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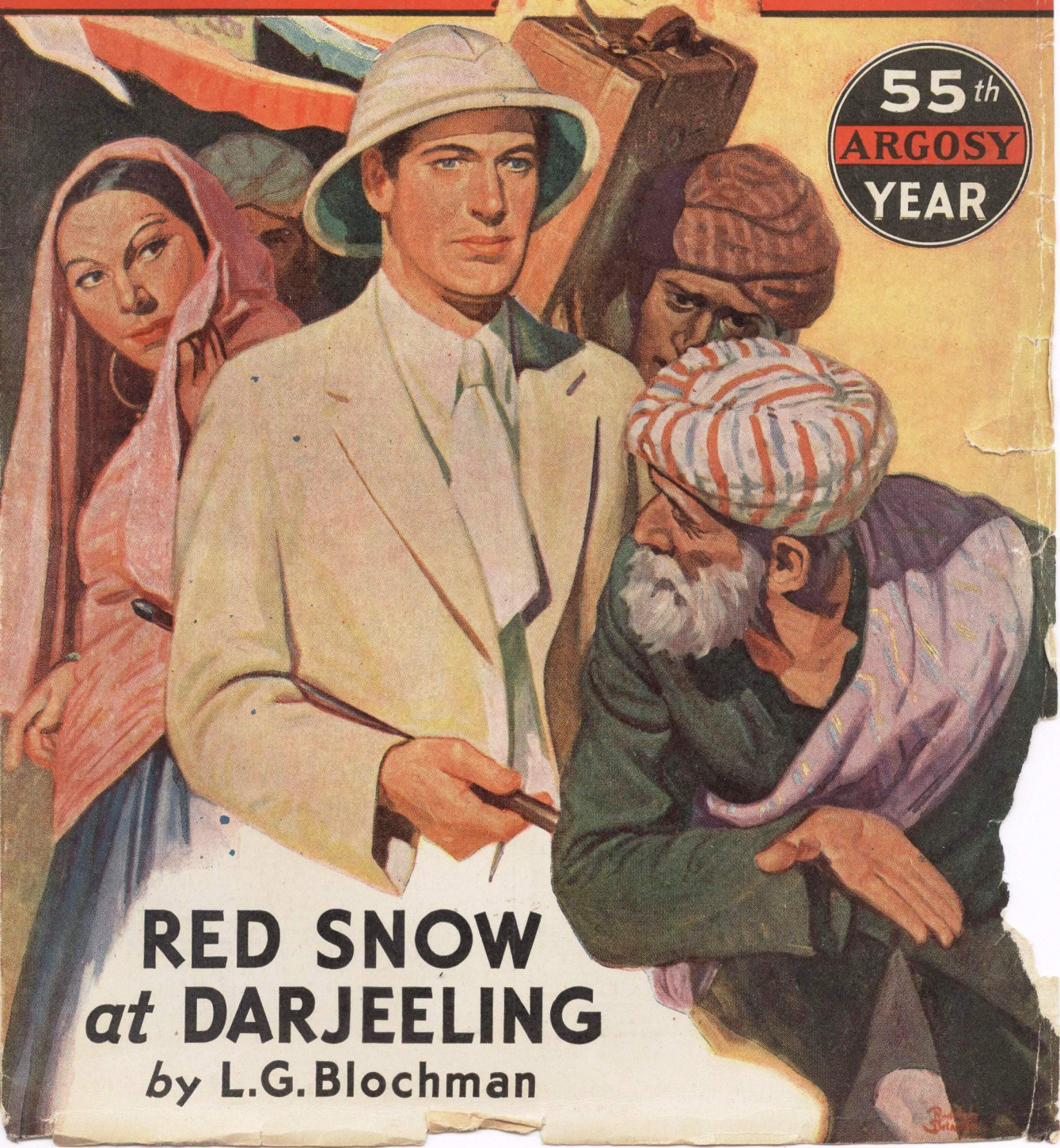

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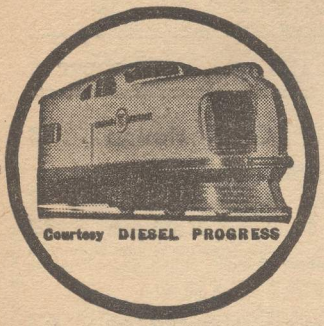

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Red Snow at Darjeeling

By L. G. BLOCHMAN
Author of "Bengal Fire," "Dak Bungalow," etc.

CHAPTER I

THE BURRA SAHIB

THE Punjab Mail, No. 2 Down, chuffed slowly into the gloom of Howrah Station, on time at 7:06 A.M. The train of dull-red cars groaned to a stop, and a chattering host of luggage coolies swarmed along the platform, extending lean brown hands as the window shutters banged open, one after the other, with a succession of explosive sounds like a *feu de joie*. A young man in a khaki topi leaned out the open door of a first-class compartment, looking back toward the servant's compartment. He signaled to his bearer, a bewhiskered, yellow-turbaned Moslem, who came loping through the crowd to take

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charge of his bags and bedding roll.

At the same moment a thin, middle-aged European in crisp whites stepped up to the side of the train, fixed the young man with a hard, appraising stare.

"You're Paul Woodring, aren't you?" asked the man in white.

"Yes," the youth nodded.

"You probably don't remember me," said the man on the platform. "I'm Basil Stiller, Mr. Blenn's general manager."

"Yes, of course," said Woodring. He had seen Basil Stiller only once, three years before, but it would have been difficult to forget that long, sallow face with its bulging eyes, the deep rictus furrows curving down past each corner of the heavy, drooping mouth, accentuating the length of the thin beaked nose. And of course no one employed by the vast Blenn enterprises in India was allowed for a moment to forget the name of Basil Stiller.

"Had *chota hazri* yet, Woodring?" Stiller asked.

"Just a cup of tea at Burdwan."

"Then you'd better hurry over to Mr. Blenn's house. He's expecting you for breakfast."

"I'll stop by a hotel and clean up first," said Woodring. "It's been a hot, dusty ride."

"You came through from Lahore, did you?"

"No, from Delhi."

"I'd forgotten," said Stiller listlessly, as though bored by having to remember details in the lives of unimportant subordinates. "Nevertheless, you'd better hurry to Mr. Blenn just as you are. It's urgent—or he wouldn't have sent *me* to get you."

"Very well, then."

The two men, walking toward the exit gates of the station, presented a study in contrasts. The younger man in khaki, almost a head taller than the older man in white, walked with an ambling, pleasantly awkward gait, while Stiller's pace was stiff, precise, in rhythm with the swing of his Malacca cane. Woodring's face was tanned by sun and wind, like the bare expanse of well-muscled legs showing below his khaki shorts. He had a quick, boyish smile, the symmetry of which was marked by the slight division between his two front teeth; but his clear brown eyes were thoroughly adult, honest, and steady. The set expression of Stiller's pasty face gave the idea that he had not smiled in years.

"I don't suppose you know why Mr. Blenn sent for you," Stiller said.

"No."

"Good. Then you can't have talked about it."

Woodring frowned at this suggestion of his irresponsibility. He said: "It's a mystery, I take it."

"It's nasty business," said Stiller. "You won't like it. I don't."

"Why not?" asked Woodring.

Stiller stopped walking. His fishy gaze surveyed Woodring coldly for an instant. Then,

"You're too young to die," he said.

Woodring opened his mouth to laugh, but something in the expression of Stiller's bulging eyes strangled the gaiety in his throat.

IN silence the two men walked through the waiting room to the front of the station, where a phalanx of Sikh taxi drivers were squawking their horns and exchanging noisy insults with red-turbaned Sikh policemen. Stiller pointed his cane at the nearest vehicle and said:

"Jump in, Woodring. The *Burra Sahib* doesn't like to be kept waiting. I'll see that your bearer takes your bags to the Great Eastern. I've booked a room for you there."

As Woodring stepped into the ramshackle taxi, Stiller flung a few words of Hindustani at the driver from the ends of his lips, disdainfully, as though the mere pronunciation might taint him. The taxi started with a jerk and a rattle. Woodring turned for another look at the cadaverous general manager who had brought him such a chill, ominous greeting, but Stiller had already disappeared in the crowd.

Brakes squealed, gears clashed, and shrill Urdu profanity issued from the wagging beard of the chauffeur as he cut sharply around a traffic jam of bullock carts, buffaloes, and *ticca gharis,* swung onto the floating bridge across the Hooghly to Calcutta. Despite the early hour, the relentless lash of the sun's rays was already raising scales of fire on the muddy river as it swirled past the pontoons of the bridge. Paul Woodring mopped the perspiration from his forehead as he leaned back to

ponder the strange words of Basil Stiller.

"Nasty business . . . Won't like it . . . Too young to die . . ."

Woodring hadn't the faintest notion of why Alexander Blenn had sent for him. True, he had been in Blenn's employ for the past five years, but so had scores of other young men. There was a certain anonymity in being connected with the farflung Blenn enterprises in India. Blenn had built—and was still building—an industrial empire on the vertical pattern which had crumbled for Stinnes in pre-Hitler Germany but which was succeeding for Ford in America. Blenn sought to control production from raw materials to transportation. His plantations, mills, factories, engineering works and dockyards stretched across the great Indian peninsula from Bengal to Baluchistan. And in the small army of Blenn's occidental employes, Paul Woodring had been only a corporal—or at most, an obscure sergeant. He had been a construction overseer on several minor projects, but that was only a glorified surveyor's job. And for two years he had had a small measure of responsibility; he had been in charge of two isolated posts in the *mofussil,* posts that were twice as lonely as they were important. He had never exchanged a dozen words with Alexander Blenn since he had been working for him, and this new mission . . . Well, he would soon know all about the "nasty business . . ."

Woodring lit a cigarette. The taxi had crossed the bridge, left Strand Road, and was chugging into the vast green stretch of the Maidan. The morning river mists lurking among the trees were evaporating rapidly under the burning sun. To his left he saw the top of the Cenotaph already dancing in the rising waves of heat. Ahead, beyond the weathered gray bastions of Fort William, the white marble dome of Victoria Memorial shimmered in the opalescent haze like a huge bubble.

Suddenly Woodring sat up straight. Above the noise of the motor he heard a clear, shrill, crescendo note, a strident bird call with a rising inflection, repeated again and again with maddening insistence—the call of the brain-fever bird. And it then dawned upon Woodring that this was Spring!

SPRING—at least according to the almanac. But there would be no real Spring in this part of India. Oh, there would be certain harbingers—like the frantic cry of the brain-fever bird, the violent scarlet blossoms of the gold-mohur trees, the arrival of the first golden-red mangoes from Bangalore. But Spring in Calcutta would be chiefly the beginning of the hot weather, the first exodus of wives for the hill stations. There would be no Spring as people at home knew it, no delicious awakening of the earth or the dreams of men; no vague, nostalgic stirrings of new life and hope in the human heart, no verdant rebirth of winter-dormant trees. All that sort of thing, Woodring reflected, had been pretty well baked out of his experience by five years of tropic sun. Not since he had come to India had he really *felt* Spring—except, perhaps, for one week that he had spent at Quetta, where the wind was sweet with the scent of apple blossoms . . .

"*Yih gali* Camac Street hai, Sahib."

The voice of the Sikh taxi-walla broke Woodring's reverie. He had stopped in front of a three-story red-brick house in Camac Street. Woodring paid his fare, walked past the saluting *durwan* at the gate, climbed

the stairs, rang. A moment later he was ushered into the presence of Alexander Blenn on the third floor.

"Come in, Woodring."

Blenn was attired in a red silk dressing gown. He was a heavy man, with thinning iron-gray hair and a hard, florid, ruthless face that seemed weighted down by a strong, aggressive jaw. Woodring could hear Blenn's deliberate, rhythmic breathing as he felt himself being scrutinized like a prize dog in the judges' ring. He instantly felt something of Blenn's dynamic presence, the self-conscious power of a true *burra sahib,* one of the old line of giants who built British India—for their own personal profit; single-minded men whose credo and career was Empire, and for whom Empire was a vested right.

"Sit down, Woodring. We'll eat. I'm starved, waiting for you," said Blenn. Then he roared, *"Khansama!"*

In the next room there was a flurry of long white tunics and red turbans, as barefooted servants jumped into rapid, un-Oriental action. Woodring caught sight of two frightened brown faces, and mentally classified Blenn with certain other *burra sahibs* he had known: Men who had lived in India for thirty years, but who spoke, with an atrocious English accent, only a hundred words of Hindustani, of which the word for "thank you" was not one.

"You married, Woodring?" Blenn demanded.

Woodring's gaze wandered to a carved sandalwood desk on which was a framed photograph of a pretty girl—a girl of about twenty, with curly hair that lay close to her small, pert head.

"No good your looking at that photo, Woodring," Blenn said. "I don't need you to perpetuate the Blenn dynasty. I'm quite satisfied with my plans for Ruth. I merely wanted to know what responsibilities you had."

"None, sir," Woodring replied, "except myself."

"You're English, are you?"

"Technically I'm British," said Woodring. "My father was British and my mother American. I was born in the French Concession in Shanghai—through a miscalculation in schedules."

Blenn grunted. He said, "You pronounce 'schedule' with a 'k'—like an American. Why?"

Woodring smiled. "My father died when I was nine, and my mother took me to the States for most of my schooling," he said.

"But you're British at heart. You're not one of these scatter-brained radicals that believe in self-determination and *swaraj* and the break-up of the Empire and all that rot. You wouldn't be working for me if you were. Now listen—"

BLENN paused. Three servants had entered, and were removing silver covers from steaming dishes. A Blenn breakfast, Woodring observed, was no half-hearted affair. There were grilled kippers, bacon, scrambled eggs, curried potatoes, great pyramids of toast, chutneys, marmalade, preserves. Blenn fell to with much gusto and little finesse.

"I sent for you, Woodring," he continued, with his mouth full, "because you're honest, you're resourceful, brave and loyal. You proved all these things when you recaptured the payroll from the dacoits who shot our paymaster in Chota Nagpur last year. Furthermore you're independent and not too ambitious—because you've done your job in God-forsaken out-stations without a

whimper, instead of yelling for transfer to the big cities, like most of our young men. So I'm giving you a chance at something big. More kippers, Woodring?"

"No, thanks."

"Ever heard of Shimalghar?" asked Blenn, scraping the rest of the kippers from the serving dish to his own plate.

"That's the independent state in the Himalayas north of Darjeeling, isn't it?"

"Right. Shimalghar is one of our northern gateways to India. And I must say the gates are half off their hinges, what with our present wishy-washy foreign policy in Whitehall. We've lost our old grip on Afghanistan and we're slipping badly in Shimalghar. Tibet and the mountains aren't the barriers they used to be. From the headquarters of the new Chinese Communist Armies, airplanes could cross Tibet in two hours. And from an air base in Shimalghar, a bombing squadron could lay eggs on Calcutta in less than two hours. And that's what will happen, Woodring, if I don't stop it. In the past year three new Russian tea factories have opened in Shimalghar, and I'll wager that every one of the tea planters is an officer in the Soviet Army. What's more, the German perfume consortium that just sent men to Shimalghar to hunt the musk deer is only a blind for a Nazi mission of diplomats and Air Force experts."

"I thought," said Woodring, "that the Nawab of Shimalghar had an agreement to be guided by Britain in his foreign relations."

Blenn snorted—and sprayed toast crumbs in Woodring's direction.

"Rot!" he exclaimed. "So did Germany have an agreement not to fortify the Rhine. And what's it worth today? Listen, Woodring. There's going to be an air base in Shimalghar—but Alexander Blenn is going to build it. I'm already making planes in my plant at Budge-Budge. I have an engine of a new design, with a carburetor that operates with amazing efficiency at high altitudes. I have a concession from the Nawab of Shimalghar giving me exclusive right to develop mechanical transportation and mineral resources in his state. The only drawback is that the concession was granted twenty years ago and expires next week. The Nawab has been stalling me on the matter of renewal. So tomorrow, Woodring, you'll go to Darjeeling, meet the Nawab's representative, and bring back a ten-year extension of the concession . . . More tea, Woodring?"

"Thanks," said Woodring. He frowned, as he seemed to be studying his own hands—large, capable hands with furry wrists. "You talk, Mr. Blenn, as though it will be a simple matter to get the extension," he continued after a pause. "Will it?"

Alexander Blenn smiled. It was a smug, defiant smile. "Yes," he said. "Very simple. And very dangerous."

WOODRING did not comment. He watched Blenn get up, wipe his mouth, light a long black cigar. Blenn took a bunch of keys from the pocket of his dressing gown, walked to the sandalwood desk, unlocked a drawer. At the back of the open drawer he unlocked another compartment, drew out an unmounted photograph. He laid the photo on the table in front of Woodring.

"Recognize any of these people?" he asked.

Woodring studied the picture. "The man with the beard," he said. "Isn't that the old Nawab of Shimalghar?"

"Exactly. Last month the Nawab made a hurried trip to Bangkok to consult the physician of the Siamese court for a throat ailment. This photograph was taken in Bangkok. Notice that the calendar on the wall behind the group conveniently fixes the date. And the people on both sides of the Nawab give us an idea of what was wrong with his throat. The man with the mustache is an attaché at the Italian Legation in Bangkok. The one next to him is a Nazi diplomat, and the little man on the right is General Daikumo of the Japanese Air Force. The Nawab seems to be writing something. In view of the recent Pan-Fascist Treaty signed by Germany, Italy and Japan, we can guess what he is writing. At any rate, I have sent the Nawab a copy of this picture, and he is very anxious to have the negative. That is why your mission to Darjeeling will be simple. But certain other parties are just as anxious to get the negative; that is why your mission will be dangerous."

"I see." Woodring was still looking at the photo. "Has the Foreign Secretariat in Delhi seen this?"

"Of course not," Blenn said. "When —or if—they do, there will be British troops in Shimalghar within forty-eight hours."

"Then isn't that the patriotic thing to do?"

"That," declared Blenn, puffing furiously on his cigar, "would be carrying patriotism too far. Listen to me, Woodring. I'm an important man in India. After the Viceroy, I'm probably the most powerful person between Peshawar and Cape Comorin. But do they recognize that at home? They do not. When the honors lists come out, who gets the knighthoods? Some stupid civil servant or a tuppence-ha'penny rajah. Alexander Blenn isn't even a baronet. But he will be—and more. He'll have a seat in the House of Lords. I've already picked the title. The Viscount of Stepney! Lord Blenn of Stepney." Blenn laughed loud and bitterly. "Stepney! That will be one for the stuffed shirts in Westminster who've been snubbing me year after year because I wasn't born a gentleman and never wore an Eton collar. Well, I'm not a gentleman. I was born in Stepney. I was brought up on the smells of Whitechapel and Limehouse and the West Indian Docks. But I'm going to sit in the House of Lords, Woodring. That's why I've got to do this thing in Shimalghar without help from New Delhi. I've got to have a handle on the Government. I've got to have my foot on somebody's neck. Understand?"

Woodring understood.

"All right. Now for your job. It may not be as dangerous as I think, because you're not known in Bengal. One of the reasons I chose you is because you're not labeled in Eastern India as a Blenn man. On the other hand you'll be up against clever, desperate opposition, and I'm not belittling the risk. What's more, you'll be paid accordingly. Think it over."

"I can give you my answer now," said Woodring.

"I don't want it now. I want you to go to your hotel and think it over. Bring me your answer after tiffin. Come to my office at three o'clock. Goodbye, Waring."

"Goodbye, sir."

Woodring shook the *burra sahib's* hand, picked up his topi, and left. As he started down the stairs, he saw someone coming up from below. At first he was aware only of a pleasantly tousled mop of light brown curls mounting toward him. He could not see the girl's

face then; but as he stepped aside on the second landing to let her pass, he recognized the girl whose photo stood on Blenn's desk. She was wearing jodhpurs and a silk blouse of robin's-egg blue, open at the throat. Evidently she was returning from an early morning ride on the Maidan, for her cheeks bloomed with a healthy flush, and her blue eyes glowed with the pleasure of exercise. She smiled as she passed. A pretty smile, Woodring decided; small, regular teeth; the suggestion of two dimples. Well, perhaps not pretty, exactly; Woodring made it a rule to subtract fifty per cent from his first impression of any woman.

Any white woman, that is . . . Not that he was unusually susceptible to feminine charms, but two years in the *mofussil* had made him wary of his own judgment. For two years he had not spoken to six girls of his own race, and they all looked beautiful. He didn't want to be dazzled, that was all. He compromised on deciding that the girl in jodhpurs had a friendly smile. Perhaps she would be pretty if she wanted to be, for she had obviously made no effort at adornment. She was quite without trace of cosmetics, and there was even a freckle or two on her small, saucy nose.

Two steps above Woodring she stopped, turned back. "You're Mr. Woodring, aren't you?" she asked.

"I am."

The girl's lips, still smiling, parted as though to say something further, but there was hesitation in her eyes.

Then from two floors above came the booming voice of Alexander Blenn.

"Ruth!"

The girl's smile vanished. She was no longer pert. In her eyes Woodring read the same frightened obedience he had noted in the Hindu servants.

"Coming, Uncle," she called quickly. Paul Woodring went on downstairs.

CHAPTER II

MAN AFRAID

AT five minutes to three, Woodring was walking rapidly through the glare and bustle of Clive Street. Calcutta may be no longer capital of India, but Clive Street is still capital of the great commercial empire that General Robert Clive himself consolidated for the East India Company. Here, in tall London-like buildings extending from the very site of the Black Hole, the men who control the trade and finance of India labor and grow fretful in the sticky heat. Here, on the sweltering pavement, young *chota sahibs* in crisp whites and sun helmets jostle fat Bengali *babus* with black umbrellas, sleek olive-skinned Parsees, chubby be-jeweled Marwaris. And here, of course, Alexander Blenn had his offices.

It was twilight inside the Blenn offices, for the *kuskus tattis* had been hung—window mats of cocoanut fiber on the outside of which coolies splashed water. Blenn was waiting as Woodring was ushered into his presence by uniformed attendants. He was a little pompous in his pongee suit, and made Woodring conscious of the suitcase creases in his own white-drill jacket.

"What's your decision?" Blenn asked without preliminaries.

"My answer is 'yes'," said Woodring, just as promptly, "provided you have sufficient confidence in my ability to get through to the Nawab's man in Darjeeling."

"Good," said Blenn. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a check. "Of course I have confidence in you. That's why I sent for you. And I spoke of a bonus for you if you suc-

ceed. Take this check. It's dated the sixteenth; that's next week. Our old concession expires on the fifteenth. That means that if you fail, I'll stop payment on the check. I believe this little incentive will help keep you alert."

Woodring looked at the check—and frowned slightly. It was for five thousand rupees. Not that the money made a great deal of difference to him. He had decided to undertake the mission regardless. The very danger of it appealed to his nature. But now he had a sudden unusual desire to test his shrewdness against the well-known guile of Alexander Blenn. He knew he was a pretty good poker player, but he was anxious to try his bluffing abilities in a game with really important stakes. He had an idea that he would be forced to match wits with shrewd men more than once during the ensuing days, and he wanted practice. He tossed the check back across the desk.

"Sorry, Mr. Blenn," he said. "You're not showing enough confidence."

"What do you mean?" Blenn's expression did not change.

"You're not playing me to win," Woodring said. "When a gambler thinks he's got a good thing, he puts his bankroll on the horse's nose. I'm gambling in this business, apparently; I'm gambling my life, according to you. But you haven't covered the stakes. I want better odds."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five thousand rupees."

Blenn said nothing. His eyes did not leave Woodring's face as his fingers slowly tore up the check into small bits. He moistened his lips. Then he reached into a drawer for his checkbook, started writing another check.

"This is highway robbery, Woodring," he said at last, "because I think you're going to get through to cash this check. You've got the proper spirit."

He handed over the new check, and roared: *"Chokra!"*

When a frightened, barefoot office boy appeared, Blenn said: "Tell Stiller Sahib and Hubertson Sahib to come in here."

BASIL STILLER made a stiff, precise entrance, followed by a man as thin as he was.

"Woodring," said Blenn, "I suppose you know Stanley Hubertson, our engineering superintendent."

"I met Mr. Hubertson in Bombay two years ago." Woodring extended his hand.

"Yes, I remember," murmured Hubertson. He had snow-white hair, yet his face was young. Part of his face, at least; the keen, black eyes which glittered behind his pince-nez, for instance. And yet the lines around his mouth were old. So were his thin, almost transparent hands; the lines in his high, broad forehead; the stoop of his narrow shoulders. His general appearance was not that of a working engineer. Woodring could not picture him in the field, flinging steel bridges across the shifting rivers of India. His mien was rather that of a scholar, a mathematician who might compute to the last erg the kinetic energy of a waterfall, or discover a new and stronger curve for the face of a dam.

