickety house on dark nights when the dust is flying. It's plain dirty murder, I tell you. And Cheneski and Olsen was friends of mine and friends of yours, and good grain men to boot. It don't stand to reason that the old Adelia has got murder in her heart for honest men like them."

Carson nodded a silent respect..

The two huge paws of Pete Verhoeven, menacing paws that had on occasion curled the black length of an iron crowbar, gripped the air hungrily. "God help him if I get my hands on him," he growled.

"But, Pete," Sandy argued, "there can't be nobody would want to harm

this poor old house. There ain't no reason for it. The big boss don't have enemies, a grand guy like him, and our boys is the swellest bunch on the river."

"There was Joe Sabicik—"

"Joe Sabicik is in jail—for twenty years."

"Maybe he's got friends," Pete insisted.

Sandy gestured impatiently.

"I think you're nuts," he remarked appraisingly. "A Dutchman with no headpiece on him ought to be growing tulips and not mixin' around trying to run grain through a million-bushel house."

Pete shook his leonine head firmly. "The Adelia is my baby," he said solemnly, "she talks to me. And anyway," he added defensively, "my mother was a Irish lady, and I'm—I'm psychic."

THE blunt, square end of a box car loomed in the shadows, and there was a sequence of clanks as a string of box cars stretched out to a halt. A man swinging a lantern dropped off the ladder and crunched across the cindery space. Up ahead, at the far end of the fan-shaped, steel-ribbed track yard, a stubby switch engine breathed quietly.

"Got a hatful of empties for you," the conductor called.

"We can use 'em, Smoky," Sandy said, "and no poker game for you fellows tonight. We're unloadin' a boat and loadin' the cargo right into cars, and ye can push about two hundred and fifty o' them bad order boxes of yours under our loadin' spouts tonight."

The conductor groaned and issued a few lusty opinions of grain elevators that imposed on the social rights of night engine crews.

"Aw," he added disgustedly, "we can't play poker anyway. We're all busted except that big lunk, Stingy Smith, the fireman, and all he'll do is sit in the cab all night, the bullet-headed tightwad."

Pulling a sheet of car numbers from his pocket, the conductor climbed the steps of the office building. Sandy Carson, following, turned on the top step.

"Pete," he called, "what was that last word you said? Sikick?"

Pete grinned. "A fortune teller called me that," he said, and spread his bulk on the bottom step.

The Adelia was buckling to her dreary, monotonous task. Bushel by bushel the laker's cargo was flowing into the house, dropping downward to the dark buried boots of the vertical elevator legs, those steel boxes underground where more hundreds of buckets dipped it up and carried it in a swift, sheer climb to the very top of the house, to be flung out and to descend once more into huge, box-like scales, and finally in drafts of thirty tons or so to be dropped a roaring hundred feet and smashed in a welter of noise into the hollow echoing bellies of patient box cars.

Pete listened to the music of his baby with the unconscious pride that filled him whenever this tall, old-fashioned gravity house was doing a job. But tonight the cherubic face that perched incongruously on his giant, steel-muscled, cable-backed body was pinched with painful groping. For the thousandth time he mentally reviewed the Adelia's crew, one by one, seeking to find a single man who might have the viciousness in his black soul to kill the Adelia's men, to rack her faithful old machinery.

He could think of no one.

He refused to believe Sandy, refused to believe that these midnight troubles of the old house were breakdowns. The honest chest of Pete Verhoeven throbbed with a grim conviction that the tipped wooden cover that had spilled Cheneski into a hopper whose narrowing, slippery slides had inevitably slid him to a slicing, screaming death at the bottom where the hopper poured into the flying buckets of number 4 leg, had been tipped by a cunning human toe—the toe of a grain man.

And that was only one example of the odd, unsuspected things that had happened on those six black nights.

But the Adelia's crew held no suspects. Except for the new man, the giant Ronowski who had been hired but two short weeks before, every man was as well known to Pete and Sandy as their own brothers.

PETE'S thoughts turned again to Joe Sabicik—dark, mean Joe, who had buried a black-handled knife in the unsuspecting back of the little oiler up in the cupola. The Adelia's men had handled Joe Sabicik within an inch of his worthless life before Pete and Sandy had saved him for the big boss to send away to the barred stone house down the rivzer. Yet there were no friends of Joe Sabicik's in this house.

Baffled and angry, the foreman rose, as Sandy's head appeared in the door at the top of the stairs.

"It ain't that I can't improve the quality of the foreman here," Sandy called, "but I'm kind of used to ye, and a smart one would be a nuisance, so don't be pokin' your head around where it ain't no business to be, lad."

Pete saluted the lean grin at the head of the stairs with five fingers of derision. "Pull that skinny knob inside," he requested, "and let elevator men do their work."

The door slammed. Around the corner of the office a railroad man, his bullet head crowned by a sooty, long-peaked cap, swung into view.

"Hullo, Smith," Pete remarked pleasantly, although he had no liking for the man.

"Hello, Pete. Busy tonight?"

"Yeah, unloadin' a boat. Loadin out cars. Got to get this cargo into the Belt yards by delivery time tomorrow."

Smith grinned. "How you gonna do it with this old cheesebox?" he inquired with a twisted, malicious grin. "Every night you got work to do something breaks or somebody gets killed."

"Best house on the river," Pete retorted shortly. The big fireman's harsh voice was oddly distasteful to him.

Smith's glance appraised the foreman's great body, and when his glance returned to Pete's mild face he spoke conciliatingly.

"Well," he conceded, "it's your business."

Gradually South Ewing went to sleep, so that it might rise early. Over the Adelia's dock the flood lights defensively brightened their rays, yet held only a meager patch against the night.

On the top floor of the cupola, where a lonesome oiler tended the massive, pounding leg heads, Pete started down through his beloved grain house on a slow, embracing, examining spiral. Down through the dusty floors of the cupola he circled. Then from the bin floor, that layer of boards over the great honeycomb of bins that formed the Adelia's body, he rode the little passenger lift that lanced its way upward through the house to form the

only means of passage from the track floor far below.

AGAIN downstairs he pursued his grim search, and when a subdued hiss of the engine whistle called the men into the locker room for the thick sandwiches and hot coffee that Sandy had provided, he followed them with a measure of satisfaction.

"Ain't a thing could go wrong tonight, Sandy," he said; "not a thing. Hummin' like my watch and tight as a drum."

The superintendent silently studied the worried wrinkles, etched in dust, around Pete's eyes, and the faint downward slant of his good-humored mouth, rimmed now with the black line that a grain elevator puts on the mouth of a man who eats her dust.

Sandy felt a pang of uneasiness. Pete was certainly afraid of a mythical murderer. The first thing he knew, Pete would be getting jumpy, and the old-fashioned Adelia, with her running power mostly exposed, was no place for a jumpy man.

"Easy does it, lad," he breathed softly.

The half hour swiftly passed. The Adelia went back to work. Weary men again settled down to the will of the great house.

In two hours Pete was grudgingly lulled into a reasonably hopeful state. "God," he prayed, "if only it won't happen tonight—"

Ronowski, the new man, clung to a divider rod and peered through dust-blanketed goggles into a loading car. The second draft was playing out. Suddenly it stopped, the last few kernels leaving a tiny, impertinent crackle to linger in the comparative silence that followed.

Ronowski stepped down from the loading platform, plastered with dust, and removed his goggles. The clean circles around his eyes gave him a staring, goblin-like appearance.

Not a mean face, Pete decided, but perhaps a little weak. He called to the man, and Ronowski ambled over, wiping his flat cheeks.

"Yah, Mr. Pete?"

"Ronowski, where you work before this?"

"Chicago River, Mr. Pete, dot Buxton 'A' house. I—"

He did not finish. The chill scream of tortured steel slashed viciously across his words. High over the noise of the house a knife-like screech rode for a cold instant and then abruptly, startlingly ceased, leaving only the tremulous, icy memory of its pitch.

"Number 4 boot," Pete roared, leaping to the hopper cover to peer down. "Bring a light. Gimme a light. Quick!"

The *post mortem* was brief. At the mouth of the hopper, where grain flows into the little boot and where the buckets of the leg are ceaselessly whirling around to dip it up and carry it to the top of the house, a lacerated steel plate mutely complained of its injury. A more audible story was told in the spasmodic bumping of twisted buckets against the wooden casing of the endless belt that traveled up and down, up and down, the full height of the house. High in the cupola the leg had flung out the twisted bar of iron that had slid into its whirling buckets down below and had fought them in the impossibly narrow space until it had been crushed and bent into submission.

THE endless belt groaned to a stop and the bumping of buckets ceased as Pete shut off the leg. Carefully he searched the boards that habitu-

ally covered the iron grating over the hopper when cars were being loaded.

"That's it," he muttered in a dead calm voice. "That space between those boards, just big enough to wedge a claw bar in and let the vibration of the house gradually shake it down. Damn clever."

An alien voice at the edge of the group inquired with sarcasm, "Going to pieces on you again?"

Pete's calm blue eyes looked beyond the fringe of men at the grinning fireman bearing the curiously unsuitable name of Smith, and his fingers twitched ever so slightly. The voice stopped, and the railroad man walked quickly away. Ronowski looked after the retreating figure curiously, and started forward.

Pete's voice checked him. "Back to work, everybody. Millwrights catch this job tomorrow."

For two hours a black thundercloud of anger behind calm blue eyes roamed the Adelia. Underneath his feet Pete felt the worn wood and iron of the old house again accursed by this intangible presence, felt the sudden return of apprehension among the men, the quick revival of too fresh and unpleasant memories.

Sandy could say this was accident, too, this sudden fall of a little bar curved like a shepherd's hook into the churning buckets of Number 4. But the Adelia did not say so, and Pete yearned fiercely for an instant's grasp of this mocking misery, just an instant's matching of his smooth muscles and his fury against it.

When the four o'clock whistle piped its respectful call to food and drink, Pete Verhoeven failed to drift out with the men to the office building. Instead he stood in the immobile fire at a high window of the cupola, scarcely noticing that the rumble of the house died out and the dust settled quietly.

A hundred feet below, men straggled across a patch of cinders to the welcome rest and food. Elsewhere there was no movement.

The shining ribs of the track yard were crowded with freight cars. At the far end they blurred into the dark. Directly below they lay like worms, some straight, some curled gracefully along the contours of the spreading fan of rails.

Two of the worms on the loading tracks burrowed their heads into the house itself. Up ahead the stubby engine waved a ragtail of gentle steam just beyond the office. Its cab was lighted.

Pete's seething anguish fixed him rigidly to the window. Idly he watched a man swing down from the cab of the engine and walk slowly back between the two worms on the loading tracks. Stillness fell again on the yard.

THEN a man came out of the locker room door, strode down the track to the engine, swung up on the step and peered inside. Pete recognized Ronowski. Evidently he did not find what he sought, for he turned and came back, reëntering the locker room.

As the closing door abruptly snipped off the light from inside, the wanderer from the engine reappeared below, strolling casually along, this time on the side of the cars nearest the slip. About ten yards from the house he stopped and turned, drew back his arm and threw some unseen object. Pete caught the flash of ripples in the oily water of the slip.

Again the man threw. This time there was no flash, but a faint *tink* from the button on the dock edge

which held the taut lines of the laker.

Once again the man threw, and again the mushroom post was hit. A fourth pitch went wild and another splash spread greasy circles under the bow of the laker.

His game over, the man sauntered on and regained the cab.

All this Pete watched vaguely, his mind still bubbling and seething with baffled anger and fear that the Adelia's misery was not yet ended for that night.

The Adelia's whistle, respectful of the laborer's rest, whispered hoarsely. The first spin of her power sent jets of dust kicking once again into the air. On the track floor below, the forest of spouts and pillars, beams and chutes, and legs and platforms was again peopled with the gray men of the elevator.

Ronowski was loading at the farthest platform. His car, wheels safely blocked, stood like a patient plow horse for the harness. Above Ronowski a pair of iron pants, more politely known in the dustless, swivel-chair end of the grain trade downtown as bifurcated spouts, dangled at the end of the main tube that dropped a sheer eighty feet from the scales above.

When grain is not sizzling at express speed down the shaking tube and into docile box cars, iron pants are buckled back in deference to the passage of the cars. But when the open door of a waiting car is spotted exactly at the platform the pants swing up and into the car. Ronowski was now engaged in pulling up these pants, pulling them up so that their bolted hinges might lie flat against the budding curve of the main stem, and their belly buckle hook onto the front of the spout, and so, when the battering stream of grain came roaring mightily down the drop, it would be bruised inward and split down each pant leg to the opposite ends of the hollow car.

Ronowski's hand was on the rope that lifts the pants as Pete Verhoeven strode across the floor to renew acquaintance with this man. There was strength in the new man, and he pulled heartily. Pete mentally approved him for it as the curved breeches swung upward and inward; approved, in one quick instant, the natural swing of Ronowski's tugging arms, but only for an instant—then there rang out across the Adelia's cluttered floor a bellow that was fit to shake the world.

"Ronowski, Jump!" Pete blasted.

But Ronowski was already jumping. He had felt the sly peculiar softness of the pull, the slushy give of the iron over his head as he heaved that rope, and already he was leaping from the platform. Safely clear he sprawled, except for one leg, one pitiful leg that too late kicked into the air after the expansive thighs of his big body.

Pete Verhoeven hugged a quarter ton of hard iron to his capacious chest and was glad for the work of it, glad that the strain for a brief moment blackened his mind to the moan of the big man, whose leg was pinned beneath it.

THE little office was silent. Pete Verhoeven checked his rhythmic pacing and turned reproachful eyes on Sandy as the tall man growled, "Stand still, ye dumbhead, or by God I'll lay one on ye!"

He stopped beside the table where Ronowski lay. The white car would be here any time now.

Ronowski's black-rimmed lips twisted a little. He grinned, then frowned. "Dot pants falls pretty quick, I t'ink.

Whatsa matter dot pants, Mr. Pete? She was all right, den she was no good. I vas very sorry I do dot. You don't fire me for dot, eh, Mr. Pete?"

The foreman frowned wearily.

"Boy," he said, "I don't know whatsa matter them pants. I don't know. It's pretty near got me licked," and again his huge body began to amble up and down the little office, but there was no licking in his eyes, only compassion for Ronowski, and a searing anger.

A man pushed open the door.

"Bolts pulled out of the hinges and dropped her," he announced briefly. "But we can't find the nuts nowhere."

Pete's rolling walk came to an abrupt end.

The man on the table, his question unanswered, interrupted insistently.