"Gentlemen," Blenn announced, "Woodring will go to Darjeeling."

Hubertson gave a noncommittal nod. Stiller scowled.

"He's a fool!" snapped Stiller.

"Let's not have that all over again, Stiller!" roared Blenn. "I know what you think. You've practically told me that I'm a fool, too."

"This whole project is foolhardy!"

Stiller insisted. "We can't afford the risk. I don't care about the personal risk to young Woodring. That's his own affair. But we're an industrial concern with no business meddling in international intrigue. We'll be driven out of India if we antagonize Government!"

Stiller's pasty face was gray with rage. He was leaning across Blenn's desk, pounding his fist on the blotter. Blenn stood up to face him, his heavy jaw advancing half an inch, his already florid complexion deepening.

"I haven't seen the man big enough to drive Alexander Blenn out of India!" he fumed. "Not in the Viceregal Lodge, or in the India Office, or in Downing Street."

"We've no business—"

"We? This is *my* business, Stiller!" Blenn screamed. "You may be general manager, but I'm paying your salary. Don't be premature in acting like the heir apparent to the Blenn dynasty. You're not marrying Ruth until after the monsoons. And perhaps not then, if I change my mind."

Blenn sat down, breathing heavily.

Stiller, too, subsided. As he remained for a moment leaning over the desk, the flaming anger in his bulging eyes dimmed to smouldering spite. For several seconds there was no sound but the whirr of the ceiling *punka* and the drip of water from the window mats. Then Stiller shrugged, backed away, and dropped into a chair.

"How about you, Hubertson?" Blenn challenged. "Any suggestions from you?"

The engineering superintendent seemed preoccupied with wiping the moisture from his eyeglasses with a handkerchief. He looked up at Blenn with a near-sighted squint.

"In all these years I've been with you, Mr. Blenn," he said timidly, "I've found that you really don't want my opinion on matters of general policy. I'm always at your orders."

Hubertson spoke humbly, but with a dry ill humor, as though he resented his own meekness.

"Then that's settled," announced Blenn, regaining his composure. "Woodring leaves for Darjeeling tonight or tomorrow. I'll be going up myself in a day or two and Stiller will be in charge of the Calcutta offices. Hubertson, I'll want you in Darjeeling, too. You'll travel separately, of course, and you'll stay away from Woodring until the new concession is negotiated. Then you'll go into Shimalghar immediately and start your surveys for the airdrome. Probably take Woodring with you.

"All right, gentlemen. That's all. Woodring, come to my house at seven tonight for final instructions."

With an imperious wave of his hand, Blenn dismissed the three men.

ON his way back to his hotel, Paul Woodring stopped in at Newman's bookshop in Old Court House Street. He purchased a railway timetable, a set of topographical maps of the Himalayan region, and a guide to Darjeeling. Then he went to his room and began familiarizing himself with the scene of his future operations.

At seven o'clock he rang the bell at Blenn's house in Camac Street. He rang four times before the *khansama* finally opened the door.

"Sahib ghar-me nai hai?" Woodring asked.

The *khansama* looked at him blankly. Woodring pushed the door open and walked past the gawking servant.

"Jao, Jeld!" he said. "Blenn Sahib *bulao."*

The *khansama* hesitated a moment, then shuffled off down the hall. Woodring stepped into a small sitting room in which lights were burning. He lit a cigarette, sat down. He noticed a tennis racket standing in a corner and a blue silk sport jacket thrown over the arm of a chair, and conjectured that they belonged to the curly-haired girl named Ruth. He had lost even his mild interest in Ruth since he learned that afternoon that she was to marry Basil Stiller after the monsoons. He remembered now that he had heard some gossip about Ruth at the Gymkhana in Delhi, some months back. Ruth Ingram —that was her name. She had been in finishing school in Switzerland when Blenn brought her out to India a year ago. When she went to live in Blenn's house, India's vast legion of scandal mongers winked knowingly over their *chota pegs* and spoke of "Blenn's *niece*" with a sly, insinuating accent. Then, after six months, Ruth's betrothal was announced to Basil Stiller, and took the wind out of the cheeks of the disappointed gossips.

Basil Stiller. Woodring blew out an indignant cloud of smoke. Stiller must be at least twenty years older than Ruth Ingram. Well, it was her funeral.

Woodring lit another cigarette. He looked at his watch. He had been waiting nearly half an hour. What was the matter with that *khansama?* He stepped into the hall, called. The servant's bare feet shuffled toward him.

"Yih kam zaruri hai!" said Woodring. *"Sahib bulao."*

The servant protested he did not know where his master was. He was not home. Woodring lost his temper. Of course the Sahib was at home. He must be. He was expecting him . . .

Then Ruth Ingram came downstairs.

"I'm afraid Uncle Alex can't see you, Mr. Woodring," she said. "He left word he wasn't to be disturbed. That's why the *khansama* was afraid to announce you."

"But he's expecting me."

"He's ill. I don't know what's the matter with him. It took him suddenly, about an hour ago . . ."

"I'll go up," said Woodring. "I know he wants to see me."

He climbed the stairs ahead of the girl. He paused outside the door to Blenn's apartments. He could hear heavy footsteps pacing the floor inside. He knocked, announced himself. The pacing stopped. The door flew open.

Paul Woodring's jaw dropped.

"Well, what are you staring at?" roared Blenn.

"N-nothing, sir," stammered Woodring. He was annoyed with himself for having thus patently displayed his shock at Blenn's appearance. He had never seen a man change so in a few hours. The Blenn he had met that morning, the pompous, red-faced, cock-sure *burra sahib,* was gone. The man standing in the doorway was ashen, haggard, old. His posture was almost cringing, and in his eyes there was a haunted hopeless light that Woodring recognized instantly, although he had seen it but once before: In the eyes of a young Subaltern at Sialkot who was being sent home to die. Alexander Blenn was afraid!

"Well, come in! Come in!"

BLENN still roared, but the booming bluster was gone from his voice. He was shouting in the dark, shouting in a vain effort to drive off the specters of despair.

"You told me to come for final instructions," said Woodring as he closed the door behind him.

"Yes, of course," said Blenn. "I've been terribly busy. Something's come up . . ."

Woodring glanced at the sandalwood desk. An ashtray was stacked high with half-smoked cigars. Beside it was an empty glass and a half-empty decanter of whisky.

Blenn went into the next room, returned shortly with a large bulky envelope which he handed to Woodring. The flap was anchored with three blobs of green sealing wax on which was pressed the monogram "A.B."

"This is a copy of the old concession," Blenn said. "It will establish your identity and empower you to receive the extension from the Nawab's envoy in Darjeeling. And this"—he handed Woodring a small leather wallet—"is the photographic negative which the Nawab is so anxious to get. You'll turn it over, of course, when you're satisfied that the document for the renewed concession is in order—and in your hands. You may check the signature against the one on the old papers."

"How am I to make contact with the Nawab's representative?" Woodring asked.

Blenn looked at his watch. "You've missed tonight's Mail," he replied in a hollow voice. "You'll have to go up to Darjeeling tomorrow. Go directly to the Himalayan Grand Hotel and register under the name of John Mapleleaf. Can you remember the name?"

"John Mapleleaf. Yes, sir."

"The Nawab's envoy has instructions to call on John Mapleleaf at the Himalayan Grand. Wait for him. I was expecting to go up myself, but I shall probably be detained here in Calcutta indefinitely. Something's come up. I shall do my best to get to Darjeeling by the end of the week, but don't count on it. If an emergency should arise, consult Basil Stiller by wire. However, if he should give you any orders that conflict with mine, ignore them. Is that clear?"

Blenn was making an obvious effort to pull himself together. He poured himself another drink of whisky. Woodring listened to the trembling neck of the decanter ring against the edge of the glass.

"Quite clear," said Woodring. "And what about Mr. Hubertson?"

"Hubertson knows how to get in touch with you. Don't worry about him. There are only two things you must remember. Guard this document and this film with your very life—because men won't stop at murder in order to get them. And don't go to the police for any reason until after you have the extended concession safe in your possession. That's all, Woodring."

"You can count on me, Mr. Blenn. Good night. And I hope you're feeling better . . ."

"Feeling better? Who said I was ill?" For an instant Blenn was the old *burra sahib*. Then the fire flickered out of his eyes, the dull, haunting fear came back.

"Why, your niece—"

"Ruth? She's insane. Never listen to a woman, Woodring. Any woman. Just a minute. Have you a gun?"

"Not with me, sir."

"Then take this." Blenn opened a drawer, slid a small automatic across the desk top. "From the moment you leave this house, you're likely to be fair game—for certain parties."

"You couldn't tell me who the certain parties are, Mr. Blenn?" Woodring asked as he pocketed the pistol.

"Sorry, Woodring, I'm not clairvoyant. Goodbye—and good luck."

GOING down the stairs, Woodring pressed his right forearm against the bulge of the sealed envelope and the leather wallet in his breast pocket. Passing the sitting room on the ground floor, he looked in—although he could think of no reason why Ruth Ingram should be waiting for him. She wasn't.

Outside at the gate, Woodring saw a cruising taxi coming down Camac Street, slowing down as it approached. He was about to hail it, when he noticed a passenger in the back seat. The taxi pulled over to the curb in front of Woodring, who instantly thrust his hands into his coat pocket for the comforting metallic touch of the automatic Blenn had just given him. He peered through the darkness, trying to make out the features of the man in the taxi. The man leaned forward, called, "Woodring?"

Woodring recognized the rasping voice of Basil Stiller.

"Get in, Woodring," Stiller said.

"Thanks," said Woodring, recoiling a step. "But I think I'll walk. It's such a lovely night. Cool. The temperature must be down to ninety."

"Did Blenn give you the—the data?" Stiller asked.

"It *is* a lovely evening," Woodring said.

"Don't be an ass, Woodring. You'd better turn the data over to me. There's a great deal about this matter that you don't know, and—"

"What, for instance?"

"You're a young man, Woodring. There's a future for you in our organization if you play your cards right. Blenn isn't going to live forever, you know, and you'd best not be short-sighted."

"You're not married to Ruth Ingram yet," said Woodring.

Stiller drew a deep breath. "Then you won't pull an oar in my boat, Woodring?"

"Suppose we go up and discuss the matter with Mr. Blenn," said Woodring. He turned, walked quickly up the steps of Blenn's house, rang the bell.

He heard Stiller give an order to the taxi-walla. The motor roared as the car sped away from the curb.

Woodring jumped down the steps, started in the opposite direction. He saw a closed *ticca ghari* jogging slowly across Camac Street from Theatre Road. He sprinted to catch it.

CHAPTER III

AMBUSH

IT was nine o'clock when Woodring returned to the Great Eastern Hotel. He went directly to his room, locked the door. He took the bulky envelope from his pocket, burned matches to heat the blade of a penknife, slipped the hot blade under the green blobs of sealing wax. He felt he had a right to learn the details of the document he was carrying.

The typewritten paragraphs on the age-yellowed pages confirmed substantially what Blenn had told him about the mineral and transportation development rights in Shimalghar. There was a version of the concession in vernacular characters, with the seal of Shimalghar affixed to every page. On the last page was the signature of His Highness the Nawab, carefully and laboriously written in English script. For the party of the second part, there were two signatures: Alexander Blenn and Christopher Jericho. Woodring wondered who Jericho was. There was no one by that name connected with the Blenn organization at present.

Next he examined the photographic negative in the leather wallet. It was

a small rectangle of celluloid, about one-third the size of a rupee note. Holding it up to the light, he observed it was a fine-grain film, of the type used in candid cameras. Therefore the print which Blenn had shown him that morning was obviously an enlargement.

Woodring replaced the film in the wallet, sat down at a table, and began writing a letter. He was addressing an envelope when there came a knock at his door.

Woodring finished writing the address, then covered the papers on the table with the topographical map of the Darjeeling district, tossed a few books on top of the map. The knock was repeated. He opened the door.

A plump red-headed young man in evening clothes stood on the threshold, swaying slightly.

"Hope I'm not intruding, old bean," he said. "I've come to see the lady."

"You've got the wrong room," said Woodring. "There's no lady here."

"No lady?" The visitor pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Then what the dickens do you suppose that chap was looking at?"

"What chap?"

"The chap who's been rubbering through your keyhole for the past five minutes. I was certain he was watching something worthwhile, and I approached to have a *dekko* myself. The chap thereupon took flight, and I, not being given to keyhole-peeping, made so bold as to knock—"

"What did the man look like?" Woodring demanded.

"I'm sorry I had only a rear view," said the red-head. "He had large pink ears and the back of his head was rather clipped and Prussian-looking . . ." He took an unsteady step backward.

"You aren't by any chance a bit tight, are you?" asked Woodring.

"A bit tight?" echoed the red-head. "My dear fellow, you do me an injustice. I'm positively stinko."

He swayed again, then lurched into the room. Woodring caught him by the arm, started easing him toward the door.

"I say, you aren't putting me out yet, are you?" The red-head's voice was plaintive. "I've ordered drinks."

"Drinks?"

"Yes. I sent my bearer down to the bar for three *chota pegs*. One for you, one for me, and one for the lady. Since there's no lady, I suppose I shall have to drink the third myself."

HE sighed, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Woodring looked at him suspiciously. His black trousers and white mess jacket were exceedingly well tailored.

"Where was my bearer during this Peeping Tom incident?" Woodring asked.

"You mean the beggar with whiskers and the yellow turban?"

"Yes."

"I didn't see him about. He's probably down the hall singing Punjabi love songs to the *ayah* of the Memsahib in Number Two-thirteen . . . By the way, it's awfully rude of me barging in here like this without introducing myself. My name's Emmet-Tansley."

"I'm sorry, Tansley, but—"

"*Emmet*-Tansley," the red-head corrected. "Henry Emmet-Tansley. My family's been suffering from congenital hyphenation for six generations. But I'm not sensitive about it, Woodring."

"Who told you my name was Woodring?"

"Your bearer," said Emmet-Tansley

simply. His inquisitive glance seemed to be exploring the room. "When are you leaving?"

"Leaving? I've just come," said Woodring.

"Yes, I know, but you're not staying on in Calcutta for the hot weather, certainly?"

"Why not?"

Emmet-Tansley gestured toward the maps and books on the table.

"I thought you were planning a trip to Darjeeling," he said.

"That's just escape literature," said Woodring. "Reading about the cool hill stations keeps my mind off the thermometer."

A peculiar look came into the stranger's eyes, a fleeting suggestion of complete sobriety in an otherwise drunken face.

"Beautiful spot, Darjeeling," said he. "You'll like it."

"I'm not going there," said Woodring quickly. He sauntered over to the chair on which his coat was hung, draped his arm across the back so that his right hand touched the pocket that held the automatic.

"Too bad." Emmet-Tansley shook his head with alcoholic sadness. "You should go. Darjeeling is—"

A knock on the door interrupted him.

"That must be the drinks," he said.

"Suppose you open, then," said Woodring, slipping his fingers into the coat pocket.

Emmet-Tansley staggered across the room, opened the door. A Hindu in long white tunic and red turban stood there. Woodring recognized Alexander Blenn's *khansama*. The servant held an envelope in his hand.

"It's only a *chit* for Mr. Woodring," said Emmet-Tansley, in a disappointed tone.

"Tell him to bring it here."

The *khansama* came in with the envelope.

"Jawab manta?" Woodring asked.

No, there was no answer expected. The *khansama* left. Woodring tore open the envelope. Still watching his self-invited guest out of the corner of his eye, he read a brief message written in a vertical, copybook hand:

DEAR MR. WOODRING:

Will you please come to Camac Street as soon as you can? I'm afraid something dreadful has happened.

In great haste,
RUTH INGRAM.

WOODRING stuffed the note into his pocket, stood up, put on his coat. He said: "I'm leaving now, Mr. Tansley. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," said Emmet-Tansley. "I'll wait here for you."

"That's impossible."

The red-head winked. "I understand," he said. "The lady?"

Woodring did not reply. He opened the door. A bearer stood there holding a tray on which were three whisky-sodas.

"Ganymede! In the nick of time!" exclaimed Emmet-Tansley, taking two perspiring glasses from the tray. "We'll have a stirrup cup, at least."

"Sorry. I must hurry." Woodring looked sharply at Emmet-Tansley. "But I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again—soon."

"I sincerely hope so, my dear Woodring. Well, cheerio, then."

The plump red-head went weaving down the corridor, a glass in each hand. Woodring watched him until he turned a corner, followed by his bearer with the tray. Then he locked the door again.

Quickly he melted the seals back in

place on Blenn's thick envelope, which he put into his breast pocket. He also pocketed the leather wallet. Then he took the mail he had just addressed, went down in the lift.

He stopped at the reception desk to buy some one-anna stamps.

"Shall I post your letters for you, sir?" the clerk inquired.

"I'll take care of it myself, thanks," said Woodring. "Will it go out tonight?"

"Inland letters are taken up tonight, sir. Home mail won't leave until Thursday, of course. There's pillar box right over there, sir."

As Woodring was posting his letters near the entrance, a taxi swooped to the curb from across the street. The driver was evidently not one who paid baksheesh regularly to the guardians of the Great Eastern's portals, because the Sikh *durwan* greeted him with a loud and menacing rush. Woodring, however, was in a hurry and put an end to the argument by jumping in and giving the Camac Street address.

The taxi turned left into Dharmtolla Street. As it continued to roll eastward, Woodring leaned forward and repeated: "Camac Street?"

The driver nodded. Woodring was not familiar with the geography of Calcutta, but he had a good sense of direction. He knew that Camac Street lay further south. And when the taxi made another left turn into Wellington Street, he yelled: *"Kidhar jaenga, jangli-walla?"*

The driver's reply was lost in the noise of the motor as the taxi picked up speed.

Woodring stood up. The driver glanced back over his shoulder, jammed on the brakes. Tires squealed. Woodring, thrown off balance, pitched forward over the front seat.

Instantly the driver threw his right arm around the youth, crushed him in the powerful angle of his elbow. Woodring tried to reach for his gun, but his arms were pinioned. He struggled. The taxi was gaining speed again, swung sharply into a narrow, dark alley. Woodring squirmed half out of the driver's grip, wrenched his left arm free. He raised his head—in time to see men swarming from the shadows, leaping to the running boards of the taxi.

The car jolted to a stop. The headlights winked out. Something struck Woodring a stunning blow at the base of the skull. Rude hands seized him, dragged him from the taxi. The contact of his feet with the ground jarred him from his painful stupor. He began to fight.

He looped a long right against the jaw of the man holding his shoulder, felt him wilt. His left was working in short, quick jabs as he tried to back away. His knuckles raked painfully across bared teeth, plunked into a yielding stomach. Grunts and howls filled the darkness. Then a low, hurtling body knocked his feet out from under him. As he fell flat, three men sprawled on top of him.

Woodring kept up the struggle on the ground. His lungs were filled with fine, powdery dust, the smell of rancid *ghi,* the stench of sweating feet. Then he saw a knife gleam above him in the darkness.

Woodring winced as the blade flashed down. But the expected bite of steel did not come. Instead the blade slashed through the outside of his coat. A hand seized the contents of his breast pocket.

Instantly the weight of men lifted from him. He heard a motor *whirr* into action. As he got to his feet, he saw a

car which had been standing without lights farther down the alley. The car was moving, bearing down on him. He sprang aside.

At that moment the taxi began backing out of the alley. Its headlights flashed on. In the glare of the twin beams, Woodring caught a glimpse of a European sitting in the back of the other car. Quickly gaining momentum, the car whisked by, passed the taxi, roared out of the alley. But the brief glimpse was sufficient for Woodring to recognize the man's face. It was the long, pasty face of Basil Stiller—surly even in triumph.

CHAPTER IV

"WALLS OF JERICHO"

WHEN Paul Woodring finally reached the Blenn house in Camac Street, he might have been mistaken for a beachcomber after a brawl in a sailors' saloon at Kidderpore. His white coat was in tatters, he was smeared with dust and grime, and there was a streak of dried blood on his face from a cut under one eye. For ten minutes he had been rehearsing acrimonious remarks he intended to address to Ruth Ingram.

The girl herself opened the door for him. Her look of astonishment at his appearance seemed genuine enough, and there seemed to be real concern in her blue eyes. Nevertheless Woodring could not refrain from blurting: "Why do you look so surprised? Didn't they do as thorough a job as you expected?"

"You—you've had an accident!" The girl continued to stare.

"Accident?" Woodring smiled grimly. "I don't think there was a single detail left to accident. Your job was very well planned."

"*My* job?"

"Certainly. Didn't you write me this chit?" Woodring held out the crumpled note.

"Yes, but—you're hurt. Let me get some antiseptic for that cut on your cheek."

"Thanks," said Woodring, "but don't feel yourself obligated to bind up the wounds inflicted by your charming fiancé's gang of cutthroats."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said.

"No? Then I suppose you'd like me to believe you didn't know the reason Basil Stiller had you write that chit."

"Basil hasn't been here this evening. I asked you to come because I was terribly frightened. Uncle Alex has disappeared."

Woodring laughed. He walked past the girl, entered the sitting room.

"You don't believe me?" the girl asked. She followed him, remaining standing while he sat down, lighted a cigarette.

"Of course not. Why do you say Mr. Blenn has disappeared simply because he's gone out somewhere?"

"But he hasn't just 'gone out somewhere,'" Ruth Ingram protested. There was a note of sincere distress in her voice. "You saw how strange he was when you were here earlier. Just after you left, the doorbell rang. Uncle Alex came running from his room. He had a gun in his hand and he shouted: 'Don't open the door! Don't let him in!'"

"I went to the side window and looked out. There was no one at the door. When I told this to Uncle Alex, it made him worse. I've never seen such eyes—like the eyes of a madman. He went back to his room and for a while I could hear him talking to himself. I was worried, naturally, and

after a while I decided to call the doctor. I thought I'd better get my uncle's permission first, so I went to his room. He was gone! And yet he couldn't have gone down the stairs without my seeing him, because the door of my room was open all the time."

"Isn't there a back way?" Woodring asked.

"There's the servants' stairway," the girl replied. "But I questioned the servants. None of them saw him go out."

"He could have easily slipped out without being seen. You must remember that Hindu servants are blessed with a large talent for sleeping at the slightest provocation and in the most awkward positions."

"But why should Uncle Alex want to slip out without being seen?"

"I don't know," said Woodring, "any more than I know why you sent for me, a perfect stranger, instead of sending for your fiancé."

"I couldn't reach Basil," the girl said.

"That's right; he was busy." Woodring ruefully stroked a painful lump on the back of his head. "But I still don't see why you called me in preference to a friend of the family."

"Friend?" Ruth Ingram shook her head. She smiled. It was a wistful smile, despite the dimples. "Uncle Alex has no friends," she said sadly. "People may respect him for the private empire he's created. They may envy him, and certainly they fear him. But mostly they hate him. You know better than I do how he's got where he is: By using other people, twisting them to his own ruthless ends, crushing them if he had to. One can't blame them for feeling as they do. I imagine I'm the only person in the world who has any real affection for Alexander Blenn, and sometimes even I—" She stopped. Then, "But he trusted you. I've heard him say so."

"And you feel that you have to trust me because your uncle does?"

"I think I'd trust you anyway," the girl replied. "I read about your exploit in Chota Nagpur when the paymaster was shot. It was splendid. I was going to tell you so—on the stairs this morning."

"Stiller doesn't trust me," said Woodring. "And I must say the feeling is mutual, although I haven't expressed my distrust by physical violence. At least, not yet."

"You still haven't told me what happened tonight."

WOODRING studied the girl's face. There was no longer any use denying to himself that she was pretty. Even subtracting his usual protective fifty percent, he could not discount the fine curve of her young throat, the graceful poise of her chin, the glowing candor of her troubled blue eyes—which had an appreciable effect on his pulse. When he had first seen her she was a pleasant, girlish person; tonight, touched with worry and a hint of tragedy, she was a mature woman—and the change was most alluring. But, Woodring told himself, it was not because he found her attractive that he had suddenly decided she was innocent of complicity in Stiller's schemes. It was because through her he felt he might learn more of the undercurrents which threatened to make his mission to Darjeeling even more perilous than he had at first imagined. He had expected danger from outside the Blenn organization. Tonight's strange incidents indicated that there was also danger from within.

"Tonight," he explained, after hesitating, "your fiancé paid me the compliment of hiring half a dozen ruffians for a job he himself apparently wasn't equal to. They waylaid me in an alley—to rob me of a package your uncle entrusted to my care for delivery in Darjeeling."

"Are you sure it was Basil Stiller who did this?" the girl asked.

"Positive. I saw him," Woodring replied. Then, impulsively: "Are you in love with Stiller?"

Ruth Ingram stiffened. Her lips became very straight. "I don't see why that should interest you," she said.

"Neither do I, as a matter of fact," Woodring agreed. "Do you know a man named Emmet-Tansley?"

"No. Why?"

"I was wondering who he might be. Now about your uncle. Who was he expecting when the doorbell rang? Who was it he didn't want let in?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," the girl said.

"Just to set your mind at rest—I was the one who rang that bell. I was coming back—but I changed my mind."

"Oh."

"When did this . . . well, this fear psychosis . . . when did it start?"

"A little after six this evening," said the girl. "A telegram came for him, and when he read it, he went all to pieces. I thought he was going to have a heart attack. He turned white and began to tremble."

"You were with him apparently, when the telegram came."

"Yes."

"Did you read it?"

"No."

"Who was it from?"

"It wasn't signed," said the girl.

"Then you did read it."

Ruth Ingram flushed. "I didn't want you to think I was in the habit of reading Uncle Alex's private communications. But I couldn't help seeing the telegram this evening—just for a moment before he destroyed it."

"What did it say?" Woodring tamped out his cigarette.

"I don't remember the exact words. It was probably code. It read like something from the Bible. Something about 'The Walls of Jericho have arisen from ruins and the hosts of vengeance are on the march.' That's all."

Woodring stood up suddenly. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing."

"The name Jericho—you've never heard it before?"

"Only in Sunday school," said the girl, "when I was very young!"

"You've never heard of Christopher Jericho? Never heard Mr. Blenn speak of him?"

"Never."

WOODRING sat down again. He took another cigarette from his pocket, but stared thoughtfully at the flaming match for several seconds before he lighted up.

"Shouldn't we call the police?" Ruth suggested.

"No!" Woodring snapped out the match with an emphatic gesture. "My instructions are not to call the police for any reason. Has Stiller a telephone at home?"

"Yes."

"Please try calling him again, then," said Woodring.

The girl got up and went into the hall. Woodring followed, stood over her as she called a number. There was a long wait. Her expression changed,

but she did not speak into the transmitter. After a moment she hung up.

"What's the matter?" Woodring asked.

"Nothing. Basil doesn't answer."

"Someone answered. I was watching your face."

The girl shook her head. "I thought I heard someone take the receiver off the hook at the other end of the wire," she said. "But I may have been mistaken. The telephone system in Calcutta is a strange and wonderful thing. They say it's quicker to call London than to get through to someone in Bow Bazaar."

"Where does Stiller live?"

"Not far from here. He has a flat in Elysium Row."

"I'm going over there," said Woodring. He looked at his watch. "It's midnight. Are you afraid to stay here alone?"

"No, of course not."

"Then wait for me. I may be several hours, but don't do anything until I get back. Yes, there's one thing. You might try telephoning Stiller again, at intervals. Good night."

"Good night. And thank you."

The girl held out her hand. Her small, warm fingers were lost in his huge grasp, but they exerted a firm pressure all their own, pressure that communicated a feeling of earnestness, of profound trust, of—well, perhaps gratitude.

THE gray, shadowless light of daybreak lay uneasily upon the sleeping streets of Calcutta by the time Woodring returned to the Blenn house. There was still a light burning in the sitting room, making a wan, yellow oblong of the window.

Ruth Ingram herself opened the door. Woodring observed her anxious, sleepless face without saying anything.

"News?" Her quick monosyllable seemed to dread the answer to the question.

Woodring shook his head. "And you?"

"None."

"Then Hubertson lied to me," said Woodring.

"No, no," said the girl quickly. "I forgot Mr. Hubertson. He telephoned a short while after you left. But he didn't have any news. He wanted to know if Uncle Alex was here. He had an appointment with him tonight, and Uncle Alex didn't come."

"That checks," said Woodring thoughtfully. "I went to see Hubertson, because I wanted to explore all possible lanes. Hubertson said Mr. Blenn telephoned him at about ten o'clock, saying that something important had come up, and they had to go to the engineering works at Budge-Budge. Mr. Blenn said he was telephoning from Stiller's flat, and that he and Stiller would meet Hubertson at the Balliaghatta station. Hubertson said he waited at the station until after the last train had gone, but that neither of them showed up. Then he went home, called Stiller without getting an answer, then called you. Apparently he's telling the truth."

"Do you suppose Uncle Alex could have gone to Budge-Budge anyhow?"

"No," said Woodring. "Because I went myself. There was no one at the works but the *chokidar.*"

"Did you go to Basil's—Mr. Stiller's?"

"Yes. It was locked tight, and dark. Tell me, does he occupy the whole house?"

"Just the ground floor," the girl replied. "A Forestry civilian and his

wife live in the upper flat, but they've gone to Simla for the hot months. They left last week."

"I'm going back to Stiller's now," said Woodring.

"I'll go with you."

"No, I'll go alone. I may have to indulge in a little light burglary. Wait here."

Woodring didn't stop for an answer. He walked to the corner of Theatre Road and hurried over the few hundred feet to Elysium Row. He tried the front door of Stiller's flat; it was still locked. He walked to the back of the house, without much hope, because he had tried the back door two hours ago, and it was locked also. Nevertheless, he turned the knob. The door swung open.

Woodring paused on the threshold, listening. Someone had been here within the last two hours, someone who had unlocked the back door, someone who was perhaps there yet. He drew his automatic, advanced cautiously through the kitchen.

The rooms were steeped in gloom. The windows were only pale gray blurs in the still-slumbering daylight. Woodring could barely make out the furniture of the dining room. In the bedroom, however, he could see at once that something was amiss. The drawers had been pulled from a commode, and the contents were scattered on the floor. The disorder, however, was nothing compared to that in the drawing room.

In the drawing room, furniture had been overturned. Broken glass gleamed on the floor. A dask had been ransacked, and the papers strewn over the rug. Almost at his feet, Woodring saw an envelope that appeared familiar. He stooped to pick it up, carried it near a window. On the back of the envelope were three blobs of green sealing wax on which was pressed the monogram "A.B." The top of the flap had been slit open. The envelope was empty.

Suddenly Woodring backed away from the window, turned to face the door from the dining room. He heard faint sounds of movement. His thumb found the safety of the automatic, slipped it off. He listened again. There was no mistaking the sounds now. They were light, cautious footsteps. Silently he approached the door, flattened himself against the wall. The footsteps continued to come nearer, crossed the threshold.

Woodring sprang—jammed the pistol against the midriff of Ruth Ingram.

THE girl gave a frightened gasp. Woodring stepped back, abashed.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded. "Why didn't you wait—?"

"Wait! I'm half dead with waiting!" the girl protested. "If anything has happened, I want to—" She stopped, staring at the empty envelope in Woodring's left hand. "Is that the packet you were supposed to take to Darjeeling?"

"Yes."

"Have they—are the papers gone?"

"I don't know yet," said Woodring, with a sweeping gesture that indicated the littered rug. "I haven't finished looking over the wreckage here. I'm inclined to think—"

He broke off abruptly. His gaze was fixed on something that glistened across the room, something shaped like a grotesquely big mango leaf, as though some dark liquid had flowed off the edge of the rug onto the floor of porcelain mosaic. Quickly he crossed the rug, bent over. The liquid was

thick, viscous, and deep red-brown. It gave off a faintly sweetish odor. He straightened up.

"You'd better get out of here, *ek dum!*" he said.

The girl, too, was staring at the horrid puddle. Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper as she asked:

"Blood?"

"Yes. Go on home, now."

"But where—? Have you looked in all the rooms?"

"I think so. Unless— What's behind that door over there?"

"That's a spare bedchamber."

Woodring strode over to the door, pulled it open. One glance at the thick dust on the floor told him that the room had not been entered for several days. He closed the door again.

"I think," he said, as he walked over to Ruth Ingram, "that we may have to call the police after all."

"Then Uncle Alex is—?" The question remained unfinished.

"I don't know what's happened to Mr. Blenn," Woodring said. "But in case he should be dead, the whole picture changes. You're his sole heir, aren't you?"

The girl's face looked very small and white in the half-darkness, but her voice was steady as she replied:

"As far as I know, yes."

"In that case, I'd be working for you. Would you want me to go through with certain projects Mr. Blenn has started, or are you of Basil Stiller's opinion that they should be canceled?"

"I would want you to use your own judgment," said the girl slowly, looking Woodring squarely in the eyes.

"Good. Then listen to me. I'm going to Darjeeling some time today. I'll want a few hours to get my things together and to get clear of possible interference. Wait until nine o'clock. If you don't hear from me by that time, and if Mr. Blenn has not returned home or to his office, call the police. Tell them the truth."

"The whole truth?"

"If they ask for it. Don't mention my name unless they find out from some other source that I'm somehow involved. Don't say anything about my encounter with Stiller, either. Just tell them the facts of your uncle's disappearance, of Hubertson's phone call, and of your trying to get in touch with Stiller. That will give them plenty to go on. Is it all clear?"

"Quite."

"Then go home."

The girl walked slowly away. At the door she paused, turned, looked at Woodring a long moment. Then she walked quickly out the back way.

Woodring bent down, started looking through the papers on the rug.

CHAPTER V

FUNERAL PYRE

INSPECTOR Leonidas M. Prike, C.I.D., was reading the Rig-Veda with his early-morning tea. A small man, prematurely bald, he gave the impression of a mild-mannered scholar, rather than a man of action. Who else would seek relaxation in classic Sanskrit, at least to the extent of absorbing Brahmanic ethics and cosmogony before breakfast? Yet, as Prike turned his face to the light, the shadow beneath the strong line of his determined chin indicated that he was nevertheless endowed with some of the Spartan qualities his parents had in mind when they named him for the hero of Thermopylae. And the keen, quick vitality in his steel-gray eyes as he looked up to greet Deputy Inspector Robbins hinted at characteristics

other than intellectual curiosity which made him one of the Criminal Investigation Department's most relentless investigators.

Deputy Inspector Robbins, the twisted ends of his small mustache freshly waxed, was making his routine early-morning call at Prike's apartments in Lower Circular Road. During the hot weather, Prike was addicted to these daily conferences with his subordinate, to plan the day's strategy before the thermometer had climbed to stultifying heights.

The inspector closed his Rig-Veda with a snap, as he said:

"Well, Robbins, what forces of evil are challenging our professional skill today?"

"That German plant-catcher is in the compound again," said Robbins, taking off his sun helmet. "He's still crying about his lost camera. I told him this wasn't any lost and found office, but he won't go away."

"Dr. Adolf Feurmann," said Prike, half to himself. He stood up promptly, slipped on a black alpaca jacket. "Tell him to come in."

Dr. Feurmann bowed sharply from the waist as he entered. He was a round-faced Teuton, with prominent ears that stood out from his head. He wore thick glasses, and his blond hair was clipped short in back and rose in a stiff brush above his low forehead.

"I have no news for you, Dr. Feurmann," said Inspector Prike, "but I asked you to come in because I want you to explain to my colleague here exactly why you consider the loss of your camera so important."

Dr. Feurmann was glad to explain —and volubly. He talked rapidly in reasonably correct English. His voice was shrill, but descended curiously at times to thick, Germanic gutturals. He was a poor botany professor, he said, who had lost his job in a German university during the Nazi purge of education. When he had refused to serve on a committee for reclassifying plants and flowers named for non-Aryan botanists, he was forced to flee to Switzerland. Luckily he was employed immediately by a Swiss botanical society to go to India on a specimen-gathering expedition. However, he felt he was still being persecuted for his defection from the Nazi party.

"I am now afraid," he said, "that my camera was stolen by my enemies, to maybe incriminate me."

"How?" asked Inspector Prike.

The professor shrugged helplessly, showing himself even more the innocent, unworldly man of science, the victim of unjust oppression, the nature of which it was beyond his power to more than conjecture.

"*Ach,* I don't know how. It will be found in suspicious circumstances. It will have maybe incriminating films. It will have pictures of maybe fortresses. Battleships. Powder magazines. It will make me out a spy, and I will be put in prison. I will—"

"There is one question I forgot to ask you yesterday, Doctor," Prike interrupted. "Exactly how long has this camera been missing?"

"Three weeks," said Feurmann.

"Three weeks? And you've just come to me now?"

"I have just now found out about the reputation of this Count Vaznilko who has been so friendly with me," apologized the botanist. "I could not guess he was dangerous. Inspector, do you know—"

"I fancy I know more about Count Vaznilko than you do," said Prike. "But he hasn't got your camera. I searched his room and his luggage at

the Great Eastern last night during his absence. You'd better come and see me again tomorrow, Doctor."

"But tomorrow I will not be here. I must go back to Darjeeling tonight. I must not forget my work. My orchids—"

"Yes, of course," said Prike, in a conclusive manner that indicated the interview was over. "Then I shall keep you informed of any developments. Good day, Dr. Feurmann."

The good doctor, looking only slightly less harassed, bowed stiffly once again and took his leave.

When the German had left, Prike asked:

"Anything else, Robbins?"

"One more thing," said the deputy inspector. "Mr. Alexander Blenn seems to have disappeared."

The inspector lost a great part of his seeming inattention. A question came sharply from his lips.

"Blenn? Of Blenn Engineering Works?"

"That's him. I sent Jenkins over to—"

"Jenkins," snapped Prike, "has a genius for obliterating more essential clues than any detective in Bengal. Come along, Robbins." Prike clapped on his topi. "We'd better get there before he makes too much progress."

PRIKE and Robbins did not stay long at Camac Street. They listened while pale, overwrought Ruth Ingram repeated her story. The girl spoke calmly, despite her obvious fatigue and taut nerves. She answered questions with apparent frankness. And when she made it plain that Basil Stiller, too, was missing—that she had been unable to reach him either at his home or office, Inspector Prike departed immediately for Elysium Row.

Two minutes after his arrival in Stiller's flat, he discovered the sticky puddle of drying blood.

The discovery brought about an instant transfiguration in Inspector Prike. Gone was the last vestige of academic aura, swept away by the surge of new forces. The long muscles of his jaw were springs under tension, springs coiled for prompt, decisive action. The flash of his steel-gray eyes was as impersonal as the metallic gleam from some precision instrument, and the brisk movements of his hard, slim body were as positive and dynamic as a machine. At that moment, in fact, he was a machine. Here was evidence of violence; mayhem, at least; perhaps murder. And here was the trained man-hunter, set in operation by a single thrust.

With a dozen curt commands he organized his first moves, and in a few moments his subordinates were rounding up the servants from the neighboring houses. They began to congregate in the compound; bearded *khansamas,* lean dark-skinned cooks, dignified bearers, *bheesties* with their goatskin water bags, pantry boys, a *mali* with his rake and pruning shears. Prike questioned them one by one, putting each through the same cross-examination in Hindustani. He had questioned ten before he got his first illuminating answers—from the patriarchal Bengali *khansama* to the family next door.

Why were there no servants at Stiller Sahib's flat? That was simple, the aged *khansama* replied. The *sahib* had given them all a week's holiday, since he was going to Darjeeling. All of them? Well, all except the sweeper. The *sahib's meta* was dead.

The inspector's eyebrows lifted, more than a trifle.

"Dead? When?" Prike demanded.

"This night," the *khansama* replied. "He died of stoppage of the heart in the *sahib's* own kitchen."

"How do you know this?"

"The men told me," was the reply.

"What men?"

"The men from the burning *ghat.* They came with a bullock cart to take him away just before daybreak. I saw them."

"Then you are sure it was the *meta* who was dead, *khansama?*"

"They said it was. He was wrapped in a *chaddar.*"

"But you did not approach to see his face?"

"I?" The venerable butler was scornful. "Does the Inspector Sahib think that I, a member of the Vaishya caste, would debase myself by approaching the corpse of a *meta,* a vile sweeper of ordures, a wallower in filth?"

"Bas!" Prike dismissed the *khansama.* Then, with a single gesture from the doorway, he dispersed the waiting crowd of brown servants and summoned Deputy Inspector Robbins.

"Robbins," he said bluntly, "this is murder. But we'll have to work rapidly to prove it, because the murderer is using a diabolically clever scheme to destroy the *corpus delicti.* The body is probably at this very moment being cremated as a Hindu in some burning *ghat.* So get to the telephone, Robbins, and—No, not that phone. There may be fingerprints. Send men at once to every burning *ghat* in Calcutta. All cremations are to be stopped until our men certify that the corpse in question is not European. Prevent the disposal of bones and ashes of any cremation completed since this morning; we may have to take anthropometric measurements. When you've done that, join me at the burning *ghat* on Tolley's Nallah, just beyond the Kalighat temple. That's the closest one to Elysium Row and consequently the most likely. Move, Robbins!"

ROBBINS moved. So did Prike, when he had given routine instructions to Jenkins, who remained in charge at Stiller's flat. In a short minute his motor car was careening through the lumbering ox-cart traffic on Russapugla Road.

In an amazingly short space of time, he had passed the Kalighat temple and was hopping from his car at the burning *ghat* on Tolley's Nallah.

When the inspector arrived at the burning *ghat,* four men were carrying a bamboo litter through the entrance. The body on the litter was covered with a bright orange *sari* and sprinkled with rice and plantain leaves. Prike stopped the rude cortege, lifted the cloth, looked into the wrinkled brown face of an old Hindu woman. He waved on the bier, followed it into the *ghat* enclosure.

The inspector stood for a moment in front of a sign which announced the cost of cremation: *Adults, three rupees, four annas; Brahmans, three annas extra; children under ten, half price.* He watched several menials piling cordwood in a shallow trench. Another bamboo bier lay on the ground nearby. Prike walked over to examine it. The body was that of a thirteen-year-old Hindu girl, with the vermilion caste-mark of marriage painted on her cold forehead.

On a wooden bench against a wall, a group of mourners were sitting, waiting for some eldest son who was squatting by the bank of a muddy creek while an itinerant barber shaved off his hair and manicured his finger and toenails. Three oblong stacks of wood were smoking furiously, impregnating

the air with the tainted odor of charred flesh. Another eldest son, shaved and half naked, was marching around a fourth and unlighted pyre, holding a flaming torch of reeds above his head as he made the prescribed seven circuits.

With the ease of long practice, Inspector Prike took in these details at a glance, and wasted no further time upon them. He found the head attendant, demanded:

"How many cremations have you had this morning?"

"Only those you see, *Sahib*. The three women who are almost finished. The fourth which is just starting—"

"You are sure they are women?"

"Yaquin, Sahib. I myself saw the sandalwood dust sprinkled on their bodies, the *ghi* and gold-dust put into their mouths."

"And that corpse there?" Prike pointed to another unlighted pyre across the enclosure.

"Another woman, *Sahib*. We have only women this morning."

"You are certain?"

"I did not see that one, *Sahib*. She was brought here first thing after daylight, and she should be finished. However, she had no relatives, so I sent for a Brahman to light the pyre. He has not come yet, *Sahib,* so—"

"Take off the wood," Prike ordered. "I must see the corpse."

"But *Sahib*—"

"Jeldo karo!"

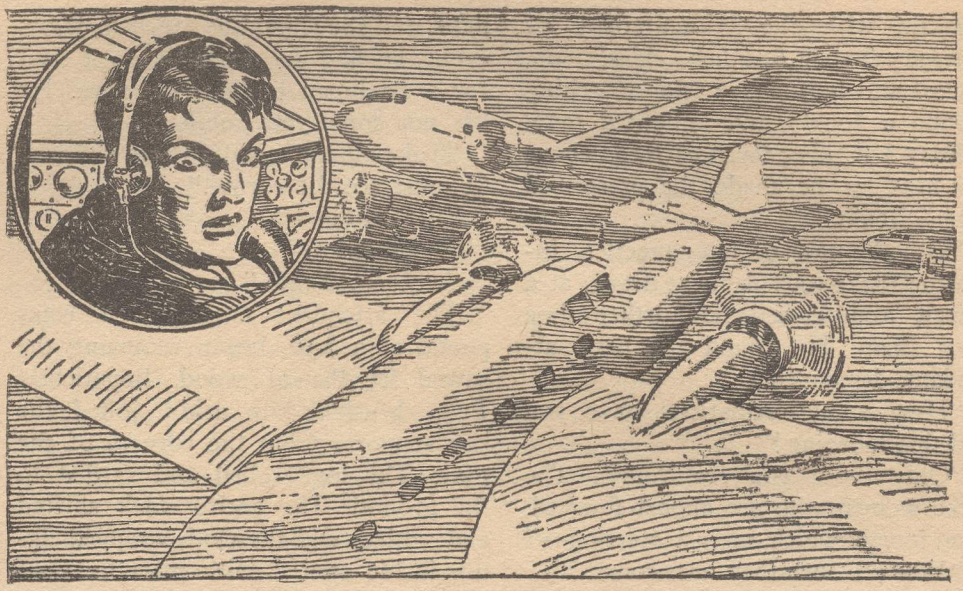
"Achcha, Sahib."

The attendant crossed the compound at a lope, began removing the sawed lengths of wood. Impatiently Prike brushed him aside, jolted the key supports from the corners of the pyre. The logs rolled and rattled to the ground. The entire stack shifted and settled, and the cloth-wrapped figure inside stirred with macabre restlessness. Prike reached down, pulled the cloth from the face of the corpse.

His lips tightened—an unusual display of emotion for Inspector Prike. He was startled—not because the face of the corpse was European, but because the features were not those he expected to find.

He found himself staring at the beaked nose, the deep rictus furrows, the glassy, bulging eyes of Basil Stiller.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Beyond Control

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Confidence Flight," etc.

I

YOU might make three stories out of this. You might have a different hero for each one. You might, but you can't. You can't tear the Barton family apart.

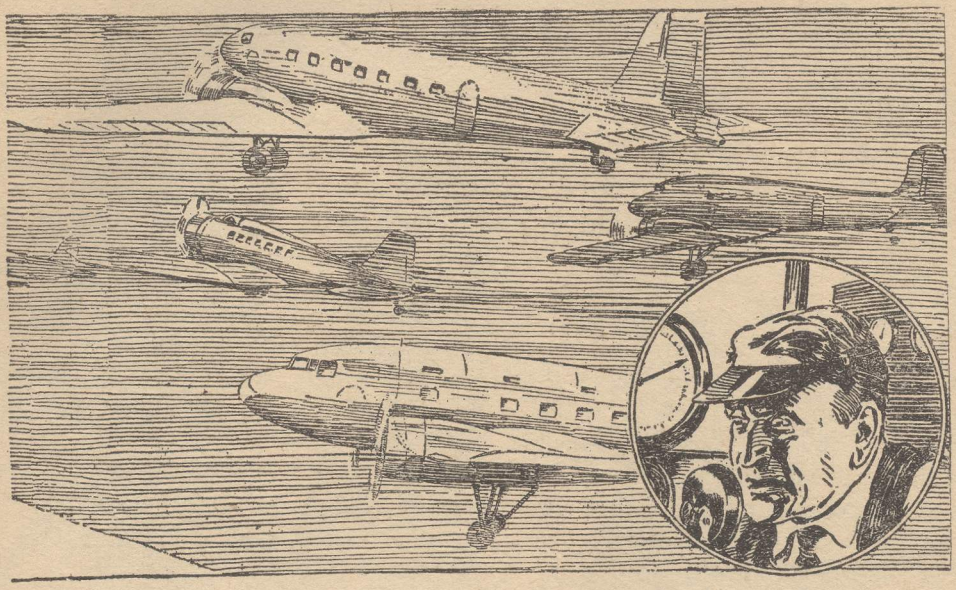
You can't take Pop Barton—who scarred his wings and grayed his hair as wartime ace, barnstormer, airmail and transport pilot until now, as he put it, he was kept "under glass" as control man in the glassed-in cupola at Metropolitan airport—you can't take him and shut him off alone and say that this is his story.

Nor can you push him into the background and pull forward his son, towering, bronzed, bony Tex. You can't climb into the Comet Transport Systems Flight 606 from Chicago and squeeze yourself past Tex Barton's panoramic shoulders and say to him, "This is your story." No, you couldn't do that, for his big square jaw would set, his frosty eyes, blue and distant like the horizon, would study you a moment to see if you meant it. Then he'd jerk his thumb toward the cockpit's forward windows.