"Mr. Pete, I say you don't fire me for dot—"

Pete was staring at the man in the door.

"There's gotta be nuts," he muttered, "there's gotta be nuts. Four nuts."

Ronowski droned his question again. "You don't fire me for dot, eh, Mr. Pete? I don't drop dot pants. I am good alleyvater man. Work long time Buxton 'A' house. Five year, mebbe." Suddenly a light came into the injured man's eyes. "Matt Sabicik tell you I am good man," he added happily.

Pete Verhoeven stiffened. For a breathless minute he caught Sandy's eyes. Then he swung fiercely to the injured shoveler. "What name was that?" he barked.

Ronowski groaned a little. Twin headlights swung around the head of the slip and an ambulance bell clanged faintly.

"Matt Sabicik," he repeated.

Pete's voice drilled, "Got a brother named Joe?"

"Yah. Got brodder named Joe Sabicik. Brodder name Joe say dis house nice place for work, say boss is easy guy. Dot was long time now, but I remember dot. I come Sout' Eweeng when dot Buxton house burn up."

Pete's fingers danced.

"Where is Matt Sabicik now, Ronowski?" he urged softly.

Triumphantly Ronowski replied, gesturing with his eyes.

"Out there. Long time he quit Buxton house, I don't see him any more, but tonight I see him. He is railroad man now in dot engine. Before dot pants fall when dis house shut down I go out mebbe to say 'Hallo' to old alleyvater man wit' me, but he is not in dot engine den. You get him and ask is Ronowski good alleyvater man. Matt Sabicik say yes. Den you don't fire—"

BUT Pete Verhoeven was through the door. After him raced Sandy Carson, spurred by the flaming look in the foreman's eyes. At the foot of the steps Sandy stopped short, astonished.

On hands and knees in the cinders, the headlights of the ambulance just sliding to a halt, playing grotesquely on his big, crouched body, Pete the foreman pawed the ground.

"I knew it was a grain man," he muttered over and over, and seized two small objects.

Sandy started to speak, but Pete waved his hand. Around the conrer of the office a big man with a tall-crowned, long-peaked cap was coming into view.

"Smith," Pete called quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Know anything about a grain elevator, Smith?"

"Nah, I don't know nothing about these dust houses."

"Well, I got a problem, Smith. I'm fond of this house. It's been my home for a long time. And I was fond of a couple of guys that died here—"

"Aw, what're you gettin' at?"

"Just this." Pete's voice was cold and gray as the naked wall that rose gigantically above them. "Just this," he said and extended his hand palm up. "Know anything about these nuts, Matt Sabicik?"

The fireman recoiled, but not quick enough. Straight into his dark face the long arm of Pete Verhoeven shot with the pent-up anger of seven black nights behind it. The Adelia's wall tilted sharply over Sabicik's head as he rolled over and up. Something bright flashed from the inside of his coat as two hundred odd pounds of mad foreman came hurtling at him.

Pete felt a savage heat in his arm, and Sabicik was gone, away from Pete, away from the office, and away from the charging rod-like form of Sandy Carson coming full steam into the action.

Matt Sabicik's flight was precipitate and unthinking. Thus it was into the Adelia he fled, and there, instinctively shunning the open floor where other men might be attracted to the chase, he flung open the first door he saw and quickly slammed it behind him. It was a mistake, for he was in the skinny shaft that soared up through the Adelia carrying the little passenger car to the top floors and entwined by an interminable circular staircase.

But the man whose red knife had just bitten Pete Verhoeven's arm was not choosy. With one leap and a yank he was on the passenger car and rising steadily toward the upper regions of the house.

Sandy Carson, at the foot of the shaft, filled his throat with one devastating curse that whistled skyward past a crazy Dutchman spinning up an eternal spiral of stairs in the wake of a slowly rising car on which a murderous Polack rode.

Then Sandy saw the trail of tiny red spots on the stairs, and with a yowl of fury he dug his long legs into the climb. Upward the raced, reeling off the ten-story ascent in a frenzy of fear as he followed the long train of red drops on the gray dust of the stairs.

THE Adelia's great body is simply a huge honeycomb of storage bins, eighty feet deep. At the upper rims of these bins, where their mouths gape open at the slanting roof of the Adelia and the floors of the cupola pile one upon another in the middle, there is a center flooring that runs the length of the house, but on either side where the roof slants down to the eaves row upon row of vast bins are uncovered.

Through the empty air over the uncovered bins at each side runs a narrow, wooden catwalk, inaccessible from the floor in the center except at each end of the long house where the narrow grating of the runway turns in to join the solid flooring in the middle.

It was on this floor that Matt Sabicik landed in a hasty jump from the moving car. Below him in the tall shaft the angry boots of Pete Verhoeven and Sandy Carson beat upon the stairs. Ahead, down the center of the floor, a solitary sweeper was swinging a broom in the eternal chore of the elevator—keeping the dust down.

Ratlike, Matt Sabicik avoided the long floor and the innocent sweeper, and dodged quickly to the right, out on the narrow catwalk, guarded only by a

thin wooden railing. At once he regretted his step. He was out now, out away from the floor, suspended in air over unknown bins, Pete Verhoeven thundering up the last steps of the shaft, and no escape from the runway except at the far end of the house. It was dark out over the bins. Dim yellow bulbs, their glassy shells glazed with dust, only made the emptiness misty. He hesitated, but it was too late to go back. Already the bulky, menacing figure of Pete Verhoeven stood at the edge of the floor. Now he was coming out over the bins on the runway.

Sandy Carson kicked the last steps of the weary climb behind him and burst out onto the floor. Like cautious travelers on a rope bridge over a gorge, he beheld the figures of the foreman and his quarry in the haze under the roof. Instantly he sped down the floor, past the startled sweeper and his swinging broom, and gained the far end of the house where lay Matt Sabicik's only escape.

The fireman was trapped. In the middle of the runway he stopped. Behind him came Pete Verhoeven. Ahead was the long form of Sandy Carson. He cursed in a high whine. Both ends were blocked, and below—he did not know what lay below. He did not know this house. Through the grating under his feet was blank darkness.

Which of these bins that yawned below him were full of soft grain, which were empty?

Suddenly a hoarse voice sounded from the inaccessible floor twenty yards away. The sweeper, sensing the silent fury of the chase and gripping the rail, excitedly yelled:

"Pete, Sandy! Thirty-one is empty, thirty-seven is empty, forty-three is empty. The rest are full. Thirty-one, thirty-seven, forty-three."

Matt Sabicik gained nothing from the cry, but into Pete Verhoeven's straining consciousness drifted the knowledge that he was standing over Number 37 bin, over a good eighty feet of black emptiness.

He advanced a little, cautiously, his great body straining forward, his left arm hanging limp and dripping those tiny, relentless red drops. The color had gone out of his face and the furring of dust on his clear cheeks stood out and away from his flesh, etching his features in a queer, ghostly duality.

He moved another few steps, but more slowly. There was something the matter with his head. His wound, the frenzied climb, and the mad joy of at last finding the Adelia's tormentor suddenly merged and overwhelmed him. His body twisted and sagged.

With one arm he reached futilely for the thin wood railing and slumped forward on the narrow grating over the emptiness of Number 37 bin. Dimly he felt the friendly wood of the Adelia under his body as he lay there, and the cool air waving gently up from the shaft below. Then running steps and a fleet shadow over his eyes disturbed the lingering consciousness within him, and he feebly, jerkily fended at them, his free arm flopping and his right foot kicking spasmodically.

Then there was a crunching pain in the kicking foot, the sound of a thin rail splintering, and a hoarse, gasping noise. An ugly crashing boom rolled hollowly up the bin. Pete Verhoeven twitched and lay still.

HE opened his eyes and stared at a white, unfamiliar ceiling that blended downward into white wall and suddenly silhouetted the scanty-haired knob of Sandy Carson.

Pete's arm throbbed under a strange tight thickness. His right foot had the same bound feeling. Gradually he remembered.

"How's my Adelia doin' on that boat?" he demanded.

"Trimmers are in it," Sandy growled huskily. "And it's only ten o'clock."

Pete closed his eyes and smiled. The picture was a pleasant one. Down in the hold of the laker he could see the red bottom showing, see the long shovel ropes jerking tight, the rich amber grain sliding in a graceful flood before the shovels toward the licking maw of the marine leg. The dusty trimmers, their noses tied up with oakum, guiding their shovels like plows.

And above all the sweet purr of the Adelia, the worn old musical Adelia, vibrating her great bulk from boot to cupola in a humming rhythm.

"What happened to him, Sandy?"

Sandy hesitated, clearing his throat. "You fainted on the runway. When he seen your end was clear he ran your way and figured to jump over you. You must've kicked a little. He landed on your foot and crashed the railing into thirty-seven."

"Thirty-seven was empty, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

There was a moment of silence, then Pete asked, "What are you doin' here, Sandy?"

"Hell," the superintendent growled disgustedly, "I been hangin' around, hopin' I'd get to hire me a new foreman. But I guess it ain't no use. They'll have you out of here pretty soon, and I'll have to put up with ye for another twenty years."

Pete grinned. "She told me there'd be a man killed last night, Sandy. I'm glad it was the right one. How's Ronowski?"

From the next bed Ronowski's voice answered quickly, "I vas all right, Mr. Pete." The voice became anxious. "I vas sorry dot pants drop so quick. You don't fire me for dot, eh, Mr. Pete?"

"Fire you? Boy, I could kiss every black whisper on that handlebar of yours."

Ronowski sighed contentedly.

"Ah," he breathed, "dot's good. You are handsome man, Mr. Pete."

Sandy Carson chuckled. "Handsome, eh? Hell, he's better'n than that; he's psychic."

THE END

How Big Is Large?

THE mighty sun, when you can safely stare at it through a dense fog-mist, looks even smaller than the moon; but we know that one million three hundred thousand earths could be packed away inside of the sun! Yet how puny and insignificant is our sun compared to the star, Betelgeuse, which is two hundred and thirty times larger in diameter. And consider Antares, which is more than four hundred times greater in diameter than our sun! And ponder of the vast universe of stars, moons, worlds. And of mighty suns, in which more than a billion of our suns could be packed away!

—*Joseph W. Skidmore.*

The Sheriff of Tonto Town

By W. C. TUTTLE

The sheriff jerked sideways; his gun fell

A score was to be settled in that Arizona rangeland feud, and the blood of many men would dampen the score card

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

A RANGELAND feud started when Henry Harrison Conroy, retired vaudeville actor, went West to claim his inherited J Bar C ranch in Wild Horse Valley, Arizona. When Henry was elected sheriff, and made his headquarters at Tonto City, a ranch and mining town, he found it practically controlled by the rich and unscrupulous Jack West.

West, owner of several mines, and of the Tonto Saloon, decided to run Henry out of the country. He did succeed in getting him out of the sheriff's office, and having Lou James, his own man, put in. Henry, accompanied by his ex-deputy, Judge Van Treece, and his ex-jailer, Oscar Johnson, went to the J Bar C, where Danny Regan was foreman.

Henry discovered a valuable vein of ore, which West tried unsuccessfully to steal from him. Then West began poisoning and stealing J Bar C cattle. Finally, his men kidnaped Leila Harper, Danny's sweetheart, and her mother, Laura.

Meanwhile, at the Tonto Saloon, West was watching Lola, a girl who dealt faro, and Tom Silver, a man whom West had once wronged, and who now, unrecognized, was working as swamper in the saloon. West suspected one or both of them of sending him notes threatening to reveal his past.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HENRY KILLS A MAN.

THERE was a merry crowd at the Tonto bar as Henry limped in behind Oscar. Lou James, the sheriff, one of West's gunmen, several miners, and a bevy of honkytonk girls. They were all

This story began in the Argosy for September 14

laughing and talking, paying no attention to Oscar, who walked past them and stopped at the bar. One of the girls saw Henry, and laughed huskily.

Henry had stopped short of the bar, looking rather grotesque with his bandaged head and queerly-clad feet. Lou James turned his head, his jaw sagging, as he saw Henry. Slowly he turned, facing him.

Henry's face was almost as white as the bandage, his eyes mere squinted slits, almost invisible.

"You cattle thief," he said huskily, "tell me where you took her."

The sheriff stared at him, unable to reply, it seemed. The tip of his dry tongue barely parted his dry lips, his eyes staring.

"Tell me the truth, James," Henry said. "If you do not tell the truth now, I shall kill you."

James laughed harshly, his right hand dropping to his side. Henry's right hand tugged at his waist-line.

"You drunken fool!" shouted James. "Drop that gun, or I'll—"

James' draw was swift—but not swift enough. Henry had fired that big forty-five Colt from against his waist. James jerked sideways, his gun falling to the floor; and then he went to his knees, his back to Henry.

"You old fool!" snapped the gunman, who was next to James.

He jerked out his gun, but before he could use it, a raging tornado in the shape of Oscar Johnson crashed into him, knocking him against the bar, which rocked under the impact. Oscar's powerful left hand was locked around the gunman's right wrist, which snapped like a pipestem when the big Swede twisted sharply.

The gunman screamed wildly as Oscar picked him up in his powerful arms, and with a mighty swing threw the luckless gunman over the top of the bar and against the back-bar mirror, splintering the huge glass and sending bottles and glassware in a crashing shower. And the victim rolled over limply and fell behind the bar, knocked unconscious.

Henry had not moved; he still stood there, slightly unsteady on his sore feet, but with the cocked Colt gripped in his right hand. Oscar dusted off his hands and walked over to Henry.

"Thank you," said Henry simply.

"*Valkommen*," replied Oscar calmly.

They backed to the doorway together. Danny, Judge, Slim and Frijole, together with the three commissioners, were at the doorway. Oscar shifted his eyes to the splintered back-bar mirror, and his hearty laugh roared out as he pointed at it.

"Seven years hord-luck for das place," he declared.

"My God, what happened in there?" asked Commissioner John Calvert.

"I killed Lou James, your sheriff," replied Henry calmly.

"In the name of God, why did you kill him?"

"I killed him, sir, when he tried to draw his gun. I accused him of being a cattle rustler, and of stealing Leila Harper."

One of the miners had been sent for Dr. Bogart. Others took the injured gunman from among the débris behind the bar.

"Conroy came here to kill Lou James," said one of the men. "It's murder, jist as sure as hell."

"James went for his gun," said the bartender. "I seen him."

"Keep that to yourself," warned a gambler. "One of you fellers better go to the Yellow Warrior and tell Jack West."

THE men from the J Bar C went across the street. The three commissioners had summoned the prosecuting attorney, and the four of them were going to the Tonto Saloon.