"What about the kid?" Tex would demand. He never had much to say, you see.

So you'd feel a little sheepish and glance ahead to see the Atlas Airlines Flight 411 racing ahead of you with Pop Barton's younger son, Buddy Barton, in the pilot's seat. And if you could somehow change planes in midair and say to slim, shortish Buddy what you had just said to his big brother, his boyish face, shiny as though just scrubbed, would wrinkle into a grin.

"Shucks," he'd smile. "I—I feel kind of honored, but I can't let you do



it. Pop's a swell guy and I wouldn't want to do anything that might hurt his feelings, and Tex and I have been great pals. You know, before I shifted to Atlas, we were pilot and co-pilot together the same as he and Pop were."

So there you are. You can't tear the Barton family apart. You can't make three stories out of what happened. If you could, you'd know just where to start.

If it were just Pop Barton's story you could start with the war. War between Atlas Airlines and Comet Transport Systems. A time war—non-stop flying time between New York and Chicago. The war Pop Barton feared might become a civil war with Tex flying 606 for Comet and Buddy racing him in 411 for Atlas. The war in which Pop Barton, as control man at Metropolitan Airport, declared his neutrality, the same as Belgium declared her neutrality after Sarajevo. For Pop, you could begin with that and the crash at the field that brought him face to face once again with Matt Smedley, Bureau of Air Commerce inspector.

A Complete Novelet of Modern Skyways and Pilots Perilous

But that same crash begins Tex's story, and trouble had its talons hooked deeply into Buddy the moment that crash occurred, though he didn't know it. It was just one of those things a man walks into with his eyes open, but doesn't see.

WHEN Tex and Buddy flew their competing planes in from Chicago the three Bartons usually had dinner together and then went on home. They had too much regard for one another to let the war in the air affect their relationship on the ground. But the night before the crash Buddy remained at the field. Atlas Airways had called a meeting of its eastern pilots.

After the meeting Buddy started for home. He was hungry, thirsty. A sandwich and glass of beer would go fine. Wait a minute on that beer, he warned himself. He glanced at his watch. A quarter to eight. He was not supposed to drink during the twelve hours preced-

ing a flight, and he was taking off at eight in the morning. Buddy was always careful about things like that.

A quarter of eight now. Twelve and a quarter hours until he took off. "I'm safe," he thought. "Guess I can get a glass down before prohibition begins."

A tavern was near at hand. He went in.

When he had just about finished his beer, his attention was attracted to a man and woman at another table, the only other patrons in the tavern. The man was drunk and arguing noisily about his bill with the proprietor, who was a none too pleasant individual, slim to the point of slinkiness, ferret-featured. The woman, inclined to be somewhat fleshy, was sober, but her brown eyes appeared distraught; her large, rounded cheekbones were flushed with embarrassment.

"Please," she pleaded "don't make a scene."

"Lemme alone," he growled. He pawed at the table as he forced himself up. He swung at the proprietor who knocked him sprawling.

"Mike," the proprietor ordered. "Call a cop."

Fear enlarged the woman's big brown eyes.

"Oh no," she cried. "He—he'll pay you when he's sober. He'll come back in the morning. I know. He's done it other times."

"Nothing doing," snarled the man, his dark beady eyes flashing. "No one walks out of Joe Paulus's place without paying his bill."

The woman rose and gathered her wrap. "I—I'll see if I can get some money somewhere."

Paulus shoved her back into the chair. "I said no one goes out without paying."

The woman started to get up again. "But—" Paulus pushed her down once more.

Buddy Barton frowned. This was none of his affair. Better stay out of it. Still there was no need for Paulus to be so rough.

"Better keep your hands off the lady," Buddy warned. "She told you she was only going out to—"

Paulus shook his head violently. "I've had that trick pulled on me before. Well, lady, what about this bill? Your husband seems to be out. Maybe you'll pay it now."

"I told you I have no money with me and I didn't realize he's spent—"

Paulus turned. "All right, Mike. Call the cop."

"Wait a minute," Buddy ordered crisply. He faced the woman. "I'll trust you. I'll pay the bill." After all, a couple of dollars. She would pay it back. "How much is it?" Buddy asked Paulus.

"Forty bucks."

"Forty—" gasped Buddy. His lips pressed together. The woman glanced anxiously toward Mike who had started toward the door again. Buddy frowned at Paulus. "I get it. You thought he was too sou—uh—tight to keep track and you jacked up."

"Were you here to keep track?" sneered Paulus. "The place was crowded before. He ordered drinks for everybody."

"That's right," murmured the woman. "Thank you for offering to help, anyway. I guess there's nothing to be done. This man refuses to accept our signatures on the bill as a promise to pay."

Buddy hesitated, staring at her. "I'll sign the bill," he said to Paulus. "Okay?"

Paulus stared at Buddy's uniform. "Guess that's proof of where I can find

you if they don't make good," he said softly.

Buddy shifted uncomfortably under Paulus's stare. He didn't like this. But he couldn't back out now.

"It's too much for you to do," the woman murmured. "You don't know me or—"

"It's all right, Buddy muttered. "When the bill is paid, you can mail it to me in care of the Metropolitan Airport."

He signed his name and helped carry the drunken man out to a taxi. A little eddy of dust whirled across the sidewalk. Whirling anti-clockwise, he noticed. Storm coming.

When he arrived home he said nothing about the incident to Pop or Tex. He felt a little sheepish about it, they might think he'd been played for a sucker. Knight errant rescuing middle-aged lady from a tough bar-proprietor . . .

II

AT ten minutes to eight the next morning Pop Barton strode toward the administration building of Metropolitan Airport. He saw a man peer from a window and stare at him, but the reflection of the morning sun masked the features.

The man by the window turned to someone in the room. "Say," he asked. "That's Pop Barton, isn't it?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

Inspector Matt Smedley, Bureau of Air Commerce, did not change the expression of his rotund, half pouting features. Nor did he answer directly. "He's not flying transport, is he?"

"No. Barton's field dispatcher. What would be wrong if he did fly? I understand he was one of the first transport pilots this country had—been flying since the war."

"That's just it," Smedley muttered. "Too much flying. It does something to a man whether he knows it or not. The continual strain, the noise, the bad air in the old cabin jobs from exhaust fumes seeping in, and other factors bring about aeroneurosis."

"Never heard of it," remarked the man. "But then I'm kind of new to this game."

"It's nervous disorder," said Smedley. "Weakens a man's reactions. It might explain some of those recent mysterious transport crashes. It creeps up on a man and gets gradually worse—makes him irritable, brings on insomnia, indigestion, and general fatigue."

"Shucks," said the other man, "Pop Barton hasn't got any of those."

"Maybe not now," murmured Smedley. "But two years ago he was pretty well shot. I gave him his choice of being grounded or resigning gracefully." Smedley's eyes, staring at the sun-gilded window, glinted. "He didn't resign right away; he beat me up first. Just part of the general symptoms—irritability. He was crazy about flying." Smedley became aware of the man's speculative frown. "Don't get me wrong, brother, I'm not holding it against him."

The man nodded but said nothing.

"You say he's field dispatcher?" asked Smedley. "Quite a bit of strain on that job at times."

The man smiled sardonically at Smedley. "Not holding any grudge, eh? A rest ought to cure a man of that aero . . . nervousness. Listen, Smedley, Pop Barton's pretty well liked around here. There's no better, no more even-tempered, dispatcher in the country. Just remember that. If you've got any ideas you'd better have definite proof concerning Barton—"

"You're getting me all wrong," Smedley laughed. "Don't go jumping at conclusions."

"Don't you, either," remarked the man.

THE tiny, completely glassed-in cupola with its little balcony controlled the airport. Downstairs each airline had its own control room and operator for directing its own planes. But for flying about the airport, the field dispatcher's directions from the control tower were law. He had absolute say about landings, take-offs, maneuvers and flying altitudes in the vicinity of the airport.

The job was no sinecure—not at a busy airport like Metropolitan on the Secaucus meadows just across the Hudson from New York where there were one hundred and fifty scheduled daily flights besides the coming and going of itinerant private planes. A control man just *had* to be alert when there were often as many as fifteen planes in the air over the airport.

Pop Barton loved his job. The reports of the pilots, his knowledge of just what they would be doing in the cockpits—it was almost as though he were flying again. He had forgotten about being grounded. He was content, set here for the rest of his life—that is, unless he made a mistake causing a mishap in the air. But he would make certain that that never happened.

The night dispatcher reached for his hat and coat as Pop Barton entered the control room.

"Nothing much this morning." He yawned. "Private plane in the sun to the east trying out a new super-charger, will want to land soon. Has a radio. Consolidated Sleeper Flight 617 from St. Louis reported it will arrive about eight. Mail planes from Boston and Chicago estimated arrival about eight-ten and fifteen. That's about all incoming. Be seeing you."

Alone, Pop Barton glanced at the record book and chart of plane positions just to be certain that the night man had not failed to report all he should. Incoming planes usually began reporting to the field dispatcher from about fifty miles away from the field. Loudspeakers dotted the room, for each airline transmitted on a frequency assigned to it by the Federal Radio Commission. One of them crackled.

"Consolidated 617. Over Belleville at three thousand. Okay to come in?"

Barton glanced about at the sky. He picked up his microphone, flicked a switch on the broad keyboard before him, and ran his eyes over dials and gauges.

"Come in," he ordered. "Circle field once clockwise, watch out for private plane to east. Use long northeast runway. Field barometer 30:09. Wind twelve, southwest. Gear down, 617."

"Gear down," replied 617's pilot, assuring Barton he had not failed to lower the retractable landing gear.

The Atlas Airlines' loudspeaker hissed to life and young Buddy Barton's voice came forth. "Atlas Flight 412 ready at take-off for Chicago. Will fly at five thousand. Okay, Pop?"

Barton adjusted his switches. "Wait for clearance. Five thousand okay."

A tractor was towing Tex's maroon and cream twin-motored low-wing transport from a hangar. Tex was due to take off an hour later. He was down in the Comet control room now studying weather charts and planning his altitudes and route to Chicago to have the least resistance from wind.

The sleeper plane from St. Louis swooped into the runway, stooped, turned and taxied toward the canopy.

The private plane approached nearer the field, waggling its wings to get Pop Barton's attention. It had no transmitting radio, only a receiver.

Barton picked up his microphone.

"Atlas 412 to Chicago. Take off, circle field once to your left. Watch out for private plane coming in to land. See you tomorrow night, Buddy. Be good."

"Okay, Pop."

Barton flicked a switch on the keyboard and spoke to the private plane.

"Okay to come in, keep clear of Atlas transport about to take off, circle to east and north and use long runway."

BIG Tex Barton waved from a window in the administration building as the Atlas plane raced along the runway. Below him a short stocky man watched the plane, too. Tex saw him stiffen suddenly. The man whirled and faced up toward the control tower.

"What's that private plane doing?" Inspector Smedley shouted.

Pop Barton had already seen the private plane. He was barking into his microphone.

"You're turning the wrong way, against my orders. You're going to cross the path of the transport. Get back, get out of the way."

Pop Barton's fingers flipped switches.

"Buddy, look out for that private plane to your left."

Barton swore. The two-place open-cockpit plane still came on. Grabbing up his signal light, a black bucketlike container with two lenses peering from the base like eyes set one above the other, Barton dashed out on the balcony.

He sighted the light at the private plane and squeezed one of the triggers. A red beam, visible four miles in daylight, lanced out toward the plane.

When Pop Barton's warning blared in the earphones, Buddy had been starting his turn to the left. At the same instant his co-pilot shouted.

"Where the hell's that guy going?"

Like a filing drawn toward a magnet, the little plane raced straight for the transport. Buddy jammed the wheel forward. The transport swooped. Instead of zooming, the private pilot blundered. He banked in an effort to avoid collision.

His lowering wing-tip swept into the transport's churning starboard propeller. Buddy saw the little plane flip over from the impact. Trembling from the shock and the racking race of the propellerless motor, the big transport skidded crazily. It side-slipped down with its left wing forward.

Buddy's hands wrestled the wheel. It was hard getting words past the constriction in his throat.

"Cut the motors," he yelled to his co-pilot. "I can't save her, but see if you can get the landing gear up to keep her from nosing over."

He whipped the wheel over, kicked left rudder. Would he be able to get control before the transport plunged into the marsh? Behind the bulkhead a woman passenger screamed. The ship's nose came forward with agonizing slowness. The left wing began to lift.

To Buddy reeds in the marsh began to show up with magnified distinctness. From the corner of his eye he saw his co-pilot bracing, checking his safety belt, one hand frantically cranking up the landing gear.

"Hang on," muttered Buddy, tugging back on the wheel. Reeds swished against the plane.

"Gear up," husked the co-pilot.

The transport slid on its belly. Wood

and metal shrieked in protest. The plane started to stand on its nose. The cockpit's forward windows burst apart. A sliver raked Buddy's cheek. He threw his arms about his head to protect it when the plane flipped over on its back. His body strained against the safety strap.

But the transport squatted back heavily, tipped over until one wing dipped in the greenish water of the marsh.

POP BARTON'S breath sighed out audibly. For a moment panic threatened him. He wanted to go dashing out to the marsh. Maybe the transport was in water and Buddy was struggling to get out, drowning.

He breathed deeply. His job was here. He stepped back in the control room and yanked the alarm. Sirens began moaning. Barton picked up a telephone.

"Send for an ambulance," he instructed the switchboard operator downstairs.

"Eastern Seaboard 15 from Boston," boomed a loudspeaker. "Over George Washington Bridge at two thousand. Okay to come in?"

Barton glanced outside. Two emergency cars raced across the field for the spot that would let them approach nearest to the wrecked transport. To the southwest a narrow column of black smoke streamed upward, spreading out a hundred feet in the air. It looked like a giant crêpe. The field fire-truck lumbered toward it.

"Seaboard 15," ordered Barton. "Proceed to Berry's Creek beam station and await instructions until field is cleared."

Barton forced himself to make his notations in the record book before he permitted himself to glance toward the spot where the transport had disappeared.

The crews from the crash cars were just climbing down. Pop Barton's face contorted. Was that only as far as they were? He glanced at the clock. Only a minute and a half had elapsed since the crash. The door behind Barton opened.

"Hello, Barton," said Inspector Smedley.

Barton felt a tremor about his stomach.

"Hello—Inspector." He motioned toward the record book. "Guess you'll be wanting to see that."

JOE PAULUS, his head burrowed deeply in the pillow in a room above his tavern, rolled over grumpily the third time the telephone jangled insistently. His eyes rested dourly on the clock. It was only eight-fifteen.

"Hello," he grumbled.

"Joe, this is Mike. Did ya hear what just came over the radio about two planes crashing at Metro Airport? The guy who signed on the cuff for forty bucks last night was—"

Paulus swore. "As if I ain't got trouble enough. I suppose he was killed and I'm left holding the—"

"No," explained Mike. "Well, maybe not. The announcer didn't say. He just said this guy Buddy Bar—the one who signed the check was piloting one of the planes that came down."

"You mean Barton?" demanded Paulus. "The young guy wearing the blue uniform?"

"Yeah, that's — Wait a minute, there's another flash coming on the radio. Hello, Joe?"

"Yeah."

"The guy in the private plane, named Anderson, was burned up. No one was hurt bad in the other. This Barton guy,

who signed the check and who was piloting, was only cut on the cheek. Guess you can still collect from him. Sorry I bothered you."

"Don't hang up, Joe," Paulus said slowly. He was now wide awake. "Say, when you carried that drunk out to the cab last night did you hear the dame tell the driver where to go?"

"Yeah," replied Mike.

"Fine," said Paulus. "She was the wife of Anderson who was killed. You get in touch with her and tell her I want to see her right away, and warn her she'd better not talk to anyone about last night. Got it?"

"Oke," answered Mike. "What's up?"

"Plenty," smirked Paulus, hanging up and reaching for his clothes.

BIG Tex Barton entered and closed the door to the office of Gordon Hollister, general manager of Comet Transport Systems.

"I was told you wanted to see me," he said. His voice was toneless. He did not have much use for Hollister, a non-flying, swivel-chair executive. Through stock manipulations and relatives on the board of directors Hollister had worked into this job. He had been a sales manager before coming to Comet, and he still had the idea that volume of business and profits came first. There was no denying those were important to an airline, but they must always come hand in hand with safety, not before it. More than once Hollister had sent planes out through bad storms when other airlines grounded their transports.

Hollister flicked a bit of lint from the sleeve of his superbly pressed gray tweed coat.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Barton," he said smoothly.

Tex was never very talkative. He said nothing now. He just stared at Hollister's pale brown eyes. Hollister was usually peppy, energetic. There was trouble ahead whenever he became suave.

"I just learned," remarked Hollister, "that Greg Anderson was killed a little while ago. Do you know anything about him?"

Tex shook his head. His eyes never left Hollister's.

Hollister examined his seemingly polished fingernails. "Since the Atlas lines organized two years ago," he explained, "they've been steadily cutting into our passenger lists. That's why I recently put into effect our shorter time schedules to draw some of the trade back. But Atlas took up the challenge and we haven't regained much, and we're in kind of a financial spot. This is all confidential, you understand."

Tex Barton nodded. He might have mentioned that until six months ago there had been no trouble with Atlas. Not until Hollister came and a few Comet planes cracked up in storms did trade begin to fall off. Comet had been good outfit before Hollister's time. Hollister had also been putting in cheaper, less trustworthy equipment. On two occasions Tex, as senior pilot for Comet, had opposed his sending out ships in a storm.

"Greg Anderson," the manager went on, "while not wealthy himself, had a good deal of financial influence. He was about to arrange for the re-financing of the Comet lines. But now his unfortunate death has thwarted that."

Tex watched Hollister closely. "Just where do I fit into all—all this financial stuff. I'm a pilot, Hollister, not a—"

"Sorry I'm boring you," Hollister smiled with just his lips. "I'm request-

ing you, Barton, as senior pilot to set an example for the rest of the pilots. Our time schedules must be cut still more."

Tex shook his head. "The time's pretty fast for our equipment now, such as it is," he declared. "The motors can't stand—"

"We've got to cut our schedules," cut in Hollister.

"It isn't fair to the passengers," retorted Tex. "You're selling them time, but cutting down on safety."

"You're wrong there," purred Hollister. "Aren't you up on your specifications for the equipment? We're nowhere near passing the safety limit. If we were, don't you suppose the Commerce Bureau would step in and call a halt?"

Tex's face set grimly. "The specifications are on paper. I've seen them in operation," he countered. "If you take my advice—"

"You were not asked in here for advice. Until the financial status of Comet comes back to normal, Barton, we are being forced to cut down in our personnel. I would much prefer to keep our younger, more progressive men."

Tex was thirty-eight. His eyes became frosty. He smiled grimly.

"Don't threaten me with the loss of my job," he challenged, "just because I won't push equipment beyond the safety limit. You forget I've got a contract to fly for Comet."

When Buddy had left Comet the Comet executives preceding Hollister were afraid that Tex might leave too, and feeling that he was too valuable a man to lose, they had signed a contract with him.

"I haven't forgotten that contract," purred Hollister. "It has five years to run, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Tex snapped. "And you can't discharge me because I won't take risks with passengers' lives."

"You're right, Hollister agreed too crisply. "But you're paid for the time you spend in the air. I have the power to deem it to the company's best interests not to have you fly so often. Five years is a long time without much flying; it'll be hard for you to keep up to date on new equipment. Let's see, you'd be forty-three. And what line would take you on and train you? You can't resign and get another job because of the contract . . . Barton, our schedules have to be cut. Think it over."

Tex's breath was heavily ominous. His long powerful fingers flexed into hard fists. He advanced with incredible speed. Hollister's jaw dropped weakly. His eyes seemed to dilate. He cringed back against the wall.

"I'm warning you," he quavered.

Tex laughed, harshly. "What're you scared about? You've got me under your thumb." He forced his fists rigidly deep in his pockets. "I—I just wanted to look at that nice press in your suit. Some time when I'm not so —so tied up in my flying, I'll show you how to put some new wrinkles in that suit."

TEN minutes later Tex strode out toward the waiting Comet transport. Buddy was strolling nearby. Tex breathed deeply and relaxed. He gripped Buddy's arm.

"Don't let that crash get you kid," he said gruffly. "You've got nothing to worry about. Your record's clean. You're in the clear."

"Thanks," mumbled Buddy. "Everything all right with you? You came out like you were going to a dog-fight."

Tex laughed. "Maybe I was just coming from a dog-fight. Be seeing you, kid."

His expression hardened as soon as Buddy's back was turned. He ran his eyes over the transport. Not a bad-looking job, but he knew what the hidden parts were like. Hollister's doing. And Hollister wanted the time cut. Or else . . .

The stewardess stood by the door.

"Get aboard," Tex snapped. "Let's get off." It wasn't like him to be so brusque.

"We were only waiting for you," the stewardess retorted.

Tex slipped into the pilot's seat, pivoted the transport, and sent it rolling to the end of the runway.

"Comet 607 to Chicago," he snapped into the microphone. "Ready at take-off. Motors warm. I won't have to circle. Okay to start?"

"What's the rush, son?" Pop Barton asked mildly.

"Give that Consolidated transport a chance to taxi off the runway. Wind is twelve miles an hour southwest. Watch out for three transports circling above Berry's beam at one thousand, twenty-five hundred and three. Okay now, take off."

A telephone rang. "Control tower, Barton speaking."

"This is Smedley, Barton. With everyone so directly concerned in that crash being immediately available an investigation board has been organized and will meet in an hour. I've arranged for you to be relieved immediately. Report to the medical office for an examination."

Pop Barton's fingers whitened about the telephone.

"You understand I hope," explained Smedley, "that in the light of two years ago this is just routine, part of my job."

"I understand," muttered Pop Barton and hung up.

He stared from the window. Doubt seeped into his mind. Had he given the proper directions to the private plane? Was he slipping? He snorted. He was as fit as he had ever been. But there was only his word for it that he had directed the private plane properly, and unless something were found in the charred and twisted wreckage showing there had been mechanical failure in the plane . . .

There was one consolation though. Buddy was in the clear. That was most important to Barton. The crash could not affect Buddy. He was in the clear.

BUDDY waved to Tex as the maroon and cream transport skimmed down the runway. He turned and resumed his pacing. There was nothing to worry about. But his father — No, nothing there either. Pop Barton, without referring to his chart even if there were ten planes in the air, could keep the positions of each clear in his mind, could direct their movements without endangering any of them. He was the best field dispatcher in the country.

The private pilot, Anderson, had obviously been responsible for the crash. There was nothing to worry about.

Joe Paulus, wearing a snap-brim felt hat and hipless black coat, slipped through the gate from the parking lot and advanced toward Buddy. His beady dark eyes appraised Buddy coldly. His glance darted about. No one was near.

"I came about that bill," he announced, flatly.

Buddy frowned. "Give that man and woman a chance to pay up first. You don't collect from me that fast."

Paulus smiled, but the calculating set of his eyes did not change.

"You're wrong, very wrong," he smirked. "Your name is on a bill dated last night for forty dollars worth of hard stuff. You've just had a crash and certain officials would be very interested to learn—"

Paulus saw Buddy's shoulders twist, his fist hooking around. Paulus swayed his lithe body, letting the blow slip across his shoulder. He caught Buddy's arm and held it fast. His right hand slid under his left lapel.

"Take it easy," he snarled. "That check is for forty dollars. The price for it is two grand."

Buddy stared at him defiantly. "You can't blackmail me. I'll turn you in to the police."

Brassy lights appeared in those beady dark eyes so close to his. "You'll pay," threatened Paulus, "or I'll—"

"I'll pay the forty dollars, no more," Buddy fumed. "And I'll only pay that if the man and woman don't do it within a reasonable time. But get this, they'll back me up that the check is really theirs."

Paulus laughed softly. "Did you know the man's name was Greg Anderson, the one who was killed this . . ."

Buddy's jaw sagged. His anger ebbed rapidly, uncovering fear within him. Paulus laughed again.

"Listen, sucker," he warned softly. "I've got you locked in a jam, and I hold the key. If you don't believe me and want to risk your whole future in aviation, just try to tell anyone what you think you know about Anderson."

He shoved Buddy away suddenly. Buddy's shoulders struck the hard pavement. He lay there dazed. This could not be. Paulus could not have any grounds to blackmail him, couldn't make people believe his story. Yet he seemed so sure . . .

Paulus sneered down at him. "It's now a little after nine. You've got all day. I'll hold that check until six o'clock tonight. You better see that I have two grand before then."

He ran his eyes derisively over Buddy's prostrate body, hunched his coat up the back of his neck, and turned toward the parking lot.

Buddy brushed off his clothes, and the motions of his hands seemed fluttery. He chided himself. There was nothing to worry about. Paulus might create a bad stir for him, but Buddy could prove he hadn't been drunk that night.

He strode to the hangar where Anderson had kept his plane. No, no one had been near or spoken to Anderson this morning. He had wheeled his plane from the hangar by himself. The parking lot attendant had not been on duty when Anderson had arrived. Apparently no one at the field had been close enough to Anderson to tell that he had been on a spree last night.

Buddy snapped his fingers irritably. Anderson's wife, of course. Why hadn't he thought of her before? She could absolve Buddy of all responsibility for the crash, release him from any blackmail possibility.

He telephoned the hotel where Anderson had been staying. Anderson? *Mrs.* Anderson? Mrs. Gregory Anderson? There must be some mistake. Mr. Anderson had always lived there. He had a single room. He wasn't married! There was no woman of that description staying there. What's that? Did anyone see Mr. Anderson leave the hotel that morning? A check-up would be made of all employees on duty at that time and Buddy would be informed if anyone saw him. Not at all, glad to be of service.

Buddy stared despondently at the

telephone. Paulus must have known about Anderson and the woman, or he was just guessing. Either way, unless Buddy could find the woman, he was at the mercy of Paulus, and there was no mercy in that man.

Conscious of his pounding heart, the warm glow on his cheeks, Buddy slouched wearily toward the administration building and the meeting of the Investigation Board.

III

TWO weeks later Inspector Smedley opened the door to the control tower and entered. Pop Barton scowled and finished making the notation in the record book.

"Nice day," remarked Smedley. "Thought we'd have a storm though along about four this morning. Blew up quite a bit, didn't it?"

"I didn't notice," Barton replied curtly. Smedley had been coming every day since the crash, making seemingly idle remarks, but every one was a concealed probe designed to discover if Pop Barton was unfit for his job, was bothered by insomnia, indigestion, or the other symptoms of aeroneurosis.

"Cleared up nice, though, by morning," continued Smedley. "Say," he asked, "why don't the towns around here pass ordinances to stop people from shooting off bombs and fireworks all hours of the night? Made a terrific racket until about twelve-thirty. Did it bring back war memories to you?"

Barton spun about. His voice was brittle. "I slept sound the whole night through if that's what you're trying to find out. It's been that way every night since the crash. Maybe you'd like to keep a night-watch beside my bed, record the number of times I turn over, how loud I snore and—"

Inspector Smedley smiled. "You're getting this all wrong Barton."

Pop Barton snorted. "Why the hell aren't you man enough to come out in the open? Go ahead, admit you're hounding me, trying to get something on me."

"I'm only doing my job, there's nothing personal," protested Smedley. "There's only your word for it that Anderson made a wrong turn and caused that crash two weeks ago. But your record on this job gave you the benefit of the doubt—"

"And you don't give benefits, is that it?" charged Barton. "You're still thinking of two years ago when I—"

Smedley shifted uncomfortably. "You were irritable then," he suggested, "like you are now."

Barton started. He leaned toward Smedley.

"You try to railroad me out of this job," he warned, "and I'll take up where I left off two years ago. Get this, Smedley, it's not the job making me snappish. It's you. And before you send in a report of *that* symptom you'd better check up with other people and see if they get the same reaction when you're around. Now get the hell out of here so I can give my job the proper attention."

Smedley's face was in a shadow, so the setting sun could not have caused its sudden color. He did not speak until he was over the threshold.

"I shouldn't make you snappish unless you're afraid there's something I'll find out. Thanks for the tip."

Pop Barton swore softly. That was a bad slip, admitting his irritability. Smedley would become more persistent than ever. But Barton knew it was not just Smedley alone that worried him lately. And it was not the strain of the job either. His hold on it was threa-

tened, not only by Smedley, but by his own sons.

As control man at a busy airport like Metropolitan, Barton was in a ticklish spot. He was watched constantly for any taint of favoritism toward planes of one line over those of another. He was watched especially when there was a time war on, a war like the one between Comet and Atlas.

And with his sons flying opposing planes he felt that trouble was bound to come—that his neutrality might be challenged. That must not happen.

He chided himself. His sons would not force him into a difficult situation. It was just his imagination goaded by Smedley's hounding that made him think the relationship between his sons had changed since the crash two weeks ago. After they handed in their manifests at the completion of flights the rivalry in the air was forgotten. There was nothing to worry about.

AT four thousand feet Buddy raced eastward beneath fleecy clouds. He scanned the air ahead, to either side and as far back as he could see at an angle from the cockpit. No sign of Tex's maroon and cream job. Tex must be somewhere behind him. He had been fifteen minutes behind at the take-off. Still Buddy could not be too certain. Tex had been hurtling across the skies lately, arriving at Metro first.

Buddy frowned. That could not happen any more. It must not happen. Atlas was offering a bonus to pilots who maintained their lead over Comet ships or extended it. Buddy needed every cent of bonus money he could get. Paulus still had not returned the check.

If only that woman who had been with Anderson could be located. He must find her. It was the only way he could block the demands Paulus made. His bank account was cleaned out. Watch, jewelry pawned. Salary, bonus. All went the same way. It was the only way unless—there could be no unless. What would the disgrace of Buddy's apparent irresponsibility do to his father? That woman had to be found.

And Tex must not arrive first . . .

AT eight thousand feet Tex bored the transport through the tops of fleecy clouds. If only they would break so he could see whether he was gaining on Buddy or had passed him. The past two weeks Comet's excellent weather service and his own knowledge of meteorology had enabled him to take advantage of the most favorable winds without any loss of speed and time experimenting with various altitudes.

But Buddy was tightening up, giving him a real battle now. Maybe the kid knew how Hollister was riding Tex. Maybe Buddy was taking advantage of it, venting some secret jealousy for all the years Tex and his father had been together before Buddy could fly.

It had to stop. Buddy might know Tex would not race him unless he had some good reason to. Tex had no intentions of being placed on the shelf for five years by Hollister. So long as he played with the wind and flew faster than any other pilot in the Comet outfit without endangering passengers he was safe from Hollister. But if he let Buddy nose him out . . .

He couldn't. Tex must always be in first when they took off within minutes of each other from Chicago . . .

POP BARTON could not still his uneasiness about the boys when they began reporting to him from fifty

miles away. Another report came in.

"Comet 606 to Metro. Over Montclair at six thousand feet. Arrive in three minutes. Okay to come in?"

Pop Barton's seamed, leathery features scowled. Tex knew better than that; he could not come in directly, not at this time of the late afternoon. Had Pop Barton been right? *Was* this time war changing Tex? Barton picked up his microphone and flicked a switch on the keyboard.

"Proceed to Berry's Creek beam station and await orders," he snapped. He didn't have to be so brusque, he chided himself.

He was glad Inspector Smedley was not present to hear.

Another loudspeaker crackled. "Atlas 411 to my old man at Metro. Clear the runways, I'll be in in two minutes. Altitude two thousand."

That gayety in Buddy's voice sounded a bit forced to Barton. Maybe he was just imagining it. Maybe Buddy knew he was closely pressed by Tex this trip, and did not want to show that he was disappointed at not getting the bonus offered by Atlas for maintaining his lead. The kid had seemed almost greedy lately the way he went after the bonuses.

Pop Barton adjusted his switches and spoke into the microphone.

"Proceed to Berry's beam and report when you reach it," he ordered.

Two loudspeakers blared at once. "Consolidated Airways 45, ready at take-off to Pittsburgh, will fly at seven thousand. Okay?"

"Union Wingline 105 over Berry's beam."

Barton moved about the tiny room, calmly but rapidly, straining the voices apart, making notations in his record book, keeping up to the minute his chart of plane positions, glancing at wind direction and velocity gauges, flicking switches.

"Consolidated 45," he said, "seven thousand okay, take off short runway, circle field once to your left, wind six northwest, avoid Union Condor at twelve thousand over Berry's beam and Atlas transport just reported at two thousand approaching beam.

"Union 105, come in. Circle once anti-clockwise, wind six northwest, field barometer 30:06, Consolidated transport taking off, watch out for it. Gear down, Union 105."

"Gear down."

"Comet 606 at Berry's beam," reported Tex.

That was odd, frowned Barton. Buddy was a minute ahead of his brother and had not reported yet, and he was usually prompt. According to his previous report he should be over the beam station by now.

POP BARTON started to face toward the west over the beam station but the high-pitched drone of a new plane to the north attracted his attention. It was a small brown biplane. Barton adjusted his switches and picked up the microphone, keeping his eyes on the plane.

"Waggle your wings," he ordered, "if you have a radio."

No response. The private pilot was coming too close over the field with the transports landing and taking-off. Barton grabbed up his signal light and flashed the red beam. The biplane swerved away from the field and began a broad circle.

Barton squinted toward the sky over the beam station just as the Atlas loudspeaker hissed.

"Atlas 411 over Berry's beam. Okay to come in?"

Pop Barton stared uneasily. He saw

two transports circling out there. Buddy's silver Douglas and Tex's maroon and cream job. Was his neutrality in danger? Tex had reported first, yet he was supposed to be a full minute behind Buddy. Who had actually been first, Tex or Buddy? Maybe one of them had mis-estimated his time of arrival. It could not be anything else. Still there was Tex's unusual inquiry if he could come right in and the forced gayety of Buddy's voice. Pop Barton snorted; nothing like that with those boys. But he would play no favorites. He wanted to be fair. He had to be fair on this job.

He fingered the switches on the keyboard uncertainly. Atlas was scheduled to arrive first. From fifty miles away Buddy had always been ahead. Barton snapped a switch.

"Come in Atlas 411," he ordered, "wind six northwest, field barometer . . ."

The telephone rang as Buddy's ship glided into the runway. Tex's boss, Gordon Hollister, berated Pop Barton.

"What's the idea, Barton? Tex's ship was over the beam first."

The telephone shook slightly in Barton's hand. "You're sure of that?" he demanded. "Did you use binoculars to make certain it was his ship?"

"Well," hedged Hollister, "I heard Tex report and looked out and saw a single ship and I—"

"Did you use binoculars?" cut in Pop Barton.

"No, but I thought—"

Barton shook the phone.

"Then don't tell me I'm running my job wrong until you have definite proof."

"I'll remember that the next time," promised Hollister.

"There won't be any next time," growled Barton and hung up.

THIS could not go on. Barton slammed the telephone back on the table. If Tex and Buddy continued this way they would create a situation forcing Pop Barton out of his job. Hollister would complain about favoritism in the control tower the first chance he got. It would start other airline executives watching, imagining their planes were being slighted. It had to stop. If Barton did not lose his job that way, the strain coupled with the knowledge that he was being watched unduly might get him, might make Smedley think he saw the symptoms he was seeking.

Ten minutes later Barton was relieved in the control tower. Firm of lip and eye he marched toward the parking lot where he and his sons usually met. As he approached, his expression relaxed and he moved at a more leisurely pace. After all, why be harsh? The three of them had always been so close, moved together as a unit, like the Marine High Hatters squadron which dove and looped with wing-tip linked to wing-tip by rope. They had always been like that. Nothing could tear them apart . . .

GORDON HOLLISTER glanced down at his reflection on the glass-topped desk and straightened his tie slightly.

"You'll have to cut the time still more, Barton," he said to Tex. "You'll have to be a little more consistent arriving ahead of the Atlas plane, ahead of your brother, or else . . . I'm really being very considerate. I know you should have been first today, but your father in the control tower seems to favor your brother."

"Pop's not like that," Tex said. His chest felt tight and hard.

"No?" Hollister raised his eye-

brows. "He as much as admitted your report came in first, but he questioned its veracity, asked me if I used binoculars to make certain it was your ship. I'm not making this up. You might ask him yourself if he said that."

"I will," Tex promised grimly, "and if he says he didn't—" His frosty blue eyes measured Hollister.

"YOU'RE five dollars short," growled Joe Paulus, ignoring Buddy's request for the bill he had signed.

"I—I know," stammered Buddy. "When I got my pay today I didn't get any bonus for this flight."

"You landed first didn't you?" demanded Paulus savagely. "C'mon, quit holding out on me."

"It's the truth," protested Buddy. "I didn't maintain my lead so I wasn't given—"

"All right," growled Paulus. "I'll let it go this time. But you make it up next week. You better see that you get all the bonuses you can."

TEX arrived at the car before Buddy. His big bony features pushed together in a scowl as he faced his father. He did not know just how to say what was in his mind. His father spoke first.

"Son," said Pop Barton. "You've been streaking it across the sky lately. Do you think that's wise? Do you think the plane can stand—"

"I've had the wind with me," Tex muttered. "There's no danger."

"All right, son," said Pop Barton softly. "Maybe you know about that better than I would. You can cut your schedule some, but why ride Buddy the way you've been doing? You'll only make him look bad with his own bosses."

"So that's it," Tex flared, his powerful frame snapping erect. "If I don't give him the breaks, you will, like you did today. Hollister said you—"

"I don't need anyone to give me breaks," snapped Buddy, who had come up quietly behind them.

"No," retorted Tex. "You make them yourself. Like at Chicago the other day. Radioing in you had a miss in one of your motors so that I had to loaf around for ten minutes above the beam while you landed first. And the mechanics couldn't find anything wrong in—"

Buddy's jaw jutted out. "You heard them say the gas mightn't have been strained just right. That grit had maybe clogged one of the carburetor jets—"

"Might—maybe," derided Tex.

"Cut it out, you two," growled Pop Barton, but they paid no attention.

"You didn't want to believe them," charged Buddy. "No, because it gave you an excuse today to try to hoodwink Pop into letting you land first. I heard about Hollister trying to back up your play. The reports of positions given throughout the flights prove I was there first, yet you tried—"

"As long as the talk's going this way," cut in Pop Barton. "I'd like to speak about that too. I wasn't going to. I thought maybe one of you might have misjudged his time of arrival, but now—"

"Then you do believe as Hollister says you do," declared Tex.

"I didn't say you lied," retorted Pop Barton.

"I take it," demanded Buddy, "that you're including me, too."

"I'm waiting for explanations," stated Pop Barton. "Suppose you speak your piece, Tex. You were higher than

Buddy. Did you see him below you when you came to the beam station?"

"No," replied Tex.

Buddy laughed derisively. Tex glared at him, but Pop Barton stepped between them.

"You're sure you didn't see him?" repeated Barton.

Tex stared levelly at his father.

"No," he said slowly. "I'm sorry, Pop. Guess I jumped to conclusions listening to Hollister. I had trouble cranking down my landing gear—that took most of my attention, so when Hollister said—"

"That alibi creaks," Buddy ridiculed. "I suppose your mechanics jacked up the ship and found that the gear—"

"No," confessed Tex defiantly. "It worked smoothly then."

"There you are, you two," laughed Pop Barton. "You're both in the same boat in the eyes of the other. Come on, both of you, own up that this rivalry is crazy and can only lead to trouble, a crack-up maybe."

"Trouble!" Buddy ejaculated. "Why include me? I was doing all right on my flight until he tried to beat me in. Is that why you asked him to lay off me? You think I'm not as good as he is. Hell, I can fly rings around him any day. You see if he beats me in any more."

"The modern pilot," mocked Tex. "If your radio fails in a fog you're lost without your beam signals. Stick to your schedule, sonny, and stay out of my way the next trip in. My wind will blow you off your course."

"Yeah?" retorted Buddy. "We'll see. Remember what happened today, Pop. I'll be here first."

"Forget it," snapped Pop Barton. I'm still waiting to hear why you two are riding each other."

Buddy lowered his gaze. They would not believe him now if he told about the check and Paulus. They would think the check was really his.

Tex pressed his lips together. To reveal Hollister's threat to ground him for five years would not sound plausible now, not after that flimsy-sounding alibi for failing to see Buddy's plane. It would just seem like another weak way of trying to justify his actions.

Pop Barton stared at them. Explaining that his job was in danger would be useless, he felt. Would only start them arguing again.

The whole situation seemed beyond control. . . .

IV

THAT was Wednesday. Everything pointed to Friday as the day for a real rift in the Barton family, for on Friday Tex and Buddy flew in again from Chicago. Each made three flights a week, twice from Chicago, once westward from Metropolitan airport. Friday would be the final flight of the week for each of them. Usually on Thursday they returned to Chicago as passengers, but Tex left Wednesday night immediately after their quarrel.

Buddy planned to board an Atlas plane leaving at nine-thirty Thursday morning. Glancing morosely at a morning paper he lounged in the passenger's waiting room. A loudspeaker blared.

"Consolidated Airways transport to Chicago by way of Buffalo, Cleveland and Detroit ready to take off in five minutes. Passengers will please board it immediately. Five minutes. Consolidated Airways transport to . . ."

Buddy glanced up disinterestedly as passengers moved toward the double doors opening to the canopy.

"Now remember," a young girl advised her white-faced companion, "just be sure to swallow when you feel your ears . . ."

Two dapperly dressed men carrying salesmen's sample cases approached.

". . . so I said to the stewardess," the man speaking leaned closer and lowered his voice. Both laughed.

A woman, inclined to be somewhat fleshy, *clickety-clacked* past them. Buddy gasped, tossed the newspaper away, and jumped to his feet.

"Hey," he ejaculated. "Miss—lady —wait a minute!"

She turned. It was, beyond doubt, the woman who had been with Greg Anderson. Her eyes widened slightly. She pivoted toward the door and hurried on. Buddy ran after her and caught her arm. His smooth face flushed with excitement.

"I've been searching everywhere for you," he gasped. "I need your—"

She pulled slightly away from him and glanced about anxiously. "There must be some mistake," she murmured. "I don't know you."

"Oh, but you've got to," Buddy pleaded. "Don't you remember? I signed the check for you at Joe Paulus' place."

"I don't—" she began.

"You were with Greg Ander—"

"This is really all beyond me," she interrupted quickly. "I don't know what you're talking about. Now, if you don't mind releasing my arm . . . I have to board that plane."

"You've got to help me," Buddy persisted. "Paulus is—"

She jerked her arm free. "I never knew anyone by the name of Anderson—or Paulus," she declared angrily. "And I have never seen you before in my life. Is that quite clear?"

Buddy stared at her as she turned toward the doors. He swore and caught up with her. "Lady," he implored her. "You don't realize what you're doing by refusing to—"

"Your name, please," the plane stewardess asked the woman.

Buddy's eyes narrowed slightly. He was not ready to give up yet. This woman had to help him. He listened closely for her reply to the stewardess. The woman frowned at him. She turned to the stewardess.

"This young man is annoying me. Can you have some one make him stop?"

"That's a lie," retorted Buddy. "She—"

Two Consolidated attendants grabbed for him. Buddy wrenched free and drove his fist. It struck glancingly on one man's jaw. The man's hat tilted crazily. He scowled and closed in. Buddy swung to drive him back. The other man caught his arm and twisted it behind Buddy's back. They dragged him away. The woman mounted the steps into the plane.

Buddy shouted at the stewardess following her. "What's her name? Where's she going?"

The stewardess didn't answer.

The door closed. The transport's motors snorted, then roared steadily. The transport taxied away. The slipstream blasted against Buddy's face; it brought tears to his bewildered, unblinking eyes. The woman had always been his hope, the only reason he went on paying Paulus.

One of the men holding Buddy laughed. "Better give up, brother, it isn't any use."

Buddy's body sagged despondently when they released him. "Guess you're right," he muttered.

THE voice of Joe Paulus rasped in the telephone receiver. "Don't hand me that line. I want a grand more, see?"

Buddy's fist pounded dully on the wall of the telephone booth. "I'm through, Paulus," he mumbled. "I've pawned and borrowed until— I'm through."

"I said I want a grand more," Paulus barked. "I'll be at the airport when you come in tomorrow night. You have the grand and I'll give you the check."

"I've heard that too many times before, Paulus. I'm through."

"I'll see you at the airport," repeated Paulus. "Don't forget, a grand or else—" He hung up. . . .

RAIN rattled like pebbles against the cockpit windows. Clouds, like damp dirty cotton, pressed in from all sides.

Buddy finished figuring on his charts and stared grimly ahead. This was his last flight. When Paulus learned that Buddy had been unable to raise the thousand dollars— If only that woman had not . . . Buddy grimaced. Well, after this flight Tex would not have to worry any more about beating Buddy in. There would be some other pilot in Buddy's place.

Buddy picked up the microphone. "Atlas 411 calling Metro. Atlas 411 calling Metro. Go ahead."

His father's voice came back. "Metro to Atlas 411. Go ahead."

"Flying at four thousand, on beam," reported Buddy. "Estimate position to be above Hackettstown. Visibility zero. What are conditions at the field? Go ahead."

"Metro to Atlas 411. Ceiling six hundred. Visibility little less than half mile. Fog closing in. No wind. Stay on beam and maintain altitude. Union transport flying westward at five thousand. . . ."

THE crinkles by Tex's eyes deepened as he squinted at the gray opaqueness ahead. Buddy was somewhere in that mess. But ahead or behind? It was important to Tex to know. Hollister had as much as said this was Tex's last chance. But there was a new problem for Tex. The commerce Bureau in the person of Inspector Smedley had warned him about pushing equipment too hard.

Tex scowled. Heed the Commerce Bureau and lose out with Hollister. Act on Hollister's ultimatum and perhaps be fined or have his license suspended by the Commerce Bureau. If he only knew where Buddy was . . .

He turned to his co-pilot. "Where do you figure we are?"

"Here're my calculations," replied the co-pilot. "Why the hell doesn't Hollister install direction—"

"That's not important now," growled Tex. "We haven't got them." He stared at his own figures and the co-pilot's. "I'll balance them together, take a point midway between our estimates." He grasped the microphone.

"Comet 606 calling Metro. Comet 606 calling Metro. Okay."

"Metro to 606. Go ahead."

"Visibility zero at eight thousand. Estimate position about over Hackettstown. Flying on beam. How are things at the field? . . ."

Pop Barton snapped a switch, but his fingers still grasped it, the knuckles turning white. Tex and Buddy. Close together again. And each had announced that he would be the first to come in today. Hollister would be watchful. And so would McHenry of Atlas who had heard about Hollister's

complaint of favoritism in the control tower.

Outside the twilight and fog seemed to have substance, looked like something Barton could reach out and grasp a handful of. The heavy drizzle made the red and green runway lights waver. Puddles on the field shivered. Pop Barton shivered, too. His eyes felt burning, gritty. They were red from sleeplessness. It wasn't the job. He knew the job. He could do that all right. No, it was worry about Tex and Buddy that made his nerves tear and yield.

Inspector Smedley entered. He did not look directly at Pope Barton. "I've ordered a relief man sent up," he mumbled.

Barton swore. "I told you before it's not the job making me like this. I'll be over it after today." He would. He'd get to the bottom of things with Tex and Buddy. They had to realize this war between themselves must stop. It was jeopardizing his job, putting him on the spot.

"If it's not the job, what is it?" demanded Smedley.

"It's—" Barton stopped. He couldn't tell Smedley. He could not make trouble for his sons, even though they were making it for him. "I can't tell you now. But it's not the job."

"Sorry," shrugged Smedley. "You understand I'm just doing my job."

THE time was five minutes to five. Tex glanced over the instrument panel. If he only knew where Buddy was. If he only knew exactly where he was himself. The barnstorming and airmail days had given him good experience in dead-reckoning, but that discrepancy between his figures and those of his co-pilot threw him off. Was he ahead or behind? What difference did it make? Either way he was likely to be washed up. Hollister or the Commerce Bureau.

"Does that starboard motor sound odd to you?" asked the co-pilot suddenly. Tex cocked his head to listen.

There was no explosion. One moment there had been a steady roar. The next—screaming, pounding of rending metal from that starboard motor. Pieces like shrapnel driving into the cockpit. The co-pilot swaying forward. A racking throb through the whole ship starting at the right wing. The transport skidding flatly, the left wing going ahead of the right. The ship working into a spin.

The automatic pilot was damaged, not working. Tex snapped it off. He cut the ignition for the starboard motor. The racking shudder stopped. The spin was to the right. Tex cut the left motor and shoved the left rudder. The transport dived. Tex could not pull it up. The co-pilot's body jammed against the wheel.

Glancing anxiously at the altimeter Tex tugged the co-pilot back, leveled the ship and fed gas again to the port motor. He pressed a button to summon the stewardess. Her face was milky, her lower lip trembled.

"Passengers all right?" Tex inquired.

"Yes, is everything under control now?"