"We better go home," said Danny. "They'll try to frame up on yuh, Henry Between West and the commissioners, they'll try to make it murder. Frijole, you get the horse and buggy, while I go over to the store and get some cartridges. How are we fixed for thirty-thirty shells, Slim?"

"Yuh might get a couple boxes, Danny."

"Are you preparing for war?" queried Judge, visibly shaken.

"Plenty guns and plenty ammunition

is a hell of a good argument in favor of peace, Judge," replied Danny. "You better go with Frijole and Henry—there's room in the buggy, if yuh set familiar."

The three of them crowded into the buggy, and drove away from Tonto City.

"I can hardly believe this is all true," declared Judge. "It is so damnably incredible for you to have done such a thing, Henry. It—it is—well, like a jackrabbit whipping a wildcat. A thousand-to-one chance. By all rights, you should have been killed, sir. James is a finished gunman."

"He most certainly is—finished," replied Henry grimly.

"Levity—in the face of present circumstances!" exploded Judge. "I am afraid we shall have quite a job keeping you from jail."

"Aw, hell!" drawled Frijole. "Where could yuh find a Arizona jury which would convict Henry of murder, when James was facin' him, with a gun in his holster, and Henry promisin' to shoot him? Lou James was knowed as a gunman. Henry jist beat him, thasall."

"If it had only happened some other place," sighed Judge. "Our job now is to prove that it was self-defense."

"Our job right now," declared Henry, "is to find Laura and Leila; the rest can wait."

"Henry," said Frijole, "would yuh mind tellin' me how yuh ever figured that Lou James was stealin' our cows?"

"Wait until we get to the ranch," replied Henry. "I'll explain it to all of you."

Back at the ranch they gathered in the main room, where Henry took pencil and paper.

"You boys wondered why you found a dead yearling and a branding-iron," he said. "I gave that a lot of thought. Yesterday I found the answer—only in a different way. There was an LJ yearling, still roped, a fire and a hot iron. Do you see what I mean, Danny?"

"Not yet, Henry."

"The LJ brands on the left side. So does the J Bar C. Here is our brand."

Henry drew out the J Bar C brand. Then he put his pencil at the top of the J, made a loop to the right and back to the left, which included the short bar between the two letters. From the loop of the J, he continued it to form a script L. Using the C for part of the script J, he completed the LJ connected brand.

"I'll be a dirty name!" exploded Danny. "It's perfect!"

"I believe it is," agreed Henry. "They altered the brand on the yearlings they butchered, before killing them, because of brand inspection. I suppose the LJ outfit had an idea of stealing every calf or yearling on that range."

"Henry," said Danny seriously, "I take off my hat to you. You have uncovered the slickest piece of brand alterin' I ever seen."

"Yah, su-ure," agreed Oscar heartily. "And das Henry is yust one fightin' yigger, Ay ta'al you."

"But we haven't one scintilla of proof," sighed Judge.

"We don't need proof, Judge," said Danny grimly. "This case won't never go to court. It's a case of J Bar C versus Jack West and the Tonto Saloon."

"I have a feeling," said Henry quietly, "that the devil is laughing."

THE Tonto was still buzzing with excitement when Jack West came. The body of Lou James had been laid out on a pool table, and Dr. Bogart had finished setting the broken arm of Abe Cort. West knew all about things before he arrived. Tom Silver, the scar-faced swamper, was busy with his mop and pail, cleaning up the floor in front of the bar. All three commissioners and the prosecuting attorney were there. West beckoned them back to his office and closed the door.

"Where's Conroy and his gang?" asked West.

"They went home right after it was all over," replied Calvert.

"All right! Swear in a new sheriff and arrest Conroy for murder."

"But was it murder?"

"It wasn't anything else. Conroy came here to kill James."

"It seems that the evidence of eye-witnesses is conflicting, Mr. West. There was one man, a miner, I believe, who gave me his impressions of the trouble, and in his opinion Conroy gave James an even break. In fact, he says that James reached for his gun. We were here a moment after the shot was fired. James was down, and his gun was on the floor, several feet away from his body."

"Who is that miner?" queried West.

"I believe I could find him—but I don't believe I shall."

"You don't, eh? I'll remember that—next election."

"By that time I hope there will be enough honest voters in Wild Horse Valley to elect an honest prosecutor, Mr. West."

"It doesn't seem to me," said Calvert, "that James was much of a success as an officer of the law. In fact, Conroy accused him of being a cattle rustler. There must be a strong reason for a man like Conroy to make such an accusation. And there is the fact that two women are missing. I—I don't quite understand what it all means."

"Cattle rustler!" snorted West. "That damned old fool of a Conroy wouldn't know anythin' about cattle rustlin'. Well, what are yuh goin' to do—drop it? Are yuh goin' to let the J Bar C murder public officers? If yuh are—I'm not."

"I believe," replied the prosecutor coldly, "that our actions in this case will be governed by further investigation. Henry Conroy is not going to run away, Mr. West. And if you have any personal thoughts of revenge, I would advise you to forget them. The law is perfectly able to cope with the situation."

"It is, eh? Then go and find those two women yo're talkin' about. Find out who is rustlin' J Bar C cattle—if anybody is. And while yo're at it, yuh might find out who robbed me of thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold. If yuh have any luck in that, yuh might find out how Doc Sargent and Lee Vane got killed—and who killed Hardy, my shift-boss, and threw him into that wagon-load of stolen high-grade ore."

"Quite a calendar of crime," nodded the prosecutor. "I believe it is high time that Wild Horse Valley had a sheriff."

"I believe," stated Albert Rose stiffly, "that we will try and make our own selection this time."

The four men filed out of the office, leaving West at his desk, glaring after them.

"Four more ready for the discard," swore West to himself. "I'll show 'em who's boss before this is finished."

OUT in the saloon, Nick Borden stood with his back to the bar, a glass of whisky in his hand, and a smile on his face. Abe Cort, three-fourths drunk, his right arm in splints and bandages, was sitting at a card table. The body of Lou James had been removed, but there was little noise and no loud talking.

"A good, old-fashioned killing sure cools off this place," observed Borden. "Jack West ought to instruct his sheriffs to quit stealin' cows when they take office. He should hang crape on the front door and close up this place."

Several of the gamblers looked malevolently at Borden, but made no reply. The four men came from West's office, and Borden laughed as they walked past him.

"Don't look so sad," he told them. "We all make mistakes. You gents ought to dump West overboard, and run yore own offices."

Unable to insult anyone in the saloon, Borden finished his drink and walked to the doorway. Just outside, leaning against the wall, was Tom Silver. Without turning his head, Silver said quietly:

"Lola's gone. She didn't sleep in her room last night. None of the girls have seen her since she went off shift."

Borden's jaw tightened. "Maybe she went out on the stage."

"No," said Silver, "she didn't; I saw the stage leave here."

Nick Borden hitched up his belt and walked across the street, where he mounted his horse.

Jack West had a drink.

"Borden was in here, shootin' off his mouth," said the bartender.

"What about?" queried West quietly.

"Said yuh ought to put crape on the door and close up this place. Then he told them four men that they ought to dump you overboard and run their own jobs."

"He did, eh?"

"Uh-huh. He went to the door and stood there a while. I may be wrong, but I think he talked with that scar-faced swamper. Anyway, after he left, I seen the swamper pass the window. He must have been near the doorway when Borden stood there."

"Thanks," replied West dryly, and walked away.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOPED DRINK.

NO one at the J Bar C had figured out just what to do. There was nothing definite to work on, it seemed. They were all sitting in the main room when Nick Borden rode in. It was his first visit to the ranch. Judge met him on the porch and they looked gravely at each other. Henry and the boys came out, and Borden nodded coldly.

"Why not sit down, Mr. Borrden?"

"I rode in from Tonto," replied Borden, "where they told me all the news. I congratulate you, Conroy."

"Thank you, sir," replied Henry simply.

"I'm not much of a hand to make speeches," said Borden. "I'm not what you'd call a good liar; and I'm not in the habit of takin' sides in a battle. A man usually has plenty to do if he minds his own business."

"Why not sit down, Mr. Borden?" suggested Henry.

"Thank yuh very much—but I can talk better this way. Van Treece can testify that I'm no angel; so I ain't comin' here under any false colors. Five years ago I blocked Jack West on a minin' swindle, which would have paid him a cold million; and West never forgets.

"I had a fine job as boss gambler in a big place, and was makin' the biggest money I ever made. West tried in every way to get me fired, and when it wouldn't work, he bought out the place, just to fire me. I went to Colorado, where I wasn't known, and got a job in a mine, where I was doin' fine. There was a girl, too.

"Not the kind of a girl you'd think would care for me.

"Mebbe I was wrong, but I let sleepin' dogs lie. I was straight as a string. Jack West found it out—and told that girl and her folks all about me. He told things that wasn't true, too. Damn him, he came hundreds of miles to ruin things for me. Since then, I've been on West's trail. Damn him, I want to see him broke, down and out—like he made me. That's my story. I've got six good men at the Smoke Tree—and I'm the seventh. If yuh need me, we'll come."

Nick Borden turned, walked back to his horse and rode away.

"That makes thirteen of us," said Henry slowly.

"Are we to ally ourselves with gunmen?" asked Judge.

"Perhaps," said Henry, "I had better move over with Borden."

"Thirteen!" snorted Frijole. "That's bad luck."

"Thorteen," declared Oscar, "is yust von better den twelve."

"I wonder why in hell Borden didn't shoot West," said Slim.

"Shooting is too good for him," declared Oscar. "Ay'd yust like to kick him in de pants."

"I believe that is what Borden thinks," said Henry. "Perhaps he hasn't any desire to kick West in the pants. Hate is a queer thing. I do not believe I have ever hated. It is so useless. I suppose I should hate somebody—now. But I just feel so damned helpless. If we could only think of something to do."

"I don't know who to hate," said Danny wearily.

"Yust vait a minute!" said Oscar. "By

Yimminy, Ay have idea! Das Lou Yames had some hired men. If Ay could get my hands—"

"That's it!" exclaimed Danny. "My God, we had to wait for the Swede to get the idea. We'll get them dirty thieves and make 'em tell where Leila is. They might know where her mother is, too! Of all the dumb fools, we're the worst."

"Without a doubt," agreed Henry. "Frijole, bring me my old boots; I shall wear them if it is the last thing I ever do."

"Ride with the moccasins on your feet," advised Judge.

"And ruin the traditions of Arizona gunmen?" queried Henry.

"What tradition, Henry?"

"Did you ever hear of a gunman dying with his *moccasins* on?"

"But there's only one gentle horse in the corral," said Danny. "The others are a plumb salty bunch. Why don't you—"

"Give Judge the gentle one, Danny; you apparently have forgotten that blaze-faced sorrel."

"I take off my hat to yuh, Henry; you've got guts."

"Forceful, but inelegant, my boy—and thank you kindly."

"I have no desire for the appellation, myself," said Judge stiffly.

"Few lawyers need them, Judge," replied Henry. "They have the law behind them, you know."

THE horses were swiftly saddled. Slim held Henry's horse until Henry was in the saddle, and Henry led the cavalcade from the ranch, for the simple reason that the animal ran away with him. But after a mile race, carrying Henry's load, the animal decided to take things easy.

They went straight into Tonto City and up to Werner's market, where the fat butcher looked upon them with alarm. He told them he had not seen any of James' men that day. Yes, there were three of them, who worked cattle for James; and they lived in a shack down on the flat below town.

But there was no one at the shack. The absence of bed-rolls and war-bags attested to the fact that the three men had flown. They went over the place carefully, and in an old pair of overalls, hanging on a nail, Danny found the note Leila had brought to Henry.

"They got her," whispered Danny. "This proves it."

"That is the note she showed me," said Henry. "They must have taken it from her, Danny. Perhaps they wanted to know who wrote it."

"It kinda looks like a woman's writin'," said Slim.

"Some men write small thataway," remarked Frijole. "This is a hell of a fix we're in. James is dead and his men are gone. Now, how in the devil are we ever goin' to find out anythin'?"

They rode back to Tonto City, where Danny dismounted and went into Werner's market.

"Did you find anybody at home?" he asked Danny.

"You know we didn't, Werner. And listen to this: Lou James stole J Bar C cattle, and you peddled 'em to the mines. Mebbe yo're innocent—mebbe not. But if we can prove that you had any hand in it, I'll shoot you so full of lead that even a taxidermist couldn't make yuh look natural."

Without waiting for any reply, Danny went back to the men.

"I'm not going back to the ranch yet," he told them. "I can't do it; I'd go crazy. The rest of yuh go home. I'll poke around here and see what I can hear. My God, there must be an answer somewhere."

"Let me stay with yuh, kid," begged Slim. "Yuh might need a hand."

"No, Slim, I'd rather be alone."

"Yuh won't start any trouble—alone?"

"No, Slim; I promise to behave. I'll be back tonight—sometime."

They rode away, and Danny tied his horse to the hitch-rack near the Tonto Saloon, where he stood for a long time, arms folded on top of the rack, staring into the street. One of the dance-hall girls, going around to the rear entrance,

spoke to him. He looked at her, and she ran the rest of the way.

"He just looked at me, and I ran like hell," she told the piano player.

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Because I've got legs, I suppose," she retorted, and walked away, but he called to her and she came back.

"Where's Lola?" he asked.

"I'm not Lola's keeper," she replied. "You ain't stuck on her, too, are you?"

"Listen, kid, this is business with me. She's got some new songs; and I heard she quit the joint."

"Suits me," replied the girl. "She's too damn stuck up. I heard that West was going to make her the hoss-gambler. If he does, we couldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole."

"I'm not worryin'; I just asked."

"And I answered you, didn't I?"

"Yeah—as intelligently as you could, I suppose."

DANNY REGAN spent the rest of the day and the evening watching the street, hoping against hope that one of the LJ riders would come back to Tonto City. He talked with the stage driver from Scorpion Bend, asking about LJ cowboys.

"I don't know that outfit," said the driver. "That feller James ain't owned it very long. No, I didn't meet a single rider on the way down here."

Danny forgot to eat supper. He went into the Tonto and sat down in the gambling room, apparently indifferent to everything, but watching for strange cowboys. West still had three of his five gunmen left, and they kept an eye on Danny Regan. Word had been passed to watch the young foreman of the J Bar C.

Hours passed, but Danny still sat there, hunched against the wall, his hat pulled low over his eyes. Finally he got to his feet, walked into the saloon and stopped at the bar.

"Whisky," he ordered huskily.

There were other men at the bar, laughing and talking. The bartender lifted a bottle to the bar, and sent a glass spinning over to Danny. He filled the glass, drank it at a single gulp, and flung some silver on the bar.

Danny walked slowly from the saloon, halted for a moment on the sidewalk, but turned and walked toward the hitch-rack. Except for the Tonto Saloon, the town seemed in darkness. He halted at the hitch-rack and fumbled at the tie rope on his horse.

"What's wrong with me?" he muttered. The world seemed to be going around like a top. He grasped for the hitch-rack, but missed it, and fell on his knees in the dirt. A moment later he sprawled on his face, almost under the hoofs of his horse.

SLIM and Oscar were in Tonto City at daybreak, looking for Danny. They questioned everyone they met, but no one knew where he had gone. A man told them he had seen Danny in the Tonto Saloon about midnight, sitting alone in the gambling room.

"It would be jist like the danged fool to head for Scorpion Bend, lookin' for some of that LJ outfit," said Slim. "But Danny gave me his word that he wouldn't do anythin'—and I still believe him."

"Yah, su-ure," agreed Oscar.

"Somethin' has happened to him."

"Yah, su-ure."

"Oscar, can't you say anythin' but 'Yah, su-ure'?"

"Yah," replied Oscar.

"That's better. There's the stage, ready to pull out. Let's go up there a minute."

Werner, the fat butcher, was inside the old stage, hunched back in a corner, but the two cowboys did not see him. As far as Werner was concerned, Tonto City could butcher its own beef. He did not want any taxidermist to try and make him look natural.

Slim and Oscar went back to the ranch.

"I believe we are unduly worried about Danny," stated Judge. "He is perfectly able to take care of himself. I only hope he has some vital information when he returns."

"I only hope he returns," sighed Henry.

Late that afternoon the three commissioners, the prosecuting attorney and Jack West sat in the commissioner's office. West chewed grimly on his cigar as he studied the four men.

"That is the situation, Mr. West," said Calvert. "We absolutely refuse to appoint either of the two men you have recommended."

"All right," nodded West coldly. "Appoint anybody you please. I can tell you this much—I'm about through with Tonto City and Wild Horse Valley. I am the biggest investor in this country. If I take my pay roll away from Tonto City, what remains? Damn it, I can close all my properties indefinitely—and I'll do it."

"If you can't boss the country?" queried the lawyer.

"Put it any way you want to," snarled West, and walked out, banging the door behind him.

"Well, I don't know what comes next," sighed Albert Rose. "We have turned down West's men—and our choices have turned us down. It don't seem to me that any honest man wants the job as sheriff of Wild Horse Valley. Gentlemen, the job has gone begging."

"But we must have a sheriff," said Calvert.

"And right away, too," added Rose. "But who can we get?"

The lawyer laughed shortly. "There still remains—Henry Harrison Conroy."

"Yes," replied Calvert, after a long silence, "there still remains Henry Harrison Conroy."

"We forced him to resign," reminded Rose. "He wouldn't take it again. He's honest, even if he is inefficient."

"Well," smiled the lawyer, "if we don't appoint someone very soon, one of you commissioners will have to become sheriff."

"I think," said Calvert seriously, "that we should ride out and see Henry Harrison Conroy. Will you go along?"

"Yes," replied the lawyer, "I'll go along—if only to hear the three of you politely insulted by a man who is perfectly entitled to say just what he thinks of all of you."

CHAPTER XX.

COLD MURDER.

DANNY REGAN'S return to consciousness was painful and bewildering. His head ached and he was terribly nauseated. He was bound, hand and foot, and was lying on loose rubble, while to his ears came the soft *drip, drip, drip* of water. The air was damp and mouldy, and the darkness was impenetrable. At first it was like a nightmare to the young cowboy; then he gradually realized that it was not a dream, but a painful reality. He had a hazy recollection of that drink of whisky, and its effects.

"Doped," he told himself bitterly. "Knock-out drops of some kind. What a fool I was to take a drink in that place. The bartender had that bottle all fixed for me."

After what seemed years, he saw a flickering, bobbing light, and heard the hollow boom of footsteps. It was a masked man, carrying a lighted candle, and in the faint illumination Danny could see that he was in a tunnel or stope.

The man came up and held the candle close to Danny's face.

"Still alive, eh?" he said.

"What is this all about?" queried Danny. "What happened?"

The man laughed. "Yore horns growed too long, feller."

He yanked Danny around and examined the knots.

"Why am I kept tied up like this?" queried Danny.

"'Cause we ain't had no orders yet to knock yuh on the head. Don't worry—we'll get 'em."

"What place am I in?"

"Keep askin' questions, if yuh enjoy it," laughed the man. "I'm damn shore I'll never answer any of 'em."

"Where is Leila Harper and her mother?"

"Jist like I said—there ain't no answers in this book."

The man took his candle and went away, hunched over, the candle-light throwing grotesque shadows along the walls of the tunnel. Danny twisted and pulled, trying to loosen the ropes, but the wet lariat only pulled tighter. The booming of the footsteps died away, and there was only the dripping of water to break the stillness.

IT was after dark when the three commissioners and the lawyer arrived at the J Bar C. Oscar Johnson, armed with a shotgun, challenged them from beside the porch, but allowed them to go into the house. Henry, Judge, Frijole and Slim were there.

"Judging from our reception at the doorway," smiled Calvert, "you gentlemen are not taking any chances."

"Apparently it doesn't pay to take chances," replied Henry gravely. "Danny Regan, my foreman, has been missing since last night."

"Missing?" queried the lawyer. "My God, Conroy, it seems to be an epidemic! What in the world could have happened to him?"

"I wish I could answer that question. What brings you gentlemen out here tonight?"

The four men looked at each other, waiting for someone to act as spokesman. Finally the lawyer cleared his throat and replied:

"Conroy, since the—er—demise of Lou James, this county has been without the services of a peace officer. You see—"

"Just a moment," interrupted Henry gently. "Why any emphasis on the word since? It seems to me that the county was without a peace officer ever since he was appointed."

"I believe the commissioners will join me in granting that point, Conroy. They admit making a great mistake."

"And would like to apologize," added Calvert.

"What is wrong here?" queried Judge. "Have you gentlemen had a falling out with Jack West?"

"Mr. West proposed two of his own gunmen as eligible for the office," smiled the lawyer. "They were not acceptable."

"In other words," stated Henry, "you refuse to accept West's selections—and have none of your own."

"We had three," admitted Calvert. "They all refused."

"So we are offering it back to you," added Rose.

"So you are offering it back to me," said Henry. "When no one else wants it—you ask me to take it back. Thank you kindly."

"Then you will accept?" asked Calvert eagerly.

"Gentlemen," replied Henry gravely, "before I would do such a thing, I would see you all in hell, dressed as Eskimos, and shoveling flames with iron-handled shovels."

"And that's what I call bein' warm!" exclaimed Slim.

"At least," sighed Calvert, "you will accept our apology for ever asking for your resignation?"

"Gladly, gentlemen," nodded Henry. "In fact, I feel—"

From in front of the house came a sharp cry, something thudded against the porch, and there was a mixture of yelps and curses, followed by heavy footsteps on the porch. Before Slim could reach the door, it was flung violently open, and Oscar stumbled in, dragging a man by one arm and the collar.

Slim shut the door when Oscar flung the man down in the middle of the room, where he sat, goggling around vacantly.

"Yust a damn peeper!" roared Oscar. "Ay saw him coom around de hoose and try to listen."

THE man was undersized, with a thin face and a broken nose. He wore cowboy clothes, and looked as though he had not suffered a bath for weeks. His thin lips drew back in a snarl as he looked around the room.

"Who sent you here, young man?" asked Judge severely.

"Go to hell, will yuh?" snarled the man.

Oscar pounced on him, twisting him like a child might twist a rag doll, and then threw him into a chair. The snarl was gone now. The cowboy's face was contorted with pain, and he sucked deeply, trying to pump air into his tortured lungs.

"He's one of Lou James' punchers!" exclaimed Slim. "I've seen this whippoorwill around Werner's butcher shop."

"I don't know what the hell yo're talking about," declared the captive.

"You will—before we finish with yuh, feller," declared Slim.

"Yah, su-ure," agreed Oscar. "Das ha'ar yigger is going to talk plenty. Ay know how to make him talk."

"Keep yore paws off me, you damn grizzly," wailed the cowboy.

"Ya-a-ah!" snorted Oscar. He grabbed the man by the collar and one wrist.

"Who vants a ving off de chicken?" asked Oscar.

"Leggo!" screamed the cowboy. "Yo're breakin' my arm!"

"Yust stort talkin', and Ay quit twisting."

"I'll talk! My God, I'll talk!"

The cowboy sank back in his chair, his thin face beaded with perspiration, lips quivering.

"What do yuh want to know?" he panted. "Keep that damn Swede off me, will yuh?"

Henry turned to Judge. "You ask him the questions, Judge."

Judge nodded and drew up his chair in front of the captive.

"You worked for Lou James' LJ outfit?"

"Yeah, I worked for him."

"You helped alter brands on J Bar C cattle for Lou James?"

"I helped him—yeah."

"You were one of the four men who were branding a yearling, and who shot down Henry Conroy, I believe. What became of that girl?"

The cowboy shut his lips tightly and his face was white as he looked around at the circle of faces.

"The—the girl—" he mumbled.

From a side window of the room glass tinkled sharply. They whirled to see a rifle muzzle protruding into the room, and before anyone could move, the room shook from the heavy report.

Their captive still sat upright in his chair, but just above his left temple was a round black hole. Slowly he toppled over, sprawling across the floor. The gun muzzle was gone before the man fell. Slim stepped over quickly and drew down the blind. There was no use running out there in the dark, searching for the killer.

"God!" breathed the prosecutor. "This is terrible!"

"If they had only waited another minute," sighed Judge. "He was about to tell us what we want so badly to know."

"There must have been two of 'em," said Slim. "This other feller couldn't afford to let our man tell what he knew."

The three commissioners looked as though they wanted to stampede. In fact, Henry Harrison Conroy seemed to be the only cool person in the room. He got slowly to his feet and faced the commissioners.

"Gentlemen," he said calmly, "I have decided to become sheriff of Wild Horse Valley, subject to your approval and appointment."

"You—you—after this?" queried Calvert in amazement.

"This," replied Henry, "is only a preliminary. All I ask is that you appoint me—and then step aside."

"Gladly!" exclaimed Rose. "I—I really feel sick."

"The law will be solidly behind you, Conroy," promised the lawyer.

"So damn far behind," said Henry, "that it won't interfere, I hope."

NICK BORDEN and his six men haunted the Tonto Saloon that night, but took no part in the drinking and gambling. There was a man

running the faro bank, and a new swamper. West mixed with the crowd, buying drinks and making himself generally agreeable, but he knew that Borden and his men were watching him all the time. Not until daylight did they relax their vigilance, and one man watched while the others went to breakfast.

After breakfast Borden noticed activity around the sheriff's office; so he walked past there, and was surprised to find Henry and Judge. He stood in the doorway and looked curiously at them.

"Well, this is kinda funny," he observed. "Did they appoint you, Conroy?"

"I believe that was their intention, Mr. Borden," replied Henry.

"Well, they could have done a damn sight worse. I wonder what our mutual friend, Mr. West, thinks about it."

"I doubt that he knows it yet."

Oscar came down the sidewalk, and Borden moved aside to let him in.

"Ay yust got dis at the post office," stated Oscar, handing a letter to Henry.

It was for Danny Regan, and postmarked at Scorpion Bend. Henry looked at it critically.

"A letter from Scorpion Bend for Danny, Judge," explained Henry. "Do you think we should open it?"

"That would hardly be ethical, Henry."

"In that event, I shall open it," declared Henry, which he proceeded to do. The color drained from his face, as he read the few written lines on the single sheet of paper.

"From Leila!" he exclaimed. "My God, Judge; listen to this:

"DEAR DANNY:

"Mother and I are leaving the country, and by the time you receive this we will be far away You have been as good as gold to both of us, dear, and some day, if we are lucky, we may be together again. I can say no more.

"Lovingly,

"LEILA.

"P. S. We are both all right."

Henry groped for his chair and sat down heavily, the letter clutched in his hand. Borden's eyes narrowed as he looked at Henry.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I know what it means, Conroy. I know you were goin' to marry Mrs. Harper. Why, in the name of God, they ever took her—I don't know. Lola's gone, too."

"Lola?" queried Judge.

"The girl who ran the faro bank, Van Treece."

"She—she's gone, too?"

Borden nodded shortly. "Since night before last."

"A beautiful creature," said Judge. "I have seen her."

"I—I hoped to marry her—some day," said Borden.

Henry aroused from his lethargy and read the note again.

"Why should they go away?" queried Judge. "That note sounds as though they were going of their own accord, Henry."

Suddenly Henry lifted his head and laughed harshly.

"Well," he said briskly, getting to his feet, "I suppose we may as well prepare for the inquest over the latest casualty, Judge."

THE change in Henry was so abrupt that Judge stepped over to the desk and read that letter again. Henry was actually humming a little tune as he opened the corridor door and went to inspect the cells of the jail.

"Gone crazy, Van Treece?" whispered Borden.

"I am afraid that is exactly what has happened, Borden. The man has suffered greatly, both mentally and physically. There is a breaking point, you must remember."

Borden nodded and walked out to the street.

"Ay don't understand," said Oscar blankly.

"Listen, Oscar," whispered Judge, "I'm afraid Henry has lost his mind—crazy, you understand? We'll have to watch him closely all the time."

"Yah, su-ure," sighed Oscar gloomily.

Nick Borden rode slowly back to his mine that morning. Somehow, he did not believe that Henry had lost his mind.

"I'll have the boys keep a watch on that sheriff's office, too," he told himself. "You never can tell what that fat comedian's got under his hat."

Slim and Frijole came in, and to them Judge confided his fears regarding Henry's mental state. They observed Henry closely, and were obliged to agree with Judge.

"Somethin' inside his head jist snapped —like that," declared Frijole, snapping his fingers.

"You didn't hear it snap, didja, Judge?" asked Slim seriously.

"No, I must confess that it was not audible, Slim."

"Anyway," said Frijole, "I brung in a jug of prune whisky. Poor old Bill Shakespeare, the rooster—"

"No," interrupted Judge, "don't lie about that rooster eating the mash and fighting a wild-cat."

"Not this time, Judge. Bill ain't come back from chasin' them two lions. Prob'ly won't, until he's done et 'em to the bones."

"You don't think Henry's liable to git vi'lent, do yuh, Judge?" asked Slim anxiously.