"Seems to be," Tex said. He noted the beam signals were no longer coming through. There was no sound from his earphones which were connected to a different radio receiver. He could scarcely see the wing-tips the fog was so dense. "Everything seems under control," he told the stewardess, not looking at her as he spoke. "Tell the passengers that, and smile when you say it, sister."

She pressed her lower lip up firmly and nodded.

Tex picked up the microphone. Unless he found a hole in the fog, going down would be suicide. It could only be his last resort.

"Comet 606 calling Metro," he said into the microphone. "Comet 606 calling Metro." He listened. Just dead silence in the earphones.

V

"LOOK at yourself," said Inspector Smedley to Pop Barton. "You're red-eyed, haggard, you're in no condition to—"

"I'll handle this job against any two men you choose," challenged Pop Barton. "I tell you I'm not like this because the job is a strain. Recall that order for my relief."

Smedley shook his head. His little eyes regarded Barton smugly.

"You're through," he said. "Any inspector, not just myself, could see that the job's too much for you."

Barton sighed wearily. It was no use arguing further, Smedley was too determined. Pop Barton stared despondently about the control tower. All these, the switchboard, the charts, gauges, loudspeakers, had become a part of him. Now they were being torn out.

The relief man would be here any moment now. Barton knew that once he was taken off this job he could never get it back. Who would believe his excuses after he was removed? No, he was through.

A loudspeaker crackled. "Allied Airways 47 to Boston. Ready at take-off. Will fly at four thousand. Okay?"

Barton nodded wearily, conscious of Smedley's stare. "Four thousand okay," he mumbled. "No wind. Use the northeast leg of the beam. Union transport just reported over Westchester at three thousand. Stay above that level. Okay, take off."

Barton made the notation in his record book. He placed charts handy for relief man. The fog was closing down rapidly. Soon it would be lower than the five hundred-foot level. After that no more planes could land here. They would have to be directed to other airports. It was a Department of Commerce ruling. No more planes. No more Pop Barton in the control tower. He pulled nearer the reports of conditions at all nearby fields. The relief dispatcher would need those when planes which usually landed at Metro had to be directed elsewhere.

A telephone rang. "This is Taylor, dispatcher at Newark Airport," informed the voice. "Fog here is below the five hundred level. I'm sending planes over to Floyd Bennett Field. Okay if I shunt some up your way? Can you handle them?"

Barton did not have to consult the table of scheduled arrivals. "Yeah," he replied. "Send them over. I—he—the relief—Metro can sandwich them in," he stammered.

"Thanks," said Taylor.

"Consolidated 75 over Camden at eight thousand on beam. Arrive thirty-six minutes. What are weather conditions at the field?"

"Ace Skyways, Flight 16, ready for take-off to St. Louis. Will fly at seven thousand. Okay?

Voices crackled in through the loudspeakers, filling the control room with a hum of sound; each voice was a person—a pilot and the problem of each was different yet all-important.

"Atlas 411 to Metro. Estimate arrival within next eight minutes. That is all."

The many-throated clamor began to

blur and fuse in Pop Barton's brain. Loudspeakers yipped at him from all over the room. He could feel Smedley's eyes upon him—intense, concentrated, dubious. The voices tugged at him, pulling him this way and that.

Barton moved about quickly for the next few minutes, but the snap was gone from his movements. Hadley Field near New Brunswick, the Camden airport, and Curtiss Field on Long Island reported they were shunting all arrivals to other airports.

"Atlas 411 to Metro. Just hit dead spot over Berry's Creek beam station. Altitude twelve hundred. Okay?"

Pop Barton froze. A cold chill lanced up his spine. Buddy was here, but where was Tex? In the confusion of sound from many loudspeakers at once Pop Barton wondered if perhaps ha had missed hearing Tex's report.

He started to turn to ask Smedley if he had heard 606 report. That would be like admitting he wasn't fit for the job. But he had to know.

"Did you hear Tex in Comet 606 report?" Barton demanded.

"No," replied Smedley, and stood up as the door opened. "Here's the relief, Barton. Come along."

"Wait a minute," growled Barton. He picked up a telephone. "Give me the Comet control room. Hello, when did you have your last report from 606?"

Before the Comet operator could reply a faint sound, scarcely perceptible, came from the Comet loudspeaker. Barton hung up.

"Comet 606 calling Metro. Comet 606 calling Metro."

"Come on," ordered Smedley. "You're no longer on duty. The relief can handle the—"

"Go ahead, 606," barked Pop Barton.

"Comet 606 calling Metro. Comet 606 calling Metro. Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Barton barked, his sweaty hand clenching the microphone tightly as though that would force his voice out to Tex.

Smedley grasped Barton's arm.

"Let the relief handle this, Barton. You can stay here and listen while he—"

"Listen, hell!" bellowed Barton. "My boy's in trouble. I'll bring him in."

"I'm ordering you to step aside," commanded Smedley. "With all the extra ships coming from Newark a fit man is needed on the job. Get away from that microphone." He tugged at Barton's arm.

Pop Barton swore. "Here's how fit I am," he barked. His fist slammed Smedley's chest. The inspector sprawled on his back. Barton whirled to face the relief man. "You got any ideas about relieving me?" he demanded. "Get out." He shoved the man out the doorway.

SMEDLEY called to the man before the door closed. "My wife's arriving on Atlas 411. Tell her I've—been delayed."

Barton locked the door and turned.

"I'm only letting you stay, Smedley, so I know where you are and can't be up to anything. You can blacklist me for life, fine me, send me to Atlanta, but I'm staying here till I can't help Tex any more. Now, are you going to sit there quiet or do I have to tie you up?"

Smedley, rubbing his chest, pulled himself into a chair. Buddy's voice blared impatiently.

"Atlas 411. Been waiting ten minutes now over beam. Can I come in?"

"Yeah, you cocksure young—" Pop

Barton checked himself. He'd been afraid this time war would lead to trouble. But why blame Tex's trouble on Buddy? Maybe Tex was at fault trying to jump the kid's schedule, and Buddy had only speeded up to protect himself. "Come in, Atlas 411, use the beam and northeast runway, no wind, field barometer 29:36. Gear down."

"Gear down," repeated Buddy.

Buddy's frown deepened. Something was bothering his father. He could not worry about that or Paulus now. Making a "blind" landing on the beam until he was close to the runway required full attention to his instruments. . . .

JOE PAULUS hunched up his coat and advanced toward Buddy.

"Okay, kid," he muttered. "Step over here and give it to me."

Buddy's heart bounced in his chest. His last desperate chance. "You got the bill with you?"

"What do you think?" smirked Paulus. "I'll tell you after I get the dough." His hand slid toward his lapel. "Don't get any ideas, sucker," he warned.

Buddy shrugged. That was that. "I haven't got the money. I said I was through. Now do your damnedest."

Paulus smiled. "Maybe there's a break for you. I heard your old man is up in—"

"You can't go to him. I won't let you," declared Buddy.

"We'll sound him out." Paulus darted his glance about. He shifted the gun to his pocket. "Lead the way, kid."

"COMET 606 calling Metro. Comet 606 calling Metro."

"Go ahead 606," Pop Barton called. No response.

"United 207 from Newark to Metro Airport. Altitude four thousand. What are your instructions?"

Another loudspeaker blared across the room. "Consolidated 81 from Washington at two thousand on beam. Arrive in three minutes. What are conditions at the field?"

Barton snapped back instructions, cocked his ear to the next voice. "Southern States Limited, Flight 27, ready at take-off. Will fly at five thousand. Okay?"

Barton flicked the switch again. "Southern States 27, take off on short runway to west," he said quickly. "No wind. Circle once to north and east. Stay away from beam station, transport approaching at twelve hundred. Okay."

"United 207 from Newark airport. Are you tuned to our beam?"

"Right."

"Ease down to two thousand, no lower. Report when you reach that level." For an unbelievable moment, the loudspeakers were still, and the silence was almost worse than the clamor.

Smedley motioned Pop Barton to the Comet loudspeaker.

"Comet 606 calling Metro. Trouble with starboard motor. Looks like connecting rod snapped. Drove out through wall of motor. Pieces of flying metal pierced into cockpit. Wrecked some instruments, receiving radios, battery auxiliary also. Sending seems okay. Hope so anyway, so you can clear me in if I find the field. Have doubts about finding it, flying by dead reckoning and not so sure of that now. Flying with port motor. Co-pilot unconscious, struck by metal, looks bad. Passengers scared but okay. Visibility zero. Not sure where I am. Terrain looks mountainous, unfamiliar. Hold-

ing to course, though, I hope. I'll try auxiliary receiver again. Did you hear me? Go ahead."

"Metro to 606. I heard you, Tex. Did you hear me?"

No response. Smedley glanced at Pop Barton. "I've been afraid of this. I sent him a warning this morning about pushing equipment. If he gets down alive he'll lose his license."

Barton shook his head. "Can't forget your job can you?" he charged. "You've got him and me where you want us. I suppose you won't be satisfied until you get something on Buddy."

"The kid's in the clear," said Smedley.

Just then someone tried the door.

"Open up, Pop. It's me, Buddy."

"Not now," called Barton, "I'm too busy."

"Open up," demanded a strange voice, "if you want to save your kid from a hell of a jam."

Smedley tilted his nose like a hound smelling blood. Pop Barton frowned at him. He gazed uncertainly at the door.

"Can't it wait until later?" he asked.

"It's the last chance," warned the other voice. "Open up."

Barton slowly unlocked the door. "What's the trouble, Buddy?"

He stepped back as Paulus pushed Buddy into the room. Paulus jerked his head toward Smedley.

"Who's that guy?"

Buddy turned toward Smedley. Why prolong this blackmailing? Why let his father be dragged in too? "Smedley," he began, "it's about the Anderson crash. This man's accusing me of being drunk—"

Paulus prodded him in the back with the gun.

"I'll do the talking," he snarled. "Stand back," he warned Pop Barton who edged forward. "Who's this other guy?"

Smedley squinted at Buddy. "I'm an inspector," he informed Paulus. "Department of Commerce, Air Bureau. Do you know something about—"

Paulus frowned and his eyes went flat and secret-looking. The last thing he wanted was for the kid to spill in front of Smedley. If he did that, the gravy would dry up for him—the game would be over.

"Yeah? Well scram, can't you? I want to talk to these birds alone."

Smedley looked at Paulus, then at Buddy. There was something here. . . . He wasn't sure just what, but he wasn't going to miss anything.

"I'm staying," he announced flatly. "Anything you have to say I think I ought to hear. What's going on, anyway?"

Paulus' smile was greasy. Smedley started forward to take him by the shoulder—to shake the truth out of him.

He recoiled as Paulus jumped toward him. But he was too late. The flat of the gun cracked him above the ear. Smedley's shoulders struck the wall and slipped down. His knees folded and he slid out on his face.

PAULUS stared down at him. "That puts cotton in his ears so we can talk. He went out awful easy though." He raised the gun for another blow. A loudspeaker blared. Paulus started and crouched back, ready with the gun. It was just a routine report from a plane fifty miles away. Barton did not have to acknowledge it.

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

Buddy spoke up. "He claims I was drunk the night before the Anderson crash."

Paulus laughed. "You were. Take a look at this," he said to Barton. He held out the check. "I said look, not take it. Forty bucks worth of hard stuff. Notice the date on it? The night before the crash. I let him go without paying that night because he was so soused."

"He's lying," flared Buddy. "He's been blackmailing me. I know what he says sounds true because I—I've paid him, but—"

"I believe in you kid," Pop Barton muttered. "I saw you that night. You were cold sober."

"That don't make any difference," sneered Paulus. "Who'd believe the testimony of his old man?"

"There will be other people who can testify—" began Barton.

Paulus laughed. "That bluff won't work. If there were others, why didn't the kid get them, why'd he pay me?"

Buddy lowered his head dejectedly.

"There is someone, Pop. The check is really Greg Anderson's. There was a woman with him. I didn't say what I knew about Anderson being unfit to fly because my name was on that check and I knew I had to find the woman to clear myself. I paid Paulus because nobody'd believe me until I could find her."

"Who's the woman?" asked Barton.

"I don't know. I saw her yesterday. She won't talk. I—I don't know where she is now. That's why I decided it was useless to go on paying." Buddy's head raised defiantly. "And don't you let him shake *you* down, Pop."

"You going to stand by and see your kid disgraced and ruined for life?" demanded Paulus. "You haven't got an out. It's pay up or I'll turn the check over to this inspector.

Pop Barton stared at the floor. He rubbed a moist palm against his thigh. "If the inspector knew," he said slowly, "you couldn't collect."

"Yeah," growled Paulus, "but what happens to your kid if—"

"That's what I mean," interrupted Barton quickly, quietly. "Hold off a minute, the inspector's coming to and—"

"Don't pay him, Pop," pleaded Buddy.

Barton glanced down at Smedley. "Quiet," he warned.

"I'll fix him," said Paulus. He leaned toward Smedley.

Barton's heavy foot kicked out. It struck Paulus's wrist. Paulus juggled the gun, trying to tighten his grip, to level it. Barton grabbed it with his left hand and held it aside. His big right fist ramrodded into Paulus' stomach.

"Arrgh," Paulus gagged. He swore. His head butted Barton on the jaw. He tried to knee Barton in the groin. Barton slammed him in the mouth. Teeth drove into Paulus' upper lip. Paulus tried to pull away. Fear glazed his dark eyes. Barton's fist battered at the face before him. It opened a cut over the eye. Flattened the nose.

"Blackmail my kid, will you?" Pop Barton bellowed. "You—"

Buddy tried to hold his father's arm from behind. It was like using silk thread to hold a maddened bull elephant. "Pop, Pop—don't murder the guy. Help me, Smedley."

They dragged Barton off. Paulus wilted to the floor. Barton, breathing heavily, glared down at him.

"Guess you did right, kid, by stopping me. There's some wire in that compartment. Tie him up."

A LOUDSPEAKER crackled. "Midwest and Eastern Airways Flight 17 from Columbus. Arrive about thirty minutes. How are things at the field?"

Barton slipped the gun in his pocket. "Fog closing in. Visibility half-mile. Ceiling about five hundred. If it gets any lower I'll send you to another field."

Barton turned to face Smedley.

"You came to mighty quick."

Smedley's face glowed. He glanced down at the check in his hand. "For a family with a good record," he said, "you Bartons sure did a swell job of messing it up all of a sudden."

Barton's big hands clenched. "So you weren't knocked out by that blow," he charged softly. "I might have known you'd pull a trick like that. But it doesn't make any difference. You've got nothing on the kid. You heard me say he was sober that night."

Smedley shook his head. "How do I know he wasn't drunk that night? That he wasn't still muddled the morning of the crash and that you're covering the wrong turn he made in the take-off? The kid's story is flimsy, Barton, too flimsy. This check explains a lot about that crash."

"What about his co-pilot's testimony after the crash. What about Buddy's examination by the medical board?"

"In the face of this bill," said Smedley, "those won't do much good. No use, Barton. Come with me, Buddy."

Barton stepped before the door and locked it behind his back. "I said you weren't leaving. I believe the kid. We'll find some way out of this. Tex needs me now and you're not going out of this room until—"

"Tex!" gasped Buddy. "What do you mean?"

Barton motioned for silence.

"United 207 from Newark. Down to two thousand as you directed. Awaiting instructions."

The chorus had begun again. Another loudspeaker opened up. "Union 142 from Boston. Altitude twenty-five hundred approaching beam station. Okay to come in?"

And then, half buried in the babble, yet to Pop and Buddy sharply distinct, Tex's voice came through the horn. "Comet 606 calling Metro. Try me again."

Barton stepped to the keyboard. "I can hear you, Tex. Go ahead."

"Comet 606 calling Metro."

"What's wrong?" demanded Buddy.

"You tell him, Smedley," directed Pop Barton. "United 207, circle beam station. Go down to twelve hundred, set speed to one hundred. Barometer 29:36. Go through same beam maneuvers as you use at Newark. Okay, come in."

"Comet 606 calling Metro. Altitude five hundred. Can you hear me?"

"He'll never find the field in this fog," said Smedley. "Too bad innocent passengers have to suffer because he—"

"Tex wouldn't push a ship too hard for any reason with passengers aboard," Buddy defended. He grabbed a telephone and called the Comet control room. "What time did 606 leave Chicago? You're sure of that? Okay. What time was the last report of a definite position and what was it?"

Buddy wrote figures down on a scratch pad.

Floyd Bennett Field reported that ceiling there had dropped below the limit set by the Air Bureau.

"Pop," called Buddy. "Tex took off twenty minutes after me. He was making a slow flight this trip. The reports he made prove it in spite of what

Smedley says. And flying with one motor has slowed him still more. I figure he must be somewhere between here and Morristown. He's a damn good dead-reckoner. If he's on his course I might be able to find him and guide him down."

"You can't do it," snapped Smedley. "He'll find an emergency field. It's his only chance."

"Chance!" flared Buddy. He hasn't a chance to find a landing spot in this soup. Not without a beam. And he isn't receiving so he can't get the beam."

"Smedley's right for once," muttered Pop Barton. "No use, kid. What chance would *you* have to find him?"

"Comet 606 to Metro. Looks bad, Pop, if you can hear me. Flares are all used up. Can't see a thing when I go down. Don't dare try now. Figure I'm too near Orange Mountains."

"What did I tell you?" said Buddy.

"Up to a thousand now. Only thing I can do is try to stay on course and hope I'll find a hole in the fog so I can get my bearings before gas gives out. Kind of late, now, Pop, but I'm sorry we had that row the other day."

Reports from other planes kept coming in. Pop Barton noted them. He stared a long time at Buddy.

"We're all in this over our heads, kid. Guess going a little deeper won't make much difference. There's one chance in a million for you to find him. But go to it. I'll keep you informed of everything I—"

"I forbid it," objected Smedley. It's an unnecessary risk."

"There's more risk if Buddy doesn't go out," Barton said calmly. "You heard all those plane reports. I can't send them to other fields now. Suppose Tex comes blundering through the fog with all those planes trying to get down here. Man, we're apt to have a disaster on our hands. I'm trying to prevent that."

Buddy dashed out. Barton locked the door again. "I'm going to be busy getting those other planes down. You glue your ear to the Comet speaker and let me know everything you hear."

Smedley pointed to the field. "Ceiling's too low. They can't come down here."

Barton shrugged. "All the other airports are worse off. Some of those planes are running low on gas. I can't send them on cross-country jaunts to clearer airports."

Barton stepped to the keyboard and began giving orders to planes. The room was a bedlam of blaring loudspeakers. Barton spoke calmly, almost softly, into his microphone. He moved continually about the tiny room as though the floor were too hot for him to stand in one position.

"Okay, Buddy, take off. Stay below a thousand until you're well away from the field. Good luck, boy. . . .

"Union 67 from Buffalo. Kind of jammed up here with planes. Go up to three thousand, and circle over beam station. Be sure of that altitude, three thousand, for there'll be a plane below you at two and one above you at four. Got it?"

"Got it. Three thousand okay. Going up now."

VI

TEX, his face sweat-streaked, his eyes bloodshot, opened a window and peered out. Unconsciously he brushed his eyes as though to clear away the gray film that blotted everything below.

Wearily he swerved his gaze back to the panel, the artificial horizon and the climb indicator, the compass. Out to

the right the jagged wound in the starboard motor was plainly visible.

The compass wavered. The uneven pull from the port motor was turning the ship. Tex's left leg trembled from the strain of fighting it. He swore and pushed on the left rudder pedal until the compass returned to its former position. Someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Tex inquired.

"Want some coffee?" asked the stewardess.

Tex unlocked the door. The stewardess stepped in and closed it. She did not look at the coat-covered body of the co-pilot.

"Passengers taking it all right?" asked Tex.

She nodded. "That spin when the motor went gave them a nasty moment but they figure everything is all right now. How're we doing?"

"You're doing okay," said Tex.

"I didn't mean it that way," she said. "What are our chances?"

"I figure we ought to be getting close to the field. I'll be able to see the lights when we get there," he lied.

"I can take it," she told him softly. "And I'd rather know. I won't let on to the passengers."

Tex nodded grimly.

"Well, a wing tank must have been punctured. We've got enough gas for about fifteen minutes. When ten of those are gone I'm going down regardless. I've been calling the field, letting them know my altitude and where I think I might be. I did it more to keep up my own nerve. It helps when you think you have someone to talk to. Don't forget to see that all belts are fastened. Thanks for the coffee."

Alone again, he picked up the microphone. He set it down. What was the use?

"OKAY, come in now," Pop Barton said to a pilot somewhere above when he saw a transport taxi off the runway.

"This is Buddy, Pop. Hasn't Tex reported?"

Pop Barton glanced hopefully at Smedley, who shook his head. "We'll let you know, son, as soon as we hear."

Barton could not let himself think about Tex, nor his own trouble, nor Buddy's. He had to keep a mental picture of what was going on in the fog above the airport. There were twelve transports up there, all spaced five hundred feet apart by Barton from one thousand feet up to sixty-five hundred. The air vibrated with the heavy drone of motors.

"Ace Skyways 93," reported a pilot. His plane was up forty-five hundred feet. "My gas is running low. Enough for twelve more minutes."

Smedley glanced anxiously at Barton. There were seven other ships in the fog below that plane. If it was forced to come down . . .

"What can you do?" Smedley said in a husky half whisper. "You can't get the others down to clear him inside of twelve minutes."

Barton picked up his microphone. "Skyways 93," he ordered calmly. "Maintain altitude. "Fly southwest on beam for three minutes. Circle down then to twelve hundred and come in, using usual beam maneuvers."

Why didn't Tex report? It was the only way they could find him.

TEX found himself fingering the microphone again. He stared at it, started to place it aside. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I lose? What can I gain?" he muttered. "Comet 606

calling Metro. Altitude five hundred. Gas for seven minutes all that is left. In two minutes I'm going down. Wish me happy landing, pop. . . ."

Buddy opened a cockpit window. He throttled the motors and listened. Just the whir of his own props and the hiss of the foggy wind.

"Buddy," his father's voice called in the headphones, "Tex is at five hundred. His voice was clearer, stronger. He must be close by. He said he's going down in two minutes."

Buddy dove to five hundred. He switched on the radio for the beam. Right on the nose. If Tex's dead reckoning were correct he *must* be close by. He had been flying only about fifty miles without the beam, and there was no wind to blow him off course. But Buddy realized only too well they could pass unseen in this fog. Still it was his only chance. They—they might even collide head on.

Again he shut off the motors. Two minutes, Tex had said. A minute was eternity in this fog. A minute and a half. Again throttled motors. No use. He reached for the throttles. His fingers went rigid.

That faint drone, a single motor. Where did it come from? It must be ahead. But was it dead ahead? Or to either side? Damn this fog! If he failed to locate Tex now, it would be worse than if he hadn't heard him.

He opened the throttles slightly. Closed them again. The drone was nearer. But where? He snapped on the landing lights.

TEX gazed grimly at his watch, at the gasoline gauge. A half minute to go. He took a deep breath, eased the wheel forward and reached to turn on the landing lights.

Before his hand touched the switch a twin-glow appeared ahead and slightly to the side. A ghostly transport materialized and whisked by.

"Too bad you're not going my way, mister," Tex muttered. "Hope I didn't startle you too much."

The transport sloped forward and slipped downward.

"What the hell!" gasped Tex.

That other plane whipped around on the other side in a vertical bank. It shot under him, forcing him to pull back on the wheel. It swerved up to his level. The motors were cut. The cockpit light flashed on. A figure waved to Tex.

"Buddy!" Tex yelped, and waved a vigorous reply.

Buddy waved, "Come on." The Atlas transport's motors resumed their roar. Side by side. Buddy leading slightly, the two planes bored through the fog.

POP BARTON shut off the power for his microphone. "Guess I'd better call the kid back. They must have missed."

Smedley said nothing.

"Pop! Pop!" Buddy's voice rejoiced from the Atlas loudspeaker. "I've found him. He's trailing me in. I'm on the beam. Can we come in?"

Pop Barton blinked hard. He swallowed once or twice.

"The crazy damn hell-flyin' kid," he said. "He's gone and done it. . . ." Barton's voice died. His glance wavered toward the bill Smedley clenched in his hand. Tex would be in trouble, too. All of them. Wearily Barton pushed a switch.

"Okay, Buddy, come in on the beam. Nice work, kid."

Pop Barton stared out at the field. When the landing wheels of those two planes rolled on the runway, hell

would break loose for the Barton family. Winging up the years through aviation they had always pulled together. And they'd still be together in trouble. Barton sighed and slouched to the door and unlocked it.