"I am not qualified to pass on mental disorders, Slim. However, I wish you two would stay around town today. I confess I am worried."

Henry Harrison Conroy did not seem worried. His nose was a bit more red, and his step was more brisk.

"I talked with Doctor Bogart," he told Judge, "and we have postponed the inquest over that unfortunate cowboy until tomorrow. It is merely a matter of form, anyway."

CHAPTER XXI.

AT THE MINE.

IT was just at dusk when one of West's gunmen took a horse and buggy from the livery stable and drove up to the Tonto Saloon, where Jack West tossed a valise into the back of the buggy and climbed in with his driver. Henry watched them drive out of town, going toward Scorpion Bend.

It was Oscar Johnson, standing in the rear doorway of the jail, who saw Henry ride away from their little stable, near the rear of the jail. Oscar hurried to tell Judge. Slim and Frijole were in the office, and they all made a hurried exit to get their horses.

"I cannot imagine where that old fool is going alone," panted Judge, trying to fit a saddle on backwards. Slim took it away from him and put it on properly.

"Frijole scooted along ahead," Slim told Judge. "He'll trail Henry and then pick us up later."

Another vigilant rider, one of Borden's men, also rode out of Tonto City, not far behind Frijole. But Henry did not know he was being followed. He was no longer riding a sway-backed vintage of 1886, but a real he-man's horse. A forty-five swung in his holster, while another, the gun he had used on Lou James, reposed inside the waist-band of his tightly-fitting overalls.

Where the road forked to the Gold Plate mine, he halted briefly. He had never been to the Gold Plate. Swinging the big bay horse to the left, he went up the deeply-rutted road for about a mile, where the road forked again. There were no sign-posts, but without hesitation he took the right-hand road. There was no moon, but the starlight was sufficient to guide him.

Heavy loads had torn deep ruts in the road, where it climbed up through the hills. About two miles from the forks, silhouetted against the sky, he could see the buildings of the Lucky Star mine.

He turned off the road and stopped behind a mesquite thicket, where he climbed stiffly from his saddle. As far as he could see, there were no lights at the Lucky Stake. He knew that West had taken his crew from there to the Gold Plate, possibly leaving a watchman.

Far back in the hills a coyote chorus started. Henry smiled grimly, wondering

what he would have thought about those coyotes a few months ago. Now, they were part of his life. The bright lights of the city meant nothing to him now. Arizona had claimed him, body and soul.

A deer came down through the mesquite, moving like a shadow, until a down-wind caused it to go thumping away, snorting softly. An owl, flying on noiseless wings, passed very close to Henry. Then he heard the soft thudding of hoofs, as two riders passed on the road; their horses at a swift walk.

They passed quickly, blending into the night, going toward the Lucky Stake. He waited about five minutes, then followed them, leading his horse and walking ankle-deep in the yellow dust. Within a hundred yards of the buildings he turned off the road and selected a place to leave his horse.

He had no definite plans, as he went slowly up through the brush, and found himself close to the dump of one of the Lucky Stake tunnels. Going carefully, he climbed to the top of the rumble and stopped near the portal of the tunnel. Slightly below him, and to the right, was the huddle of new shacks.

He heard a door close, and a few moments later he heard the scuff of footsteps as a man came up the trail toward the tunnel. There was a half-ton ore-car on the wooden track, and Henry crouched behind it.

The man halted at the portal of the tunnel and lighted a candle. He was rather short, but heavy-set. Then he disappeared into the tunnel.

Henry crept over to the portal. It was not a big tunnel. On the right side of the timbered entrance the loose rock had slid away, leaving a few feet of space between the timbers and the rock wall. Henry leaned back in this space, partly concealed by the upright timber, and waited for the man to return. Henry had no idea who the man might be, nor why he went into the tunnel.

From his concealment he saw the flash of a light in one of the buildings.

"If they ever offer a prize for the biggest fool in Arizona, I know who will get it," he told himself.

Then he heard the hollow booming of footsteps from inside the tunnel. They seemed to be coming very slowly. Someone was talking, too. They were closer now, and he heard:

". . . none of my business. I was told to tie yuh at the knees, and keep yore hands tied behind yuh. 'F I'd had my way, you'd be playin' a harp by this time. Here we are."

The lighted candle flashed almost against Henry as the man drove the point of the candle-stick into the timber. He blew out the candle, leaned out past the timber, and Henry slashed him over the head with the barrel of his forty-five, held in both hands. Without a sound the man went flat in the dirt.

THE main building at the Lucky Stake was of rough lumber, unpainted and unfinished. It was to be used as an office and sleeping quarters for the executives. The main room was twenty by thirty feet in size. The windows were covered with blankets. Two saw-horses and some lengths of planks constituted a table, on which was an oil lamp.

Seated against the wall, their hands bound behind them, were Leila and her mother, Lola, the faro-dealer, and Tom Silver, the scar-faced swamper. Four masked men were stationed around the room. From an adjoining room came the low murmur of voices. Not a word was spoken in the main room. Then a door creaked open, and Jack West stepped into the room. Behind him came another man, masked in black, as were the four guards.

The prisoners looked dumbly at West, who stopped at the table, looking at them, a scowl on his face.

"Sorry I had to keep yuh waitin' all this time," he said, "but this is the first time I had a chance to be with you. And when it comes to this sort of a deal, I like to handle it myself."

"I didn't suppose you'd have the nerve

to do this without a mask," said Tom Silver.

West grinned slowly. "It don't require nerve—when I know you'll never tell anybody what happened. You scar-faced fool, do yuh realize that you'll never see the sun rise again? Think that over."

Mrs. Harper was staring at West, a puzzled frown between her eyes. It was the first time she had ever seen him, except at a distance.

"I—I didn't know," she faltered. "You are *that* Jack West."

"Oh, no, yuh don't!" West laughed at her and shook his head. "You got wise—and now you'd deny it. Damn yuh all!" He drove his fist against the top of the table. "You've tried to trip me up—but I've got yuh all. You thought you'd strip me of my money. Well, all you'll get is a swift trip to hell. I'll—"

One of the guards opened the door cautiously, and Danny Regan stumbled into the room, his hands behind him, a rope around his knees. Behind him came the short, heavy-set guard, black-masked.

"Set him down with the rest," ordered West harshly.

"Danny!" exclaimed Leila. "Danny, they got you, too?"

"Yeah, we got him, too," laughed West. "It don't pay to cross Jack West."

"I'm all right, Leila," said Danny, his eyes on West.

WEST laughed and turned to one of the guards.

"Better take a look around outside," he said, and the man walked out. West turned back to his prisoners.

"We're goin' to make this short and sweet," he said harshly. "Lola, your case comes first. You worked with Nick Borden. You listened at the crack in my ceiling and heard about that shipment of gold in the bed-roll. You told Borden, and Borden got it."

"That's a lie!" snapped Tom Silver. "I listened at the window of yore office."

"Yuh did, eh? And you told Nick Borden, eh?"

"All I'm sayin' is that I was the one that told. Lola didn't have a damn thing to do with it. You made a mistake when you took her, West."

"I did, eh? Who dropped those clippings on my desk—you?"

Tom Silver was stumped. West laughed.

"So that was Lola. A dirty little blackmailer, eh?"

"No one blackmailed you, you dirty killer!" flared Lola.

"In God's name, who are you?" asked West.

"I would be ashamed to tell you—ashamed that I didn't kill you weeks ago. I became a dance-hall singer, faro-dealer, and I worked my way into your employ—just to put the fear of a just God into your merciless heart before I drove a bullet through it."

Jack West's face was white, as he looked at her flaming eyes.

"You—you . . . were . . . my . . . wife's kid?" he said slowly.

"I saw you kill my mother," she replied simply.

"So that's—well, what the hell!" he snarled. "It sure had me puzzled. Going to scare me to death before you shot me, eh? I wonder if you shot Doc Sargent. Yeah, I reckon yuh did. Mebbe he caught yuh. But you didn't kill Lee Vane, too. You ain't that clever with a gun. Well, I know all I need from you."

West turned from Lola and looked at Mrs. Harper.

"So yuh recognize me, do yuh?" he sneered. "When I gave yuh two hundred dollars over twenty years ago, to send yuh back East to yore folks, I thought I was through with you forever. Yeah, I was sure the big-hearted gambler. You said so yourself. And when that crazy husband of yours disappeared, I outsmarted Parke Neal, and got that gold mine all for my own.

"Mebbe you thought you was smart when you sent me a bill for yore third of a million dollars, plus interest for twenty years. Why, I recognized you right away. That's why I tried to buy out yore shop.

I wanted yuh out of the way before yuh knew I was the same Jack West. They called me 'Handsome' when you knew me.

"Oh, I've got yuh all rounded up. I'm sorry about yore daughter, but she got caught—and knew too much."

"What are yuh goin' to do with us?" asked Tom Silver.

West laughed softly. "Oh, that is all prepared, Scarface. We are abandoning our first tunnel because it's too dangerous—and useless. Why, one good blast would cave the whole damn two hundred feet. The folks of Tonto City saw me start for Scorpion Bend this evening. We had a couple horses cached out along the road. Later, we'll ride back there and go on to Scorpion Bend."

"Yo're a cheerful murderer, West!" observed Danny Regan.

"Why not? Survival of the fittest, Regan. I set out to ruin the J Bar C, and I'll do it. I'll run Conroy and Van Treece out of the country—or kill 'em. Yo're the first one to be removed."

West turned and looked at Tom Silver.

"This case is about closed," he said. "Scarface, who in hell are you, and what was yore game?"

"You'll never know, you crooked snake. You can't get away with all this. Yore money won't help yuh, West. Some of yore men will talk, and they'll hang you to the highest tree in the state."

West laughed harshly. "Not as long as I've got the money to buy men. And you won't care, anyway, because yore bones will be under two hundred feet of rock. That's all, boys—the case is—"

THE door was jerked open and a masked man sprang inside, closing the door swiftly.

"Hell!" he almost screamed. "Look out! I found Dan Evans at the tunnel mouth, his head caved in! And there's men all over the damn place, Jack!"

"Evans?" gasped West. "Why, I—I—"

"Do yuh want to git trapped?" yelped the man. "I tell yuh—"

"Trapped!" West's face was white. "We can't let 'em find—"

He whirled with a gun in his hand and fired point-blank at Tom Silver. His shot was echoed by the revolver in the hands of the heavy-set guard near the door; and West twisted on his heel, his gun swung high. Swiftly Danny Regan's right hand swung from behind his back, flame spouting from a forty-five Colt. The heavy-set guard was shooting methodically, the gun held in both hands, and the other guards were caught in a murderous cross-fire.

A bullet smashed the lamp, and the only light in the room was the lightning-like flashes of the guns. Then they were all stilled. Men were running all around the outside of the house, and Oscar Johnson's voice bellowed:

"Yumpin' yee, Ay bet ve are too late!"

A heavy body crashed against the door, and it banged open.

"I really believe everything is all right," stated Henry's voice. "We do need a little light. Somewhere on that right-hand wall I believe you will find a lantern."

"Yee-e-e-rusalem!" yelled Oscar. "Das is Hanry! Hallo, Hanry!"

"Hello, Oscar."

Someone found the lantern and managed to light it. There were Judge, Slim, Oscar and Frijole, Nick Borden and three of his men. Henry was leaning against the wall, wearing a strange coat and hat, a black mask dangling under his chin.

Only one of the guards was alive, but dying. Borden yanked away his mask, disclosing the gunman who had driven West away from Tonto City. Jack West was dead, a sneer on his face and a cocked revolver gripped in his right hand. Borden stepped over West's body and lifted Lola up in his arms, swiftly taking off the ropes, while Danny and Henry cut the bonds from Leila and her mother. They were crying from fright and exhaustion.

Tom Silver, his back against the wall, a black stain seeping down his shirt, stared with tired eyes at nothing whatever. Oscar cut the ropes loose, but it meant nothing to Tom Silver.

"West shot him, Nick," said Lola. "West was going to kill all of us, I think. Tom," she said softly, "do you—are you hurt bad? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Lola, I can hear you. But my number is up. West is dead?"

"Henry Conroy got him, Tom," she answered.

"Conroy? Conroy got him? Good."

"We'll get you to a doctor, Tom," she said.

"Don't bother—it's too late. I'm glad that West went ahead of me. You'll get West's fortune, Lola. There's witnesses. West robbed Parke Neal. Mrs. Harper is entitled to a share, Lola. Her husband was the third partner in the Three Partners mine."

MRS. HARPER, shaken badly, leaned over and looked at Tom Silver.

"You knew Tom Silver?" she asked hoarsely.

"In the old days," he replied. "I—I knew his story."

"Do you know what became of him?"

"A—man—shot—him," replied Tom slowly and painfully, spacing his words carefully.

"Jack West?" she whispered.

His eyes shifted to her and he nodded.

"What is your name?" asked Lola.

"Tom—Tom Jones—is—the—name—"

"He is gone," sighed Judge, as he straightened up and looked around. "My God, what a night! Henry Conroy, you nearly drove us crazy. Why did you do all this alone? By what right, sir?"

Henry, with one arm around Mrs. Harper, the black mask still dangling under his chin, replied soberly:

"By right of my official position as sheriff of this county, sir. And not only that, I—I"—Henry's voice broke a little—"I had a big personal interest in seeing it done properly. They were thinking of me when it was written, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.' And Leila, may God bless her, told me where they were. That is, she told Danny—but I got the message."

"Leila told you in that letter?" gasped Judge.

"I told you?" gasped Leila. "Why, Henry, I never wrote a letter!"

"Thank God for a man who can think!" exclaimed Lola. "They forced me to write that letter. It was a mighty long chance, but I made it as plain as I could."

"Plain?" muttered Judge. "Plain? Why, I read that letter."

"When I saw the word 'gold,' and then the word 'lucky,' I felt that it meant something," said Henry. "Lucky Gold. Lucky Stake. And when you wrote P.S., you made the tail of an L on the P. It was L.S.—Lucky Stake. Jack West moved his crew away from here so he could finish things for us. He meant to bury all of you in that old tunnel, where he kept Danny. Only through the grace of God did that guard happen to be built somewhat to my personal specifications. His coat was tight—but the mask fit fine."

"We trailed you, Henry," said Judge wearily.

"We trailed you, too," admitted Nick Borden. "We nearly had a battle between your outfit and mine, before Oscar Johnson fell over a log, and told the world what he thought of logs. Then we got together and were trying to find somebody, when the Fourth of July celebration started in here."

"Well," observed Henry, polishing his nose a little, "I guess that is about all we can do around here, until the coroner can look things over."

"I'll send one of my men to town," offered Borden. "We'll need a wagon to take the ladies home."

HENRY nodded. The three women were talking things over together; so Henry and Borden walked over near the doorway.

"Conroy, I never can be grateful enough to you," said Borden. "You've—well, I've got a future—now. I guess you know."

"By the way," said Henry seriously, "is there any gold in the Smoke Tree, Borden?"

"Not an ounce," whispered Borden. "There never was. It was only a blind to cover what we were doing."

Henry nodded and caressed his nose.

"I believe that things will be very good in this valley. You and Lola can take over West's interests. There will be no more cattle rustling, no water poisoning—and the gold thieves are gone—now."

"Yes, they have left the valley, never to return, Conroy; thanks to you. There is only one thing left; one thing to tell you. That Golden Calf mine of yours, Conroy. It—"

"No good?" queried Henry.

"No good. I staked Parke Neal to enough gold to salt it, and the loose ore is all from the Yellow Warrior. He was goin' to sell it to Jack West. But he blew himself up, tryin' to make it too good."

Danny came over and put an arm around Henry's shoulders. There was a smile on his dirty face, as he said:

"The women have—well, they've kinda decided—for all three of us."

"Decided what?" asked Henry.

"A triple marriage at the J Bar C, with everybody in Wild Horse Valley at a big fiesta. Yessir, they decided unanimous. And—take a look, will yuh? They're all cryin' together."

"Well," replied Henry soberly, "you can't blame them for crying, if they took one square look at the three of us."

From the other end of the room came Oscar's voice:

"And Ay said to Free-holey, 'Free-holey, since me and Yudge and Hanry ain't shoriffs no more, das Vild Hurse Valley is going to de dogs.'"

"Yuh shore did," agreed Frijole. "And she was, too."

"Yah, su-u-ure. And yust de minute ve are back on de yob again, Ay said, to Free-holey, 'Free-holey, you'll be surprised.'"

"And I shore was, Oscar. Did I tell yuh that Bill Shakespeare, the rooster, came home today? No? He shore did. Both spurs wore right down to the quick, and he was a-limpin' in his left laig. If that rooster could talk—man, could he tell a story!"

"He seems to have a fairly good interpreter," said Judge dryly.

"Yeah," agreed Frijole soberly. "But we're changin' his name tomorrow—to Henry. Who the hell did Shakespeare ever whip?"

Henry laughed and walked over to Laura.

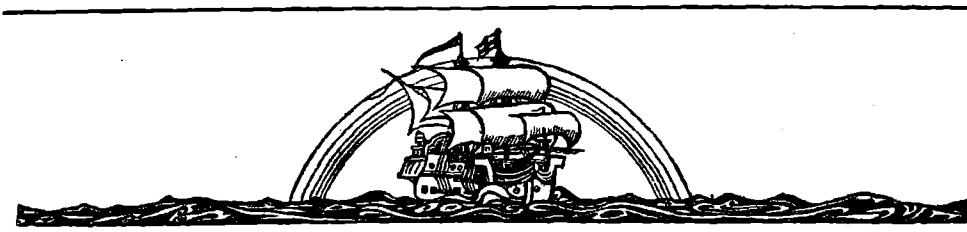
"I felt that I was blessed above all men, Laura," he said. "With peace in Wild Horse Valley—and you. And now they are going to name a rooster after me. Such is fame, I suppose."

"But, Henry," said Mrs. Harper, her eyes filled with tears, "you have always said that anything can happen in Arizona."

"And I believe it stronger than ever, my dear. God bless Arizona."

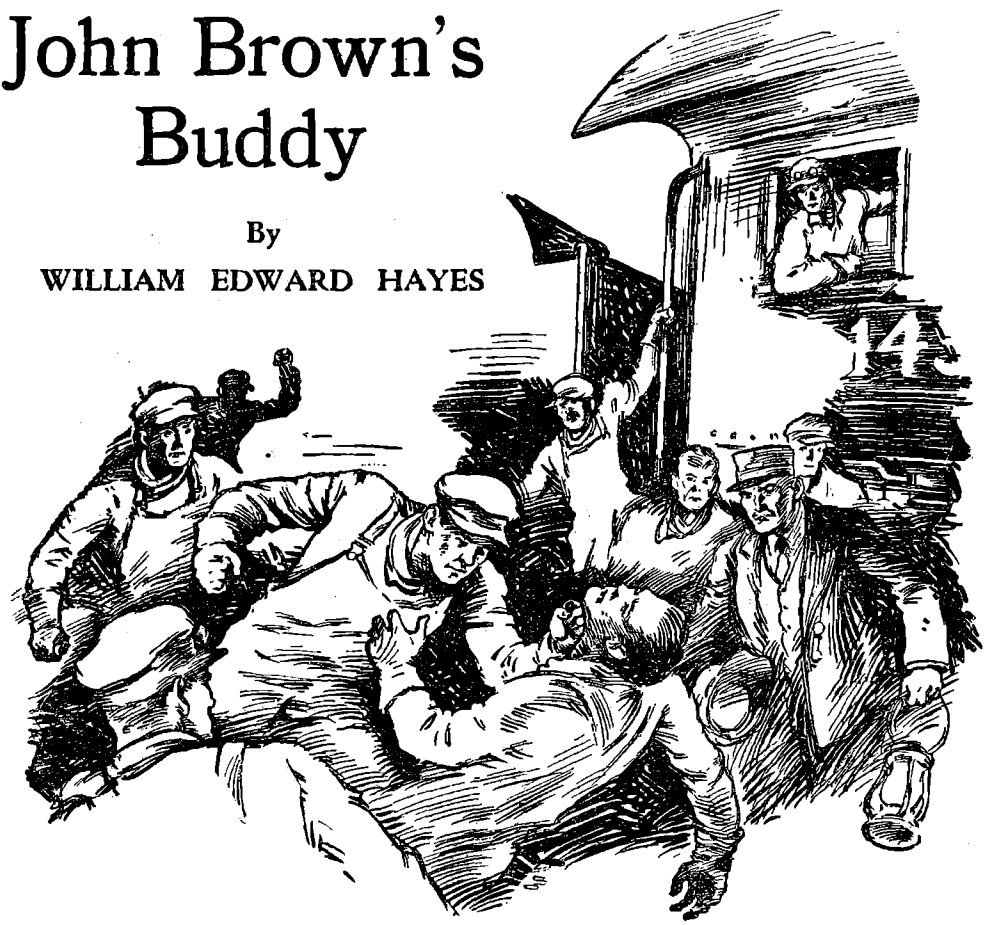
"Das right," agreed Oscar heartily, "but don't forget Hanry."

THE END



John Brown's Buddy

By
WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES



There was a flailing of arms

SURE, I heard guys like you talk before. You don't like the job. You say it's a dog life, and anybody that'd start railroading in the first place is minus some of his marbles. And if you had a chance you'd get you a farm with a couple acres, and you'd pull the pin on this job and go out and make a decent living. Don't tell me. I know all about it. You've been railroading five — six years. You've been threatening to go on a farm most of that time.

Yeh? You won't go on a farm. No more than I've gone on a farm. This railroad—this steam and cinders, and being up all hours of the night and day—listen, fella! See this frost around my ears? I've been here a few years. I've seen 'em come and go. Like a writer, or a painter, you're a railroader or you ain't

When railroading is in the blood, there's no telling what a young fellow will endure to gain a place with the high iron

You've got it in the blood, or you haven't. If you haven't got it, you never stay—you never make good in the first place. If you have got it, a pair of compound mallet mountain helpers couldn't pull you loose from the job. If you've got it in the blood, fella, your ma could raise you a thousand miles from a right of way, but sooner or later you'd be finding yourself where the two rails run and...

Oh, that's only what I say, is it? Listen, guy, I know a bird whose ma was so sure her son would never see a railroad...

Well, no, he wasn't raised exactly a thousand miles from the high iron, but he might as well have been for all the chance he had as a kid to watch the smoke, hear the roar, and...

No romance to it any more? That what you mean to say? No romance to the pound of polished drivers on the joints. Hunh! Listen, fella. You're new here. So you probably ain't heard of John Brown's Buddy, and the reason he got the name, and why it's sticking through...

Sure, I got time to tell you. It'll be a half hour yet before they get my caboose on, and I've got my train checked, and my bills written up...

My caboose. I'm sitting in it that night, up there in the eastward passing track at Broken Bow, busily engrossed in trying to figure out why train dispatchers are endowed with such small brains in such fat, ugly bodies, when I hear footsteps on the back porch. Not just ordinary footsteps like some heavy-footed brakeman 'd make coming in out of the night, but a *clump-clump* that sounds like somebody's beating on the platform with a couple sledges.

I suppose I'm a little startled, and especially since I ain't exactly expecting company I'm more than curious. In fact, I forget all about train dispatchers, and their peculiar ways of getting a man into a siding and forgetting he's there, when I look up and see what's framed in the door.

Maybe I blink, or something. I know I swallow and pretty shortly squint down one eye. I'm looking at a lean young gent with all the earmarks of having come out on the small end of an ungentlemanly dispute. He's wearing a black soft hat with a pinch crown and the brim turned up in front, and a blue shirt with a windsor tie, and a blue suit. In fact, his garb was that of a traveling brother, if ever I saw one.

And maybe it wouldn't have struck me like it did if this bird wasn't so mussed up. But the hat was caved in, the shirt torn at the neck, the tie cock-eyed, and the suit plenty spotted from too i n t i m a t e contact with ballast gravel.

I guess my mouth is open when this guy speaks. He says, " You the skipper, fella?"

And his voice is real tough. In fact, his walk is tough when he comes on in and stands before me.

I see he's looking at the metal nameplate on my derby designating me as the gent in charge, so I say, " Naw, I'm just the chief clerk. It's only that I'm wearing the conductor's hat."

You know, out on this railroad the road men all have to wear these tags so's the officials can tell 'em from the bums.

The tough egg says, " Don't kid me, fella. I was sent here to see Conductor Artie Drew. If you ain't him—"

" All right," I says, " I'm Artie Drew. If you wanna borry my first-aid kit—"

"I don't wanna borry anything," he snaps; and I guess he sees me looking his clothes over, because he starts to brush 'em, and I see his knuckles are bloody and grimy.

"Just drop in for a visit?" I asks. "We ain't had an introduction."

"I'm John Brown's buddy," he says, still tough as ten-penny nails.

"Oh," I says, "I knew there was a song about it, but danged if I ever expected to see it wanderin' around Montana in the middle of the night—"

"What's wanderin' around?" he asks; and it's then I get the first good look at his eyes, and something about 'em does something to me. You know. You feel like the face or the eyes are familiar, but you can't place 'em. That's the way his eyes were. Pale blue, kind of big, and tired and young. The eyes didn't go with that tough way of talking, or the tough way he held himself.

"Skip it," I says. "Who sent you, and whatcha want?"

"I told you," he says. "I'm John Brown's buddy. I—"

"Just which John Brown 're you meaning?" I asks, beginning to smell something.

"Your engineer," he says. "He told me to tell you who I was, and—"

"Hold it," I snaps.

I felt a coughing fit coming on quick. You got to know my engineer to appreciate it. He's a big, lean, handsome guy with a vacant, innocent face, and his name is Lewis. They call him Dirty on the road because of the nature of some of the tricks he plays on people.

I GIVE this youngster a good look, now, and he stands there glaring at me, but somehow I can see behind the glare and behind the whole front he's trying to put up. Somehow he just ain't tough, regardless of how he talks or walks. I ain't clear on what Dirty's trying to pull by this John Brown stuff.

So I asks, "What's your name, son?"

"I ain't a son," he says, quick, "an' my name's Brown, too. Buck Brown. John said if I'd come over here an' introduce myself to you, maybe you'd let me ride your caboose to Harbison."

"Maybe," I snaps, "you don't know there's rules against such."

"But," he says, "I'm a brother. I'm a brakie. I'm tryin' to get to Harbison because John tells me they're hirin' brakies there."

Now, look. You been around long enough to know that a railroader never says brakie when referring to a trainman. You never used it, nor I, nor any other old head. Well, by this time my curiosity is thoroughly aroused. Here I've got a tough guy that ain't tough at all, posing as a railroader when he isn't a railroader at all. And I've got him on my hands because my low-minded engineer wanted to be funny.

"Yeh," I says, "they're hirin' brakies at Harbison. But they want experienced men with service behind them and—"

"I'm experienced," he says. "I'm—I got age on me an' I've got service letters to show."

He reaches into this stained coat of his and hauls out some envelopes.

I take 'em, and all I need is one look. They're service letters, all right, with red and purple lines on 'em, and all that. But I know a phony when I see one. This guy had 'em made up for himself, or bought 'em off somebody. Those letters covered six years as a trainman and switchman on three different railroads in the East, and six

years ago, unless I'm altogether crazy, Buck Brown hadn't even shaved yet. I look the letters over and hand 'em back.

"Lined up?" I asks, meaning, of course, if he belonged to one of the brotherhoods.

"Sure," he says, and just the way he answers I know he doesn't know what I'm talkin' about, so I let it pass. I figures if a guy wants to get to Harbison for a job, and's got the crust to lie like this one, he can ride with me. Anyhow, I want to see my engineer and have a talk with him about the reason for all this John Brown business.

"All right," I says. "Crawl into that bunk yonder and take it easy. We'll be six or seven hours yet, getting in, so you might as well hit the hay. I'm going over to the telegraph office now. If my hind man comes before I get back, tell him you're John Brown's body, reposing in peace."

I no sooner get over to the telegraph office until I find out that the dispatcher has changed his mind about things again, and we're going to roll right away. There's a flock of orders, governing our movements, and since Dirty Lewis has already got his, I'll have to forego the pleasure of an intimate chat with him until later.

I read over my orders and a couple messages the dispatcher throws in for good measure, and then I go out to see if everything on the train's all right. I hear Dirty toot his whistle for a signal to go, and pretty soon, from the caboose, there comes this lantern sign. I relay it on to the engine, and the train jerks into motion. I've got almost a hundred cars, so it's quite a little time before the caboose comes up to me and I swing on.

My flagman is standing on the back porch, and at first I don't see anything wrong. This flagman's a big guy with a chin that sorta sticks out, and a neck like a bull's. I don't pay any attention to him, but go on inside and lay my orders out on my desk.

THE caboose pretty soon jerks on the curve out to the high iron, and I'm reading the orders over again, when we stop while the hind man throws the switch. We don't really stop, you understand. Just creep along like.