"Okay, take over," he called to the relief dispatcher.

He unwound the wire from Paulus' ankles, but not from his wrists, and pushed him toward the stairway. Smedley followed.

GORDON HOLLISTER was in a corridor with one of his assistants.

". . . don't have the plane brought to the canopy," he was ordering. "It would only make a bad impression on those people down there." He saw Pop Barton and smiled smugly. "No need of having the Comet lines suffer because Tex Barton forgot the rules of safety. Send some cars to the hangar to bring back the passengers."

Barton glared at him and stepped his way. Hollister started to close the door quickly.

"Hold it, Barton," growled Smedley. "You're in enough trouble now. Hollister, keep your mechanics away from that transport. The Commerce men will take charge of it. Wait for me downstairs, Barton," Smedley ordered, and went off to see about giving instructions for impounding the Comet transport.

Tex and Buddy arrived outside where Barton awaited them.

"Hello, Pop," Tex muttered. "Buddy's just been telling me about—our troubles. Too bad we didn't know the other day when—we would have all stuck together and might have pulled through." He shrugged his big shoulders.

Smedley reappeared. "Have you got any statement to make?"

"Plenty," growled Tex. "In the first place the kid was cold sober the night before—"

Smedley grimaced. "I've been over that with your father. Have you anything to say regarding—"

"Yeah, the job wasn't getting Pop, it was worrying about me and—"

"Why are you evading my question?" demanded Smedley.

"He's not evading," cut in Pop Barton. "Thanks, Tex, but speak for yourself."

"Why," probed Smedley, "did you disregard the warning I gave you about pushing the plane?"

"I didn't disregard it," snapped Tex. "This is the slowest flight I've made in a long time." He saw Hollister staring at him from the doorway. "This is the slowest," he repeated doggedly. "Look at the log."

Smedley shook his head. "Your co-pilot's dead. You could have faked—"

"Careful what you insinuate," warned Pop Barton softly.

"Not forgetting me, are you, Smedley?" inquired a new voice.

Smedley appeared flustered. "Eh? Oh—er—hello, Inspector McAllister."

The man nodded slightly. "Did you forget you asked me to ride on one of the eastward flights and keep check on Tex Barton's speed? I did that this flight. Until the soup became too thick for me to check landmarks the plane had not been pushed."

Hollister came forward. "That doesn't mean a thing," he declared. "Previous flights must have weakened that motor."

McAllister raised his eyebrows. "I think not. It happens that the motor which gave out is a new one just installed yesterday. I understand, Smed-

ley, you've warned Hollister about that inferior equipment. Pending a more thorough investigation, of course, it looks like that clears you, Barton."

Tex smiled slightly. Cleared by the Air Bureau, just Hollister remained to square himself with. Tex's features tightened. His big hand clamped on Hollister's shoulder. The devil with his job. Smedley stepped forward.

"Hollister, you heard what was just said. I'll give you a choice: resign gracefully and stay out of aviation or—"

"I'll resign," Hollister cried.

"Fine," grinned Tex. "Let me give you a little send-off." He spun Hollister. His big hands lifted Hollister easily. His foot contacted the right spot and caterpaulted Hollister sprawling into a deep puddle. Tex turned back to the group. His smile faded.

"Listen, Smedley," he suggested grimly, "if you're trying to railroad Pop and Buddy like you just tried with me, I'll—"

"I'm not," Smedley reassured quickly. "I'm clearing your father on physical condition. But he's through, unless he can prove he wasn't covering up for Buddy."

Pop Barton shook his head.

"I believe Buddy, but I can't prove anything until he finds that woman and makes her talk."

Smedley laughed. "You'll have to think up something better than that. That woman angle is too flimsy, I'm surprised that you believe it, even if Buddy is your son."

Buddy scowled at Smedley. "You've got to believe it as far as Pop's concerned. I'll take my punishment until I find her. But leave him out of it. You know damn well he wasn't covering for me. Pop wouldn't do that even for me if he thought I was in the wrong. He thinks too much of aviation."

"So do I," Smedley scoffed.

Buddy blinked hard as he faced his father. "I'll clear you somehow, Pop."

"Forget it, son. It wasn't any fault of yours."

"I mean it," promised Buddy doggedly. "I'll make Smedley the laughing stock of—of the skyways for riding you."

HE whirled through the revolving doors into the administration building. The others followed. In one corner of the waiting room the passengers from Tex's plane were grouped.

Buddy strode by and went to the ticket window for the Consolidated Airways.

"I'd like a list of all the women passengers who took the plane to Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago yesterday morning," he requested. "Names, addresses, and destinations."

The clerk shook his head. "Sorry, you should know I'm not permitted to give out that information without an executive okay."

"Get that list ready," said Buddy. "I'll be back with the okay."

He turned away. The group of Comet passengers was breaking up. Buddy checked himself in mid-step. He glanced sharply at the group again.

A woman, inclined to stoutness, averted her head and stepped briskly toward the doorway. Buddy stumbled over a suitcase, scrambled vainly for his footing; but even as he fell he seized the hem of her coat.

"Not this time, lady," he barked. "Pop! Tex! I've found her."

Smedley's eyes smoldered. "This is a little too raw," he sputtered. "You said you'd do anything to clear your

father. So you pick the first woman you see, eh?"

"She *is* the woman."

Smedley laughed harshly. "You can't make me believe that. You're crazy if you think you—"

"Give the kid his chance," interrupted Pop Barton. "Lady, did you ever see this young man before?"

"No," she declared decisively.

"What did I tell you?" scoffed Smedley.

"Lady, for heaven's sake," pleaded Buddy, "don't lie." He pointed to Joe Paulus. "You were in that man's tavern with Greg Anderson. I signed the check for you. You've got to admit that. I . . . my father will be in a terrible mess if you don't."

The woman's glance wavered toward Paulus, Barton, Smedley. "No!"

"Maybe a ventriloquist could put the right words in her mouth, Buddy," mocked Smedley. "This is idiotic. This woman—"

Pop Barton pushed Smedley aside and shoved Joe Paulus forward. "Is that the woman who was with Greg Anderson?" he demanded.

Paulus smirked. "I told you the check belonged to the kid. Who said anything about Anderson or a woman?"

Barton swore. He could not avoid glancing dubiously at Buddy. He swore again, this time at himself for his doubts.

"One more chance, Paulus, or I'll finish what they made me stop upstairs." He tapped his fist against Paulus' battered face.

Paulus cringed. "All right, all right," he blurted. "That's the woman. She was with Greg Anderson."

"No, no," the woman shrilled.

"That doesn't hold, Barton," blustered Smedley. "He'd say anything to avoid another beating. This has gone far enough. Now I'm going to—"

"Lady," said Pop Barton. "You heard Paulus. If it's true, speak up."

She pressed her lips firmly. Tex moved forward slowly.

"My brother risked his life to save my plane. You were aboard it, so you owe your life to him. If you can say one word to clear him of the charge against him, it's your duty to, no matter what the cost to you."

Her eyes darted from face to face helplessly. "You don't know what you're trying to make me say," she sobbed.

Buddy glanced despairingly at his father. He'd make one last attempt. "There's nothing to fear," he pointed out. "All we want you to do is confirm to this inspector what I've said. That's all. We'll see that you're protected. No one will ever know. It won't go any further than this." He glanced at the gold ring on her finger. "Your husband. . . ."

She smiled bitterly. "It's rather late for that promise after—after all this."

"Then you *do* know something," Pop Barton said. He glanced triumphantly at Smedley whose face had gone a shade darker. His eyes, staring at the woman, were deeply puzzled, as if he were trying to make up his mind whether she was lying or not. His frown was more pronounced, the pout intensified. He took a step toward her. She backed away a little as if frightened by his scowling face.

"You—you've raised a doubt in our minds," Smedley said to her, heavily, hating to admit the possibility that Buddy could have been telling the truth. "You've got to clear that doubt away. Don't you see, it's too late to back out now. We've got to have the truth—do you hear—the truth." The

woman quailed before him and her eyes fastened helplessly on the check that he drew out of his pocket. "*Do* you know anything about this?"

There was silence for a moment during which nothing happened except that the flush on the woman's face grew deeper.

When she spoke it was in a low, almost inaudible voice. "Yes. I—I was with Greg Anderson—that night." She wet her lips with her tongue and stared half defiantly at Smedley. "This young man signed the bill when Greg—Mr. Anderson—couldn't pay it." Her head fell and she began to sob. Smedley, who hadn't moved, now let the hand that held the check fall limply.

"I see," he said, very quietly. His face had gone ashy; he seemed years older. Pop Barton wondered that his defeat had affected him so deeply. Even so, he felt a little sorry for him—he seemed so . . . so deflated.

"I guess that's that," Tex Barton said, jubilantly. His hand rested on Buddy's jacketed shoulder, pressed it.

"Come along," Smedley mumbled to the woman.

"Let her alone," Pop Barton warned. "She's told you everything."

"You mind your own business."

Tex flexed his powerful shoulders. "Keep your hands off her," he warned. "We promised this woman we'd protect her and you're not going to—"

Smedley looked up at him as if Tex Barton were part of some world he didn't recognize. He tightened his grip on the woman's arm, and Tex growled something deep in his throat.

The woman tried to smile up at Tex. "It's—it's all right," she faltered. "Please don't— You see, he's . . . my husband."

No one spoke. No one moved. Smedley swung around sharply and led his wife away, not looking down at her, his head facing squarely ahead.

THE waiter brought three steins of beer.

"Thirty cents," he said.

When the waiter left, Buddy gripped his stein and grinned. Imitating his father's control tower manner he intoned, "Beer 30, come in and use the tongue runway."

Tex grimaced.

"Gear down 30," he chuckled. "Gear down on those bum jokes." He faced his father. "Looks like it's up to you, Pop, for the toast.

Pop Barton gazed proudly at his sons. He smiled happily. "Barton Flight 3 from Misunderstanding and Beyond Control, come in, all is okay."

The three steins clicked together.

The Mite and The Mighty

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "The Mighty Mr. Weeble," "The Wildcats' Whiskers," etc.

THROUGH the open side window, Mr. Weeble could see the black derricks, the rush and color of the boom oil field. He could see it, but not very well. There was steam on his glasses and the stinging sweat of honest toil in his eyes. Mr. Weeble was pearl-diving for his dinner, with only about six hundred more dishes to go.

Not noticeably cooler than Hades, the café kitchen reeled in its noontime rush. It shook from range to roof with the vibration of giant rotary drills grinding on all sides. It stank with a thousand cooking odors, mostly pork. And the smell of cooking pork hitherto had always made Mr. Weeble quite ill.

But not here and now, strangely. Up to his ears in greasy water, Mr. Weeble was beaming mildly over his fogged spectacles. He even hummed as he worked. This, he was thinking, was Life in the Raw, at last, man stuff. As stirringly different from the placid little bank back in Pottsburg, Indiana, as it was from heaven.

A drop of water flicked into his mustache and he paused to stroke it carefully away. He was very proud of those amazing red whiskers. They made him look like a rabbit with a rhinoceros horn, but undoubtedly they were a sign of something. In the country bank where Mr. Weeble had spent most of his working life, he had always kept that mustache clipped down. But when he had lost his job, he had just let it run wild, and now look! Here he was in Cemetery, Texas, flat broke, strange, dishwashing for his dinner—and having almost the time of his life.

"Here's some more, bo," said a harsh voice at his back and a fresh avalanche crashed into the already crammed-enough sink.

Mr. Weeble's beam dimmed, just the tiniest bit. He didn't mind the work. But he was hungry. He had had no breakfast. At this rate it would be about midnight before he washed his way to his next meal. It seemed like a rather long swim.

Resignedly, he reached for the hose attached to the hot water faucet, wincing as it dribbled on his hand. That water now was really hot! It missed being steam by not more than one calory or something. Pinching the end carefully, Mr. Weeble aimed it at

With a spasm of horror, Mr. Weeble realized exactly what he was doing with that hose

the greasiest platter, started to open the faucet; and jumped a foot.

Out in the crowded dining room somebody had just let go a bellow like a mad bull. The dirty dish slot was directly in front of Mr. Weeble, and he bent fearfully to peer out. The trouble, he saw, was at the counter, not ten feet away.

A giant oil worker was glaring into his soup bowl, his hair on end. Beside him was another Goliath, whose face was turning purple and who seemed just about ready to smother to death.

"Hey, waiter!" The first giant fairly lifted the roof. "Look here in my soup! What the hell you call this, an alligator?" He dug into the bowl with his spoon and plopped down on the counter a truly horrendous something that waved bristly, long legs. "Hey!"

"Now, now, pardner!" Frying Pan Fargo, the shirt-sleeved proprietor, hove hurriedly into Mr. Weeble's limited range of vision. "Found that in your soup, you say? Hmm."

He bent close, then straightened. "Not in our soup, you didn't! Not unless some of your friends here slipped it in. Our soup's strictly homemade, pardner. And look here—your bug's marked *Made in Japan,* see?"

"What!" The roof did lift that time, Mr. Weeble was sure of it. The second giant by now was making weird, gobbling noises, as though in his last agonies. Sudden understanding, and murder in his eyes, the first giant snatched the alien bug and whirled.

"Oh! Another of your jugheaded jokes, huh?" he inquired in a voice like thunder. "Well, bozo, I'll learn you. I'm just gonna make you eat this booger, that's all."

"You and which army are gonna do what?" The second giant kicked away his stool with a delighted roar. "Come on, panty-waist! Ah! You would, would yuh?" He spun away from a rush, launching a pile-driver left in return.

"GENTS! Gents!" The café man's horrified expostulation broke in a squak as the bowl of soup leaped to his bosom, like a scared cat. The first giant had just kicked the second's feet from under him. He had also kicked the counter. The heavy boards shook as though rammed by an elephant. Ketchup bottles, coffee cups and platters were crashing. With a joyful yell, the first giant dived, apparently on the second's prostrate neck, and the sopped proprietor cut loose a frantic battle cry.

"Sam! Buck! Joe! Front and center, boys! Queeck!"

"It's them damn TNT twins agin!" Frozen with delighted terror, Mr. Weeble heard the fat cook's angry hiss, right behind him. "Git out there, Buck, and give 'em the boot! Give 'em the boot before they wreck the dump. I'm right with yuh!"

"I'll boot 'em!" The Buck addressed, a gorilla disguised as a waiter, pounded his chest and leaped through the swinging doors. By now the counter was bounding and pitching like a ship in a storm. Mr. Weeble could not see what was happening on the other side. But he could get the idea. Down there on the floor was battle, red-hot and unrestrained.

Shouting his war cry, the bouncing Buck surged past the end of the counter, and a pair of Number Twelve brogans came up to meet him. Heels first, they hit him very neatly on the belt buckle.

"O-oof!" he remarked in a strange

voice, and sailed back into the kitchen, like the famed Whoofus bird which cares not where it is going, but always flies backwards to see where it's been.

The crash with which he lit must have been the impulse which set Mr. Weeble off.

Not that Mr. Weeble realized what he was doing. The dining room was a whooping madhouse by now. Frozen, fascinated, appalled, delighted, Mr. Weeble was taking it in. Abruptly he saw that steam was rising from the top of the pitching counter. Then, from the other side, lifted a loud and anguished howl.

"I'm scalded to death!" A giant form reared up; and with a spasm of supreme horror, Mr. Weeble realized what he was doing with that hose.

Unconsciously, he had lifted it level with the slot. A steaming stream was squirting out, striking the counter and merrily splashing over. He had been spraying the battle below with water so hot it sizzled.

"Cut that out!" The second giant came up, pawing and yelling. The first giant whirled and crouched, as though to charge the slot. Probably he was merely trying to dodge that liquid fire. But it didn't look so to Mr. Weeble. Panic sweeping him, Mr. Weeble twirled the faucet wide open and let fly.

He washed his two victims away from there like two bits of gravy off a platter. The yelling, joyous circle of onlookers about them broke for cover. Stampeding, the two wilted warriors headed for the door. About halfway there a flying wedge of reckless waiters hit them and helped them the rest of the way, headfirst. Somebody cut off Mr. Weeble's hot water and the war was over.

BREATHING hard, Mr. Weeble shook his head dazedly. Momentarily a red flame of battle had swept his soul and that mustache had waved like a Viking banner. But the flame was gone now. The whiskers drooped dispiritedly. They drooped still more, and Mr. Weeble with them as the fat café owner came raving into the kitchen.

"Spill soup on my best vest, will they! The gnat-brained, bit-headed hippos! The laughin' jackasses! The—the—" Arms waving, Frying Pan Fargo pawed the earth. "Yeah, and another thing! Who was it in here squirted that hot water on 'em?"

The cook pointed and Mr. Weeble felt a frantic desire to slip quickly through a crack in the floor. Fargo was glaring. He came like a padding tiger. But then, amazingly, he was pounding Mr. Weeble on the back, shaking his nerveless hand.

"You, huh? Only guy in the house with any brains. Steam 'em out! That's the ticket! Hadn't been for you, they'd of wrecked the joint, that's all. By dang, the last time, up in Four Sands, they did wreck the dump before we could th'ow 'em out!"

He spun violently, roaring at the fat cook. "Sam, the best damn dinner in the house for my friend here! Boiled the britches off them Hogan hellions, that's what he done! They been needin' it fer years. And, pardner, if it's a steady job you're wantin' why you got one right here with ol' Fryin' Pan Fargo from now on out!"

"Why—why, thank you, sir," stammered Mr. Weeble in happy confusion. "I—really it wasn't much. Pleasure, I'm sure."

But ten minutes later he was revising that hasty opinion. Providing the specified dinner, Sam, the cook, was

also saucing it with sad tidings. The nearer the dessert he got, the more dire his prophecies; and Mr. Weeble was rapidly losing his appetite.

"Yessir, them two Hogans you sloshed is shore bad men. I mean, bad! Why, you know how this here field got its name? It use to be called peaceful Prairie, but when them two Hogans come, why they kilt so many men that—"

A waiter thrust his head in to bawl a machine gun string of short orders. The cook swung to his pots and pans. In cheery fragments, his voice still drifted to Mr. Weeble's quivering ears.

"—town finally had to hire 'em just to fight each other, it got so bad. Question which'n is meanest, Tack or Tom —ain't any kin, even if they have got the same last name, but everybody calls 'em the T'n'T twins, get it? Dynamite and deestruction—"

The cookee slung a dozen filled platters the length of the serving table without spilling a drop and turned back. "So you shore better watch yore step, Doc. If they find out it was you scalded 'em, oh my! What kinda pie you want?"

"I, ah—no pie, thank you!" Mr. Weeble gulped. "I—think I'll go outside. Fresh air—" He arose and wavered toward the rear door.

Outside, he glanced timorously up and down the littered alley before sinking down on a box. With limp fingers, he extracted a handkerchief, and carefully wiped his glasses. A little, cool breeze came softly to ruffle the red mustache on his lip. His hand moved up to smooth it down. And somehow, the very touch of that proud badge of courage made him feel better immediately.

After all, he mused, he probably had not scalded the horrible Hogans very seriously. The water hadn't been that hot. It was unlikely they had even caught a glimpse of him, but if they had, if they now meditated terrible vengeance, well, Mr. Weeble wasn't afraid. Or anyway, not very much. He had merely protected his employer's property which certainly was no crime.

He even suspected now that perhaps the cheery cook had been telling it, well, maybe just a little tall. Hitchhiking down here, Mr. Weeble had been told that this boom field had drawn its macabre name from the fact that the discovery well had been drilled next to a graveyard. Such a site was the luckiest location a wildcatter could pick, so his truck driver informant had declared solemnly. And in this case, obviously it had been. These were rich wells.

The only trouble, so the truckee had said, was that occasionally a drilling well broke loose, ran wild and, maybe, cratered. Derrick, drill rig, and maybe some of the crew too would go down in a vast, booming grave. At which times, so the truck skinner thought, that Cemetery handle was double appropriate.

The truckee had said nothing at all about any TNT twins having anything to do with the christening. So presently Mr. Weeble got up, went back in, looked the cook cynically in the eye, and demanded his pie. Perhaps the cookee was impressed. At any rate, when Mr. Weeble pushed back, replete, another greasy minion was dousing the dishes and for the rest of the afternoon Mr. Weeble merely peeled apples.

AT about six-thirty, Frying Pan Fargo himself came back side to pat him on the shoulder again and press a bill into his hand.

"Call it a day, Professer, and eat

yore supper," he ordered genially. "Be back at five-thirty tomorrow mornin'. You git twenty a week hereafter, but this is just a lil' extra. By dog, you hosin' them Hogans was the purtiest sight I've saw in months."

He was swinging briskly away before the blushing Mr. Weeble could even stammer his thanks. "Oh yeah, and stay outa them guys' way, too," he tossed over his retreating shoulder. "No tellin' what they might do to you, the dang jugheads. They'll be at work this evenin', but—" The rest was lost in distance.

Still blushing, Mr. Weeble looked down—and discovered that Fargo had given him a ten dollar bill. Somehow, it sent a little chill through him. It was so unpleasantly suggestive of—well, everybody being extra nice to him while they could. Like the chicken dinner for a condemned man, or—Mr. Weeble gulped, and thought hurriedly of something else.

He managed to stow away a very satisfactory supper nevertheless and then, for an hour or two, he even took in the sights of Cemetery. Though he kept a careful eye out for the Hogans, he saw nothing of them. Probably they were at work, as Fargo had said. These wells never stopped, night or day. But there were plenty of khaki-clad huskies off duty, all with pay in their pockets, all anxious to play; and with hordes of parasites to help them. Gamblers, drillers, dance-hall girls, roughnecks, con men, whatnot, all mixed together. It was quite the livest cemetery Mr. Weeble had ever seen.

At about eight he rented a room in one of the most respectable looking of the innumerable shack rooming houses and went soberly to bed. He was at the restaurant early the next morning. Nothing untoward happened during the day, except that the fat cook continued to regale him with tales of the Hogans and their fighting prowess. The next day was likewise uneventful. But on the third day, the blow came.

"You might as well take the afternoon off, Professer," Fargo told him at noon. "Be back at six. I'll want you to work tonight." And with a nod, Mr. Weeble had turned obediently to get his coat.

He had gone to his room to take a nap. The day was hot, so he pulled his bed over to the window. It was on the ground floor and unscreened, but in broad daylight he wasn't afraid. Besides, he had nothing worth stealing. He had dropped peacefully off to sleep.

Not thirty minutes later his slumbers were disturbed by a nightmarish dream of being hanged by the horrible Hogans. Then, dazedly, he realized it wasn't entirely a dream. Something was trying to yank his head off. He came awake with a terrified start, and nearly pulled his own face off as he tried to sit up. Just in time, he realized it was his mustache caught.

His head was in the window. Outside was a mildly surprised looking cow, trying to back away. Her rope led through the window. With the aid of a strip of court plaster, it was firmly anchored to Mr. Weeble's whiskers.

From outside somewhere came a strangling gurgle and Mr. Weeble saw red. A cow tied to his mustache! Nothing could have insulted and angered him more. He had that rope off his outraged whiskers in a flash. Blood in his eye, out he went through the window.

OVER to the right, on the sidewalk, were three grinning oil workers. Mr. Weeble headed for them, like an enraged Scotch terrier.

"Which one of you gentlemen com-

mitted this—this cowardly offense?" he inquired in a voice that gave fair warning. Snatching off his glasses, he stowed them carefully away in a pocket where they wouldn't be broken, and lifted his fists.

"You mean that cow you combed out of yore whiskers just now?" The biggest of the oil workers caught the deadly glint in Mr. Weeble's eye, wiped the grin off his face. "Why, we never done that to you, Deacon," he assured solemnly. "Think we'd be standin' right here where you could catch us if we had?"

"Who did, then?" Mr. Weeble was so mad he failed entirely to catch the wink that passed. "The—the low fellow! Who was he?"

"Why, it was that lowdown Tack Hogan done it, Deacon." The giant shook his head mournfully. "Always playin' dirty, mean jokes on somebody, that jughead. You gonna lick him fer it?"

Mr. Weeble caught his breath, and glared. The other two were nodding confirmation of the giant's words, their faces as innocent as a new-born babe's.

"That's right, it was Tack Hogan done it, Deacon," one of them corroborated. "I seen him. Picketin' a cow out to graze on a man's whiskers! If that ain't mean! But you better think twice about tryin' to lick him fer it. He's so tough he might lick you."

"I'll chance that, sir!" bristled Mr. Weeble. "Where'd he go?"