Then, in a minute, I'm conscious of two yelps from Dirty's engine, and I know we're heading down the country. I put the orders on the spike and happen to look over toward the bunk, and see it's empty. Just about then my hind man—Siler, his name was—comes up beside me.

I looks all around the caboose and then I yelps, "Where is it?"

Siler says, "What?"

"John Brown's buddy," I says.

And Siler sticks that chin into my face and says, "Lissen, Artie! Who's tryin' to be funny?"

I see the chin kinda scratched up.

"The kid," I yells. "He didn't get off and—"

"If you mean that tough string in the boomer clothes," Siler bawls, "I throwed him off. I picked him up an'—"

"Wait!" I snaps. "What's the big idea? When I tell a man he can ride—"

"That's what I wanna know," Siler explodes. "What's the big idea? Here I figger I've put that punk in his place once tonight, an' then I walk in an' find him takin' possession of the caboose like he owned it, an' defyin' me to do anything about it, an'—"

"Hold it!" I yells. Maybe I'm sniff-

ing by then, trying to smell that mouse I was suspecting. "Let me have it easy. Where'd you meet this—"

"In the Broken Bow lunchroom," Siler blurts. "Settin' up there to the counter, puttin' on airs, an' tellin' lies, an'—"

Daylight dawns. I'm beginning to see things. "Talking to Peggy Cane," I says. "That it?"

Peggy Cane being the Broken Bow night charmer, the five-foot-three of biscuit-shooting perfection.

"An' her," Siler babbles. "Her, standin' back of the counter, leanin' on her elbow, lookin' at him, an' drinkin' in his tales of where he's been a boomer when he ain't done no more'n ride on two streaks of rust, or I miss—"

"Get a little breath, big fella," I break in. "I'm sort of getting the picture. Peggy was giving Buck a tumble, and you couldn't take it. That it?"

"To hell with you," Siler says, and I can see he's sulking. And I can pretty well guess why. He's got a rep as being a hand with women. He's got something about him that makes most of the beanery queens smooth down their shirtwaists when they see him coming. But all he ever gets from Peggy is a tilted nose. And can she tilt it!

"Can't a man talk to a girl without you wanting to start a war?" I asks, hungry now to get it all in my bean.

"When it begins to get personal," Siler says, "I object. When somebody begins to make remarks about—"

"Just what remarks?" I puts in.

"Her askin' him," Siler blubbers, "what he thought of lady-killers who you couldn't keep in their place, and him givin' me a dirty look when she looked my way, an' sayin' somethin' about certain kinds of faces never killed any real ladies. Listen, Artie! I got it. You're damn right I got it. So I walks over to this mug an' invites him outside."

"And he went outside?" I pops, remembering the knuckles and all.

Siler's grin isn't pretty. "Yeh," he says, "an' I took him apart, an' she seen me do it." He chuckled in his throat. "She come out with water, an' kneeled down an' held his head, an' Dirty Lewis helped her get him up."

"So," I says, "Peggy Cane then put you in your place." I knew how Peggy could hand 'em out the answers. "She told you what kind of a gent you are, and you resolved if ever this kid crossed your path again—"

"I showed her," Siler growls and laughs again. "I throwed him off right in front of her lunchroom door. If he's got any bones left whole in his skinny legs to pick himself up with—"

"Some day, Siler," I says, "you're gonna tie into the wrong fella. Somebody like Buck Brown, and when you do you're gonna get what you ask for. I'm only sorry I wasn't on the caboose when you picked Buck up. I may have some gray in my hair, big guy, but I can still hold my own, and somebody else'd be laying on the Broken Bow platform."

I turn my back on him and climb up to the cupola. I can't get those strange eyes out of my mind. I can't help but wonder at the lies and the tough pose. John Brown's buddy. Dirty Lewis might've known sending Buck to my caboose was just one way of wrecking the caboose after that.

A WEEK or two slips by, and I've just about forgotten Buck Brown, when I'm rolling West with an extra, pulling a flock of empties, and have to go in at Broken Bow for two sections of an eastbound hot-

shot. We roll up into the westward siding, and I see a headlight over there in the eastward passing track, and make out another extra taking a rest. Since it looks like an hour or more delay, I figure we ought to eat there. So I finish up my desk work and strolls up to the depot and the lunchroom.

I'm just about at the edge of the platform when I see the commotion by the lunchroom door, and see a crowd gathering, and hear somebody yelling, and right away I jump into a lope to see what the excitement's about. I come hopping up when, *socko!* Something comes hurtling out of that group with a wildcat yell and smacks me.

Smacks me down, I mean.

I guess maybe I'm stunned for a minute, and then the lights quit swimming, and somebody's pulling something off me. Somebody else is pulling me up to a sitting position, and then I recognize the voice of a brother conductor.

The brother's saying, "You all right, Artie? You ain't got any bones broke, or anything?"

"I guess I'll be able to stand," I says trembly like. "Only, who blew up the depot?"

I'm working one side of my jaw up and down with my two hands.

"It was John Brown's buddy," the brother conductor says, and I snap out of it like a flash.

"Oh," I says. "Him! I thought he got killed a week or so back—"

"It ain't his fault," the skipper says. "He oughta been killed. God knows he's tried hard to be killed."

"Wait a minute," I snaps, getting up and trying out both legs. "Just what do you mean—"

"I mean," the other conductor says, "he's been on my crew eight days. I caught him outta Harbison eight days back when my head man laid off. An' I been catchin' hell ever—"

"You mean," I says, "he's workin' here?"

"I wouldn't call it workin'," the brother says. "But evidently he fooled the trainmaster into hirin' him. He's been learnin', an' lyin'. He's got service papers as a pin man, but if he ever broke freight before—"

"I know," I says. "I saw the letters. But what—what happened here?"

"Ask that plug-ugly hind man of yours," the brother says. "God knows what started it. We're in the passin' track waitin' for the hot stuff to overtake us, an' John Brown's buddy goes to eat. Seems like Siler come in an' started baitin' him, an' he invited Siler outside. If you know this skinny tough guy, maybe you can tell me why he's tryin' to outlie the lyin'est boomer that ever hit this pike."

"You know as much as I do," I says. I can't help from grinning. Here this Siler is twice as big around as Buck Brown, and the thought of the kid inviting him outside the lunchroom after what Siler had done to Buck a couple weeks before—well, you had to hand it to Buck. He either was nuts, or he had more courage than sense.

"The only thing I know," the other skipper mumbles, "is the kid's got ability. If he'd quit lyin', an' let you learn him! You only have to show him once. You show him a move, an' he'll do it better'n you ever did it when it comes time to do it again. But that lyin'—"

"So you're asking for something, too, are you?"

We both swing around. There's Peggy Cane with those gray-green eyes of hers blazing plenty. She's standing there with her hands on her hips and that pert nose tilted back.

She's an eyeful of flame and wrath.

"Meanin' just what?" the other conductor asks, kindly, him being like a father.

"I think you're all horrible," Peggy says. "You leave Buck alone. He's a gentleman, and Heaven knows gentlemen in this racket are few. The next crack—"

"You let him tie into me once more," Siler blurts, coming out from the mob, "an' there will be one gentleman fewer, an' if you think I can't—"

SMACK! I know I jumped. It was all so quick. Just a flash of something like metal, and then that crack. It was the griddle cake turner. You know, one of them aluminum things with a wide blade. She laid it flat on Siler's puss. And just as she did Buck Brown evidently come to. He was on his feet, wobbly, with water dripping off him where somebody had doused him to restore what senses he possessed. He staggered into the middle.

"I'll take him, hon," Buck said, and there he was flailing out with those long, skinny arms.

I hopped on Siler and stopped a well-aimed haymaker while the other skipper pulled Buck back, and the bloodshed was averted.

Some minutes later, when my westward job was rolling again, I got Siler in the cupola of the crummie and put it to him.

"Supposin' you tell me," I says, "what it's all about?"

Siler just glares. Then he says, "Tryin' to make a monkey outta me," like he was thinking out loud. Suddenly he whirls around. "I'll give him once to start somethin', Artie, an' then I'll bust him in two."

"You've busted enough," I says, knowing it's none of my business. "You've made a monkey outta yourself. Nobody else's done it, or tried to. If that kid brakeman and Peggy Cane—"

"Brakeman!" He snorts at that. "By hell, Artie, if I ever get the chance, I'll show her and everybody else what kinda brakeman he is!"

Suddenly I go cold. Buck Brown, braking here on this division! Lordy, but I start praying. If Buck ever happened to catch my crew for a vacancy...

Sure, he caught my crew. I'll say he did. But then prayers never did me much good. Either I don't do it right, or I ask for the wrong things.

Yeh, John Brown's buddy—that's what everybody's calling him by now because he told several of the brothers that before he found out Dirty Lewis is kidding him—catches my crew at three o'clock one rainy morning when I'm called West out of Harbison with a trainload of coal. My regular head-end brakeman is down with a cold, or something, and when I go to the yard office to get my bills I'm almost rolled over by what I see.

Siler's just turned around from his locker, when he sees Buck, and maybe it was luck that I got on the scene when I did.

I took a hickory club I used for twisting down handbrakes out of my locker. I march up to those brothers. "Listen, you two mugs," I snaps, "you're my responsibility as long as you're on company property. One move outta either one of you, and I use this club."

"All right," Buck Brown bawls, and those eyes do something to me again. "All right, skipper! But you see he keeps his dirty mouth offa me, or—"

"I'll smash his teeth down his skinny neck," Siler hollers, "if he makes just one crack—"

"Listen, you two!" I don't yell much. I never had to. But I yell then. And I bang that club down on a bench.

They listen. "You heard what I said. If you boys wanna kill each other you pick your off hours, because if I have to use this club neither one of you'll be in any condition to start a war."

I'm worried. I don't know how it's going to work out, nor just how much they might think me bluffing. And I guess, because I'm so much on edge, is why that first trip with those two brakemen was a nightmare. Everything went wrong.

That hill up to Skygate. You know what a grade that is. We busted in two right in the middle of it because the engineer we had that morning was a mauler, a raw-hider. We had to go up in two pieces, lug chains through the mud, switch out the cripple at the top of the hill.

And because I don't trust my brakemen outta my sight, I neglect my office work in the caboose and stand out there in the rain helping them. Then, after we leave Skygate we get a hot wheel from a sticking brake that almost puts us in the ditch.

We would've been in the ditch if Buck Brown's eyes hadn't been sharp. When I see what his quick thinking saves us on that tangent between Skygate and Casco, I begin to change my mind about his ability. Then, when we get to Casco, and I have to let him handle the switch list because of other chores, well...

I'll say he handles that list. He does the work in no time flat. We're coupled up and ready to go before I realize it, and when I get on the caboose to leave town I see Siler sort of sulking.

YEH, we made Broken Bow for lunch. Yeh, I reckon that's why all the speed Buck Brown puts on at Casco. We have work to do at Broken Bow, a couple loads to set out. Buck does it all by himself and then I escort him into the lunchroom.

I don't have to look twice to see that he and Peggy have it bad. It's a wonder we get half the things we order. But somehow Peggy manages to get the orders right and give Buck a lot of attention, too.

When Siler comes in I start to get nervous, but nothing happens. Siler snarls an order and gives Peggy a dirty look, and she returns it. Other than that, the meal is peaceful, and I start groping around for the answer.

I'm not kidding myself to believe that me laying the law down like I did had all this effect on them two belligerents. But still...

Well, we get to Bellew finally without anything cropping out. Siler is particularly sulky and quiet, and somehow that worries me. I notice that nowhere on the trip does he or Buck ever exchange a word except when it comes to making switching moves.

That evening, in the boarding house at Bellew, I get to talking to Buck. I've been watching his work all day, and if he's a rank amateur then I'm a train dispatcher's pride and joy. If he never broke freight before, as the skipper that night at Broken Bow told me, then I put him down as a wizard.

"You're all right, Buck," I say over my pipe that evening. "You got the makings of a railroader, kid. But what—"

"I'm no kid," he snaps, and there he sits, hard and tough.

"But what I can't figure out," I go on, ignoring him, "is why you wanna make people think you're such a ten-minute egg, when you know you're not, and I know you're not. You act like a spoiled child that nobody could ever do anything with, and like you're gonna have your way or—"

"Am I askin' you for anything?" Buck demands. And he tries to glare.

"A sock in the puss," I blurts, "if you can't be civil with a guy. I ain't trying to pry into your private affairs, kid, but sometimes a guy needs a friend. A male friend, I mean—"

"I got a friend," Buck retorts, and gets up and walks off.

Well, I could've jumped up and shook him, but I sit there; and directly another crew comes in and a couple guys I know want to start a penny ante game.

I don't see any more of Buck until the trip back next day with a train of apples and a hot schedule. We make only three stops for coal and water, but it's on one of these stops that I see Dirty Lewis on a westbound job. It's the first chance I've had to talk to him, and I'm under his cab yelling up, asking him what this joke is about John Brown's buddy, and Dirty grins down at me with that innocent, vacant stare.

Dirty says, "It ain't a joke, Artie. It's—wull, Artie, mebbe time'll tell. Keep yuhr eye on 'im, Artie, an' don't let anything happen to 'im."

Right then we whistle off and I make a dive for my caboose. John Brown's buddy! No joke. Dirty's words sort of haunt me. And up in the caboose I see Siler, glaring ahead, moody and quiet, like the well-known calm before the storm.

Was there a storm, you say? Look! This regular head man of mine. He turns into grippe, or something like that. He stays off. Buck stays on my crew. Siler gets more silent. It gets on my nerves What's going on? I can't find any answer. So I start to look out. I start to watch.

It's about a week after that first trip with Buck aboard. I'm no sneak. And I never spied on my hands. But in this case...Yes, I spied. And I saw what was going on.

Siler's working on Buck, little by little. Siler's trying a new method to get Buck's goat and put Buck in a spot where Buck'll start open war, and then Siler'll put the finish on it and claim self-defense.

How? By little things. Like crossing up Buck on relayed signals to the engine so a car won't be spotted just right, and the engineer'll have it to do all over again, thinking it's Buck's fault, and by giving Buck the dirty end of the switching work, especially in the rain, and a dozen and one other things. Riding the kid to the limit without appearing to ride him.

WHEN I see what's going on, I get Siler in the caboose and put it to him.

"How about gettin' that car off the derail at Cardington?" I ask. "I saw the signal you tossed Buck, and I saw him give the same signal to the engine, and now you'll say he didn't relay the signal right."

"That punk!" Siler snorts. "You didn't see anything. I tossed a sign to stop. He kept the engine backin'. Is it my fault—"

"All right," I barks. "But I got eyes, Siler. Now look here. You let me catch you just one more time pulling a stunt like that and this railroad won't be long enough or wide enough to hold both of us."

"Don't tell me I'm lyin'," Siler bawls. "By hell, Artie, if you take that kid's word against mine about these signals—"

"Like I said," I whales back at him, "I got eyes. You watch your step."

I kept a watch out for a couple days after that, but everything rides okay. Buck is developing into a natural, Siler's keeping his hands off. We're getting the work done, and we're getting over the road. I'm just about to congratulate myself on being a sharp guy with a way of cracking the whip when...

Well, if you think it wasn't a storm! I'm not likely to forget that afternoon if I live to be a hundred...Sure, they're just going up to the caboose track now for my crummie...Yeh, I got a couple minutes...

Oh, yes. The storm. We're at Bellew, the west end of this division, when we get a call about noon to run extra east with a pick-up peddler job. The kind that does switching work just about every place. Buck's been on my crew then about two weeks and everything seems to be okay.

We back onto the train in the eastbound yards, and I start to check it over, when Siler says he's up with his work and he'll check it for me if I want to see about my orders. Well, I don't think anything about that. It's regular and all.

Buck is on the head end, letting off hand brakes, and looking things over, and when I pass him he almost loses that tough look long enough to smile at me.

For just a second I see behind his pose, and those eyes trouble me again, and he seems right that minute like he sure would love to have somebody to talk to, to tell something to.

In due time we start out over the mountain, drop down the other side to White Cloud, and do some switching there. I look over the list and see that we'll have quite a bit of work at Broken Bow with two cars of lumber to set out and a lot of stuff to pick up. I think about how that ought to tickle Buck, especially if we take time to eat there, and I sort of have to grin when I think of him and his hungry look, and the way he come into my caboose telling me he was John Brown's buddy.

Leaving White Cloud, we get an order to meet a couple trains at Broken Bow, one of which is a passenger extra. Siler brings the orders over from the telegraph office where he's been cooling his heels while Buck picked up a pair for the head end.

Now, a passenger extra running west is either an excursion, or an official train, and this being the middle of the week, there wouldn't likely be any excursions out. I ask Siler who the passenger extra is, but he says he doesn't know, which doesn't sound true to me.

We high-tail it to Broken Bow, so we'll have twenty minutes or so to do our switching before we have to clear the main for the eastward limited that will overtake us there. Just as we come in sight of the yard limit sign, Siler goes out over the tops to be on hand to help Buck, and I finish up with my desk work.

Being in yard limits when we stop we don't have to have a flag behind us. So I leave the caboose and start walking over.

Now, this move of setting out those two gondolas, loaded with rough lumber, is a simple one. The engine just spurts ahead, slacks off, and cuts loose from its cars. One brakeman gets the switch as soon as the engine clears it, and the other rides the cars into the

storage track and tightens 'em down with his hand brake. Nothing to it at all.

We don't have a very long train, and I'm within two cars of where the cut's made when I see Siler down at the switch, and Buck up behind the engine on the head gondola, ready to pull the pin.

BUCK gives a sign and the engine tears out, and I see Siler get set. I see Buck's leg kick out, hear the engine shut off for just a spell, and then when Buck signals with his leg again that he's got the coupling pin up, I see the engine snort off. It's all nice and pretty like with Siler right on his toes. He bends the iron like an expert and the engine busts down the main while the two gons turn out.

I'm looking at the gons when a flash of sun in brass gets my eyes and my heart does a flip. There, in the storage track, is a business car, all polished and bright, and over at the coal chutes is an engine. The passenger extra. The division superintendent.

Well, I'm thinking what a dumb move it is to kick a couple of loads into a track occupied by the boss's car, but there's plenty of room, so I start on toward the depot when I hear a yell!

Man, that is a yell! I look up sudden and I see Buck Brown run from the head gondola across that heap of lumber, to the hind one, and go after the hand brake there. I just start running. I'm sick, and I'm weak, but I run.

That storage track slants down just a little eastward. Those gons were gaining. I guess I start to yell, and I see Siler running and yelling, and people are coming out of the depot yelling. I see Peggy Cane and she's got her hand to her mouth.

Then I turn back to Buck and goad myself a little faster. He's racing back to the head gon again and someone on the business car has seen what's coming by this time because there's three or four guys piling off and getting away from there.

Suddenly I can't run. I see Buck up on that lumber grabbing a huge piece. It must've been an eight-by-eight. He's grabbing it and throwing it over in front of the wheels. He's deliberately trying to derail that car to keep it from rolling down into the brass hats.

By then I'm sweating plenty. I see the forward trucks of the first gon heave up and settle back down again, and a cloud of dust come up around the wheels, and then over goes another one of those pieces that it seems impossible for a guy Buck's size to lift. Over it goes and by this time everybody is running toward what looks like a sure wreck. I know I'm yelling at Buck to unload.

But he stays right there until the front trucks bite into one of them square poles, heave up for good, tear into the ballast and tilt over to one side. I guess by then I'm praying because the last I saw Buck he was tugging at another piece of lumber, and now lumber is spilling all over the railroad and the dust and the people yelling and all—well, I'm just about ready to blow up.

I get up in the dust cloud ready to hunt for Buck's remains when I hear a howl and out of the dust I see something coming like a plummet. It's Buck. Then, before I can open my mouth, or move, or do anything, I hear a loud, squashy *woof* and I see Siler going over on his back.

Buck hit the big brakeman with his head down, hit him in the middle, and that should've finished anybody. But Buck sailed in with his fists and then it was a jamble. I heard the superinten-

dent back of me howling about somebody separating those two men and I got in there and tried. I took a slam on the side of the head that knocked me into somebody else, and then I'm all mixed up in legs and arms.

Finally I hear Buck yelling, "Yeh! You fixed 'em. You did. You plugged up those brake chains so I couldn't tighten—you—"

Then another voice bawls, "Buddy! Buddy! Great God—"

By now I'm back on my feet with the dust out of my eyes and the mob's pressing closer and I see a stoutish gray man holding Buck's collar and shaking him like he was a rag, and yelling, "Buddy! You've driven your mother gray-headed. Answer me."

AND Buck says, "You got eyes," real tough like. "I'm brakin' on the railroad," he hollers. "You leave me be while I break this skunk's neck. . . ."

Well, I'm ready to set down right there. The gray man whirls, and he sees me, and he says, "Artie! What the hell's all this about? What—"

Maybe I give a good imitation of Zazu Pitts in a quandary. I know I'm trying to make words and I'm making a lot of motions, but all I can get out is, "He's—he's your—your—"

"My son," this gray gent snaps, and it looks like he's going to snap my head off, and then I say, "All right, but—"

Well, what can you say to the general manager of the railroad in a case like that? Yeh, the general manager. J. Tidwell Brown. John, his name was when he was a conductor on this division about thirty years ago. John T. Brown in the old days, who had to do better by his name when officialdom claimed him.

"Your son," I finally says, "is a damn good railroader, J. T., and if you've been trying to keep him off the railroad—"

"Listen, Artie," J. T. says, "I'm telling you in private, see? His mother's kept him as far away from smoke and cinders as she could for twenty-two years. He beat it from college last month. But somehow—well, you know. When this railroading's in the blood . . ."

So, you see. That's my point. It's in the blood, or it ain't. Siler? Oh, yeh. It was one of those things you couldn't prove. Somebody monkeyed with the brake chains, and Siler knew the office car would be in the storage track because the White Cloud operator had told him. He didn't stay long after that beating Buck gave him before the old man pulled Buck off. And as for Peggy, well, Buck's mother was a hasher at Bellew thirty-five years ago when the old man was a rangy brakeman on this district. So there was room in the family for another beanery queen . . .

Yes, that tough pose was put up to fool people, sure. And Buck fooled just about everybody. Of course his eyes stirred some sort of memory in me, but that didn't mean anything. He fooled just about everybody except one man.

That one man? Lewis. Dirty Lewis. Dirty'd hauled the old man's private car over the division three years ago when the old man had his family aboard, and Dirty remembered hearing J. T. call his son Buddy, and since J. T. used to be John to us out here —well, there you are. John Brown's buddy. He told me exactly who he was in my caboose that night at Broken Bow, and I didn't know it.

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ARGOSY is "extra-curricular," says

RUTH COLETTE

I have seen letters from readers in many different occupations, but I have never seen one from a college girl, so here I am.

Whenever I can get it, I read ARGOSY every week—unless my mother or fourteen-year-old sister get it first, and in that case I don't get it until *both* of them have read it threadbare.

I want to tell you that I think "The Blackbirds Sing" is one of the best stories you have published during the four years I have read ARGOSY.

My mother and her best friend used to shock their families by reading the magazine, back in the days when some folks raised their eyebrows at any girl who read dime weeklies. And I feel that they are a grand cure for a mind overstuffed with psychology, French, and English literature.

Let's have lots more stories like "A Lion in the Parlor."

Crescent City, Fla.

AS one editor and publisher to another:

JOHN F. HOGAN

Possibly an opinion from one who has been in newspaper and magazine work for 45 years, from carrier to editor and publisher, may interest you. Particularly in this time, when I say that for 40 years I have read ARGOSY, among others, but prefer your magazine to all others in the American fiction field. It is a peculiar fact that I read 99% of the stories, some of which are not so "hot"; but in general I believe you publish the most interesting fiction stories I read in any magazine.

This is my first letter to you—but I want to tell you how much I appreciate the ARGOSY.

Detroit, Mich.

BORDEN CHASE gives a new kind of thrill to

JOHN HANSEN

This is something I have never done before and I don't know very well how to do it, so I'll just do the best I can.

What makes me write is the story, "Bed Rock," by Borden Chase, which I think is the best yarn he has written so far—and I hope he writes more like it.

I was a miner until a year ago last May. At that time my chest was crushed and I suffered other injuries so that I am no longer able to do much work of any kind. My muscles and will-to-do are all right, but the rest of me won't keep up with them. So I cannot mine any more. But from that you can understand why I like Borden Chase. Instead of working in mines and tunnels I now read his stories about them. Yours for more mining stories.

Torrance, Calif.

HE'S an old New Yorker, writes

CHAS. A. PARKER

I have delayed writing this in order to give the subject considerable thought. When you ask me to choose the best story that has appeared in ARGOSY, with such writers as Challis, Worts, Mason, Bedford-Jones, Wilstach, Chase, and the other swell writers, you have given me, at least, *one hard nut to crack.*

But I have decided that Borden Chase's sand hog stories are the very best; and out of the three he has written, I believe this last one, "Bed Rock," to be the very best. Reason: because it is written so much out of fact. It brings back fond memories of the "Great White Way"

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Your name.....

Address.....

and all Manhattan. I am a former New Yorker and I well remember old Trinity, and all of lower New York as well, for I was with a firm on lower Broadway, and after that with one on West 23rd Street.

As a whole, I like most of your writers, and I feel that you have shown wisdom in the way that you have always put out the grand old ARGOSY.

Lansing, Mich.

Of Interest to You!

WHAT do you consider the best story (of any length) published in ARGOSY since June 1, 1935? For the twelve post cards or letters from readers which name the best reasons why this or that story stands out above all others the magazine will give twelve full, yearly subscriptions. Literary style or skill will not count, for what the editors want to know is exactly what stories readers like best, and *why*.

Letters selected will be published from week to week, but *not all letters published will be rewarded with subscriptions.*

Your letter must reach us not later than January 1, 1936. Address it to The Editor, ARGOSY Magazine, 280 Broadway, New York City.

LOOKING AHEAD!

WINGS OF TREACHERY

An aviator on a Hollywood holiday—a holiday with more danger in it than the Roman kind. Hard-boiled Stu Holt got a laugh out of his new job of air chauffeuring a movie queen; but that was only before he'd uncovered the murderous scheme that lay behind the job. An amazing two-part air novel by

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What convict wouldn't be willing to battle like hell if freedom was the prize? And in this case the prize was a full pardon if he could discover a way into the interior of Australia. A gripping tale of the early attempts to colonize an untamed island continent. A novelette by

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A sergeant of the Shanghai police learns that the only way to track an Oriental murderer is to try Oriental trickery. An unusual short story by

ALFRED BATSON

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—OCTOBER 26

WARNINGS of Prostate Trouble

Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Sexual Weakness, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at Night are only some of the ailments, differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

THOUSANDS AFFLICTED

Thousands of men in every community suffer from these ailments, weaknesses and other physical shortcomings without knowing that very frequently they are caused by prostatic failure.

MANY DOCTORS ENDORSE MASSAGE

Massaging for the alleviation of Prostate Trouble is as old as time, and some of the most outstanding authorities in the medical profession recommend massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd Edition.)

DR. W. D. SMITH
INVENTOR

USE "PROSAGER"

—a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home.

It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

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Each month we receive scores of unsolicited letters of gratitude and appreciation from users of the Prosager—having thousands of users we no doubt can refer Prostate Sufferers to someone in their own home town who are enthusiastic in their praise of the remarkable benefits received.

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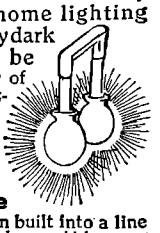

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Self-Supporting in Ten Months

"I am able to live on the money I earn by writing, and it is not yet ten months since I began the course! Until a few months after beginning study with you I had never had a line published in any commercial publication. What more can I say for a course which has enabled me to earn a livelihood by the most congenial work I have ever done?"

John N. Ottum, Jr.
Box 95, Lisbon, N. D.

How do *you* know *you can't WRITE?*

Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I am a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably never will write. Lawyers must be law clerks. Doctors must be internes. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—continuous writing—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

Learn to write by writing

NEWSPAPER Institute training is based on the New York Copy-Desk Method. It starts and keeps you writing in your own home, on your own time. Week by week you receive actual assignments, just as if you were right at work on a great metropolitan daily. Your writing is *individually* corrected and constructively criticized. A group of men, whose combined newspaper experience totals more than 200 years, are responsible for this instruction. Under such sympathetic guidance, you will find that (instead of vainly trying to copy some one else's writing tricks) you are rapidly developing your own distinctive, self-flavored style—undergoing an experience that has a thrill to it and which at the same time develops in you the power to make your feelings articulate.

Many people who *should* be writing become awe-struck by fabulous stories about millionaire authors and, therefore, give little thought to the $25, $50 and $100 or more that can often be earned for material that takes little time to write—stories, articles on business, fads, travels, sports, recipes, etc.—things that can easily be turned out in leisure hours, and often on the impulse of the moment.

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