A little glint of astonished admiration came into the giant's blue eyes. "I'm darned!" he said, in a different tone. "Would you really tackle him, Deacon? You, uh, know who he is?"

"I know." Mr. Weeble nodded dauntlessly. And then his eyes widened. He was just recognizing the big face.

"Why, you—you're Tom Hogan, then, aren't you?" he inquired in a brittle, challenging voice and again lifted his fists. "Mister, if you're lying to me—" But the giant was beaming at him, holding out a big, friendly hand.

"Shore, I'm Tom Hogan," he admitted. "And yo're the guy gimme the hot bath over in Fargo's the other day. But me, I ain't like that Tack hellion, I don't hold grudges. Shake, Deacon, I had it comin' to me. And if I'da caught Tack tyin' the cow to yore soup-strainer I'da walloped him fer it, but he'd already drove off when I come by. You prob'ly won't be able to catch him 'til this evenin'."

A car hunked lustily at the curb and the big Hogan twisted his head. "Yeah, comin'," he boomed. And then, to Mr. Weeble: "Got to be gettin' back to work, Deacon. But, say, if you really are aimin' to beat up on that Tack skunk, why mebbe you better lemme give you some pointers first. He's shore mean to whip, I'll tell you that. But you just drop by the well any time this afternoon and I'll give you the lowdown how you can mebbe twist his tail proper. I'm roughneckin' on the Magnus Number Seventeen, the fourth derrick out yonder, see? You come right on in and if I ain't busy, I'll be right with you."

With a cheerful wave of his huge hand, he climbed into the car and went rattling away. Still boiling, Mr. Weeble shooed the cow and crawled back into his room.

He was red, fighting mad and he couldn't get over it. He tugged at his mustache and said what he considered very harsh things to himself, under his breath. Presently he jammed on his hat and went out to stalk the streets, not actually looking for Mr. Tack Hogan, but perfectly willing to take

him on if he did find the scoundrel.

Mr. Weeble didn't know it. But undoubtedly, in previous reincarnations, his mood and his mustache had paired up before. Or, oh well, anyway, ancestors of his, with similar whiskers, had acted similarly. They saw for example, that old Eric the Viking used to go into bellicose sulks for days, before suddenly cutting loose and making the world his medicine ball. Folks knew when to leave him alone.

NOBODY bothered Mr. Weeble just now, either, and he didn't run into Tack Hogan. Which was probably just as well. No telling what would have happened. Glowering, he marched up and down the streets, muttering to himself. Perhaps it was thirty minutes later when he suddenly realized he was stalking right toward that Magnus Number Seventeen derrick.

He stopped short. He wasn't going in there. Tom Hogan had been so sympathetic and friendly that Mr. Weeble didn't suspect him of any duplicity, in fact he really liked the big fellow. But in taking care of himself, Mr. Weeble just now didn't feel he needed coaching from anybody.

They were coming out of the hole with the drill pipe, although Mr. Weeble wasn't sufficiently versed in oil-drilling technique to think of it that way. But he could see that the heavy traveling block was hoisting a string of pipe from the hole. The crew was unscrewing it in eighty-five-foot sections, leaning them in one corner of the derrick. High up on a platform inside the tall tower, a man was handling the upper end of the business. He leaned out to wave cheerfully, and Mr. Weeble recognized him as Tom Hogan.

Smiling a little, despite himself, Mr. Weeble waved back. By nature he was a friendly little soul, except when riled. He heard a queer, rumbling noise that seemed to come from the ground beneath his feet. And then, his smile freezing into a stare of black horror, he saw it happen.

The enormously heavy string of drill pipe lifted like a ponderous rocket. Clear through the top of the derrick, with a terrific crash, up . . . up . . . writhing in air like a gigantic snake. It must have shot two hundred feet above the top of the derrick before it broke downward in whipping, iron coils.

From the well was coming an earth-shaking voice, like the harsh driving scream of a mighty wind. The derrick floor was a vast bomb. Smoke, dust, steam exploding outward, a rain of mud, rocks and water. Steel screeching as it bent and buckled. Mr. Weeble could see the crew sprinting frantically for safety. But it was all just a blurred, vague background for that tragedy taking place high up in the derrick.

Tom Hogan was trapped. The derrick was buckling, swaying. A belching tornado roaring up from the depths and in the midst of it the giant was fighting vainly, desperately for his life. He didn't look so big up there. He looked like a doll. Mr. Weeble saw him turn a white face, crying undoubtedly for help. Then something hit him and he went limp, dangling up there with a pathetic helplessness.

What happened to Mr. Weeble right then he could never afterward explain. He was terrified to the marrow. Anyone would have been at this furious demonstration of the terrific forces of nature unleashed. Every nerve in him was crying, run, run. Yet abruptly he knew he was driving forward. A queer, little figure, coat tails flapping, whiskers flying; the mouse attacking the volcano.

The very ground beneath his feet was reeling and swaying, with a greasy, sickening pitch as he raced in. Cracks opened up, spurting dust or mud. The crazy, rocking derrick had visibly dropped now. The whole thing, foundation and all! It stood in a shallow, saucer-shaped depression that had not been there a moment before. And that depression was deepening, like a sagging, rubber blanket.

Down under the surface crust, the scouring, drilling mud fluid had washed out a huge cavity in the soft, subterranean rocks. Now with the gas tearing at the top strata, the well was preparing to fall into a crater of its own making.

The drill pipe had stopped coiling up out of the hole as Mr. Weeble reached the derrick floor, and the mad scream of the gas had changed. It had forced an outlet now and its first explosive head was gone. Nevertheless the roar was still that of a cyclone. Blue vapor, incredibly inflammable, was shooting out at a pressure of maybe a ton or so. Lacking only heat, that derrick floor otherwise was a first class representation of churning hell as Mr. Weeble plunged into it, and he knew that at any moment the heat might come. This thing needed only one good spark to add the last touch.

HOW he got to the ladder, he never knew. Certainly he didn't cross that floor. No one could have. But he reached the ladder somehow and he fled up it like a badly scared monkey. As he went, he could feel that wrecked derrick sway and give beneath him like a mast of a sinking ship.

There was not so much gas and mist after the first twenty or thirty feet. He could see only vaguely, for there was mud all over his glasses now. But he knew the derrick was leaning crazily. The slick, wet ladder rungs were canted at a weird angle, but he kept climbing. He got over a place where a whole section was smashed away. His shoulder thumped into something, a heavy board. And there beside it was a dangling shape. Hogan!

Clinging one handed, Mr. Weeble got those muddy glasses off and into his pocket, so he could see. Hogan was still partially conscious, still trying dazedly to help himself. He was hanging in his safety belt, a heavy, leather harness, snapped to a line which, in turn, was fastened to a derrick girt. Probably in sane moments Mr. Weeble couldn't have budged the big fellow in an hour of trying. But here, now, he swung him in one-handed, clasped him tight and somehow unsnapped that line. All without either dropping the semi-conscious man, or losing his precarious perch and falling himself.

But he was still not back to safety with his burden, and how he was going to manage that he didn't know. Locking one arm about a brace, he took a death grip on his man and looked down, toward the derrick floor.

Without his glasses, he couldn't see at all well at any distance. But now he didn't need to. A chill of stark horror knifed through him. There was no derrick floor any longer. Instead, there was just a ragged, brown, boiling hole. And the derrick was going down into it, bodily.

Where they should have been some ninety feet from the ground, they were now not more than forty or fifty. That much of the derrick had already been gulped by the churning, roaring crater.

No chance to climb down and out now, even though Mr. Weeble could get down that ladder with his helpless burden. But there was one other thin,

crazy chance left. The wrecked derrick was leaning like a skeleton Tower of Pisa. Through the thundering murk, Mr. Weeble could see vaguely, almost straight below him, what looked like the slushpit. At least, he hoped it was. If he was correct, and if the thing wasn't drained by the crater yet, there should be, maybe, enough mud and water in it to break the force of a desperate jump. Provided, of course, one didn't smash sickeningly down on that drillpipe, or other hard debris.

No other chance now, anyway. The derrick was moving with a greasy, quickening motion. Going down into that yawning, gulping mouth. Locking his legs about the brace, Mr. Weeble heaved Tom Hogan up in his arms as though the two hundred and fifty pound giant had been a baby. With a mighty effort he tossed him far out, and as straight toward that liquid blink below as he could. Then, eyes closed, he sprang after him.

Mr. Weeble's brain did not at that moment pause to analyze the sensations of falling. Afterward he remembered, or earnestly believed that he did, that it was like flight—dizzy, swooping, downrushing flight with the mud hurtling up at him. And then—*oof!*

He hit on his back, with a flat, stunning smack that all but knocked him cold. For an agonized instant he thought it was finale. Then he realized he was deep in mud and greasy, roiling water, still fighting instinctively. His head broached the surface, he caught a great gulp of air that was half gas, and began blindly to thresh and paw about him. It wasn't deep. He could stand up. But he couldn't find Hogan.

FRESH horror swept him as his hand hit something hard and jagged, a broken end of part of the drill pipe. If Hogan had struck that, or was down in this mud, unconscious, smothering, not to be found . . . Clawing crazily at the mud in his eyes, he got back a dim vision, saw a big, grotesque boot that waggled feebly. The next instant he had its owner right side up and was floundering desperately for the far bank.

He knew which way was out. That black, bellowing horror behind him gave him perfect directions. He splashed against a twisted nest of great pipe, tugged his burden up, out of the water, tried to shoulder him up. Red, demoniac faces leaped suddenly out of the reeling fog about him, faces and clutching hands. Either devils or help, Mr. Weeble decided dazedly. Those open mouths must mean they were shouting at him. In this thunder they might as well have tried mental telepathy. But with his final strength, Mr. Weeble shouted back.

"Careful with him, boys! Careful! I—I've had to handle him roughly."

That was the last Mr. Weeble remembered, until a wet sponge was sopping his face, and somebody, very far away, was saying, "He's coming around now. He's coming around."

Assuming it was true, Mr. Weeble opened his eyes. There were those faces again, less red and more anxious now. One of them was the Hogan's, with a grotesque bandage around his forehead. Mr. Weeble tried to smile at him. Twice the big fellow gulped before he found a hoarse, taut voice.

"You—you okay, Deacon? You okay?"

"Why, I think so." Mr. Weeble essayed to sit up. Somebody helped him, and gave him a drink of molten fire. Gasping, he wiped the tears out of his eyes, then fumbled for his glasses. They weren't even cracked. Somebody

cleaned them for him and put them on his nose. The scene framed in the open doorway leaped into focus, and Mr. Weeble gasped again.

Out there across the field was what looked like a volcano. A pit, out of which great, sullen flames curled, black smoke and steam. It must be the well. But now there was no sign of the tall derrick.

It had vanished as utterly as if the earth had swallowed it—which as a matter of fact, the earth had.

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Weeble faintly. "W-when did that catch?"

"Huh? Oh. Why about three minutes after you drug Hogan out. Why it didn't catch while you and him was in there playin' high dive, I dunno. The wind was right toward them boilers."

Mr. Weeble shuddered and closed his eyes. Choking and hoarse, he could hear Tom Hogan straining for words.

"Hadn't been fer you, Deacon, gittin' me outa that, I—I reckon I— If there's anything on earth I can do to pay you back, anything—"

"You might really show me how to whip that Tack Hogan," suggested Mr. Weeble, and opened his eyes wide at the giant's strangling gurgle.

A strange look of abysmal shame on his face, Tom Hogan was choking. "I —I—listen, Deacon!" he blurted strickenly. "You got to forgive me! You—you got to! I—dammit, that cow—and you was snoozin' so peaceful when I come by. Right in the window and I—listen, now—"

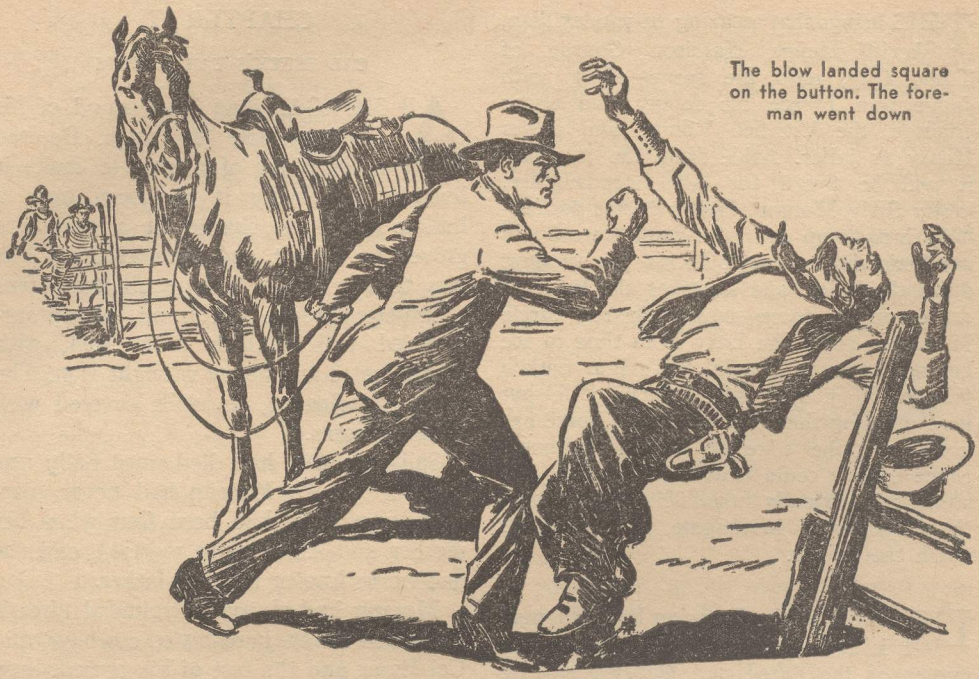
"You mean—you did it? You?" Blood in his eye and that red mustache flaring, Mr. Weeble boiled to his feet. "Get up, sir, if you're able!" he roared, in a voice that would have done credit to any Norse berserk. "I'm delighted I saved you. Get up and take your punishment like a man!"

"For the lova Mike!" An astounded oil worker tried to step between them, but Mr. Weeble thrust him furiously aside. Snatching off his glasses, he pocketed them and struck a fighting pose.

Mr. Weeble's eyes glared with astonishing ferocity. Mr. Weeble's mustache twitched with passionate hostility.

"Defend yourself, sir!" he instructed the gaping Hogan in a tone like thunder. "When this is over, if you wish, we'll shake hands. But now, put up your fists!"

Hogan obeyed. With a mighty leap and poke, Mr. Weeble hit him in the eye and down went the grateful Mr. Hogan — realistically, anyway — out cold.



The blow landed square on the button. The foreman went down

Galloping Gold

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of the "Henry" stories, the "Dogieville" stories, etc.

ROARIN' BILL ROSE, ex-outlaw, hadn't found going straight easy in Tonto Valley. Blizzards and drought and lobo wolves—and worst of all, Ab Morgan and his Quarter-Circle M—had all taken a crack at Roarin' Bill's Lazy R. But he had kept to the straight road just the same.

At least, until his old friends Pecos Charley Peters, Sody Slade, Ed Clovis and Zibe Tucker rode in from New Mexico. Then, having known how it was to have a posse on his heels, Roarin' Bill felt that he had to help them out. He hid the four in the old Comanche mine on Ab Morgan's land—and then fortune began to smile on him for a change. The quartette found gold—a rich vein—in the old mine! They began slowly to tote the gold over into the tunnel of Bill's own abandoned Two-Gun mine. If this was the first crooked thing Bill had done since he decided to turn straight, it wasn't too crooked—because it would take quite a lot of gold to make up for the cows Ab Morgan had stolen off the Lazy R, and the years of misery he had caused the owner of the Lazy R.

Bill's four owlhoot friends finish the job. Bill takes a sample of the gold down to the assayer in Tonto City—and runs into Ab Morgan. Morgan, his latest scheme for stealing Bill's only waterhole frustrated, is in an ugly mood and a little drunk. He threatens Bill, and the ex-outlaw offers to shoot it out with him. Morgan backs down.

As this happens in the Tonto Saloon with plenty of witnesses, nobody in Tonto City is very surprised when, that evening, the body of Ab Morgan is found in the general store. Roarin' Bill is nowhere about, but he was last seen in the general store. Morgan has apparently fired one shot and wounded Bill, and Bill, not daring to trust to a self-defense plea because of his past record, has fled.

This story began in last week's Argosy

THIS brings that amazing ex-vaudevillian, Sheriff Henry Harrison Conroy of Tonto City, onto the scene—along with Judge Van Treece, his deputy, and Oscar Johnson, the Vitrified Viking who serves Henry as jailer. Aside from the fact that it will be tough for Ab's stepdaughter, pretty Sally Morgan, Henry is not particularly broken up over the cantankerous old rancher's death; but it is his job to hunt down the killer, and he takes the trail.

He and his posse—mostly Quarter-Circle M riders—reach the Lazy R in time to see but not to catch Roarin' Bill's four outlaw friends. They don't find Roarin' Bill—but next morning they find where his horse has gone over the edge of Devil's Chimney. Since nobody could outlive such a fall, and since it is virtually impossible to get down the Chimney to investigate, that seems to finish the matter.

DOWN in nearby Scorpion Bend, though, it is only the beginning. There's the matter of the dazed and battered looking man whom the telegraph operator saw peering through his window, and who later vanished aboard an outgoing freight train. There is also the fact that Ira Hallam, Tonto City assayer, has rushed over immediately to tell his friend Sam Hartridge, crooked Scorpion Bend lawyer, of the rich gold sample Roarin' Bill brought in to him—supposedly from Bill's old Two-Gun mine.

When they learn of Roarin' Bill's supposed death, the two figure out a scheme to get the gold. Bill has left his will with Hartridge, in which he gave all his worldly goods to a nephew in Detroit whom he has never seen. They decide to produce a substitute for the nephew.

Hallam gets hold of Slim, a drifter from out East who is interested in mining. They proposition him. He agrees to pose as the nephew if they'll split three ways on the take. They grudgingly agree.

"But you haven't told me yet," says Slim, "just who I'm supposed to impersonate."

"The name," answers Lawyer Hartridge, "is Frank Neilan—from Detroit."

"Frank Neilan," mutters Slim. "Why—uh—that's fine. From now on I'm Frank Neilan."

"And don't forget it," says Hallam.

Slim grins. "Don't worry; I won't forget," he answers.

CHAPTER VI

CAL ESSEX'S ULTIMATUM

AB MORGAN had been proud of his Quarter-Circle M Ranch. He had spent a lot of money to make it liveable. Originally it had been only a huddle of adobe shacks in a sycamore grove; he rebuilt and remodeled until it was to his liking. The ranch house was a two-story adobe and frame, nearly surrounded with a thick patio wall, with arched gates and heavy wrought iron. The patio was flagged, its walls covered with climbing roses.

Sally's mother had died when Sally was twelve, but Ab Morgan had never married again. Sally had been four when her mother and Ab Morgan married, and she had never known another father.

Morgan had always surrounded himself with hard-riding, hard-bitted cowboys, and Cal Essex and the rest of his present crew were no exception. Cal Essex wanted Sally Morgan; he had wanted her ever since he had first seen her, two years ago, but had been careful to hide it from Morgan, who had told him that *he* was going to select a mate for Sally. Ab Morgan was under six feet of dirt now; so there was nothing to prevent Cal Essex from asking Sally to marry him. Cal was not a man to waste time; so already today he had come to the ranch house and spoken his piece.

Judging from the expression on his face now, though, as he stood at the bottom of the front steps and looked up at Sally, his invitation had not been accepted.

"All right," he said huskily, his face a trifle white under its coat of bronze. "You know how I feel, Sally. But that's all right. I—I reckon you'll want me to take charge of everything—about the ranch—now."

"You'll still be the foreman," Sally told him evenly. "I will run the ranch."

Cal Essex laughed shortly and looked away for a moment.

"Pretty big job for a girl," he said. "The boys won't like it very well—havin' a woman runnin' things, yuh know."

"Well, that's just too bad."

"You know what I mean. They're used to havin' a man boss."

"They've got a woman boss now."

Essex shrugged his shoulders.

"Go ahead. But I'm tellin' yuh that you've got eight tough boys to boss, Sally."

Sally's eyes flashed.

"If I can't boss them—I'll fire them," she declared.

He came up the steps till he was close to her again, and spoke with lowered voice.

"I wouldn't do that," he said. "I don't like to tell yuh this, but before you make any mistakes, I reckon you better know all about it. Those boys stole cattle from the Lazy R—actin' on yore father's orders. If you fire any of 'em—they might talk."

Involuntarily, Sally took a step backward. She stared at him in horrified amazement.

"My father stole cattle?" she whispered.

"Plenty. He wanted to break Bill Rose."

"Oh, that isn't possible! Cal, you're lying to me!"

"You can say that—'cause yo're a woman."

"Woman or no woman, I still say it, Cal Essex. Dad isn't here to defend himself. Oh, it isn't true; my dad wasn't a thief."

Cal smiled thinly.

"Wasn't he? Well, my advice to you would be to set tight. I'd hate to have Wild Horse Valley know what he was. And don't forget that *they stole cattle on his orders.*"

With that Cal Essex turned away and sauntered down toward the stables, Sally stood there, staring after him, heartsick and helpless.

"I reckon I've got you hogtied, young lady," Cal chuckled to himself, "and I'll be runnin' this ranch, if anybody stops to ask yuh. She don't dare ask anybody if it's true."

SALLY MORGAN tried to think things over calmly. Cal Essex wanted to boss the Quarter-Circle M. It was the first time that she had ever detected meanness in Cal Essex, and she realized that it amounted to blackmail. Unless he had his way he would denounce Ab Morgan as a rustler. She knew Ab Morgan had tried in just about every possible way to run Roarin' Bill Rose out of the valley, but she had never dreamed that he was stealing Rose's cattle. Yet she could not prove that he did not steal them—and Cal Essex probably could prove that he did, because he would have the able assistance of his cowboys.

Sally finally came to a decision. In this extremity there was only one man in the valley whom she felt she could trust—and that man was Henry Harrison Conroy. Sally felt sure that she could tell him the story, and that it would never be repeated.

She hitched up her own buckboard team and started for Tonto City. Her sudden decision to go to town piqued the curiosity of Cal Essex. He promptly sent one of the cowboys after her on the trail to Tonto City, in order to find out where Sally went and whom she talked with.

By the time the cowboy arrived, the team was tied at a little-used hitch-rack, with Sally and the Sheriff Henry sitting in the buckboard, talking earnestly.

If Henry felt any amazement over the story Sally told him, he did not show it. He merely rubbed his red nose with two fingers and a thumb, his small eyes squinting thoughtfully, until she finished.

"My dear, I am not surprised at Mr. Essex," he said dryly. "My own idea is that, given the opportunity, Mr. Essex would be what the Mexicans call a *mucho malo hombre.* As far as your stepfather being a cattle rustler—I go into my Spanish again and say, *'Quien sabe?'*"

"You believe he really did steal Lazy R. cattle, Mr. Conroy?" Sally asked.

"Merely an old custom—revived at times, I believe, Miss Sally. But it is bad form on the part of Mr. Essex to taunt you with it. I can see his reasons. Your refusal to consider his proposition of matrimony—and I really could not blame him for that—caused him to show his real

colors. My advice would be to continue to run the ranch as you see fit. After all, a denunciation from him would also implicate him as a rustler."

"But I don't want it to be said that Dad was a thief," sighed Sally.

Henry nodded.

"Cal Essex realizes that. That is his strength." Then he told her: "By the way, I got a letter from Samuel Hartridge, attorney at law at Scorpion Bend, saying that a young man named Frank Neilan, nephew and heir to the Lazy R, is on his way here from Detroit, and will arrive very soon."

"I heard that he had left everything to his nephew," Sally answered. Then she added, impulsively, "Mr. Conroy, in spite of everything that has been done, I liked Roarin' Bill Rose. Before there was real trouble between our ranches he used to come over and visit. He seemed to be a kindly man, but lonesome. All he had to talk to were Thunder and Lightning."

"He was all right," nodded Henry soberly. "His past was rather checkered, I believe, but he played a square game in this valley. I feel that the gunfight was an even break. Roarin' Bill was shot. Perhaps in his panic and injury, and with no witnesses, he felt that the law would not give him an even break. No doubt they would dig up his past—which might not look good to a jury."

"That was why I came to see you," said Sally. "You seem to always make allowances for failings in human nature. I'm sure our conversation won't be repeated."

"You may rest assured of that, my dear lady."

He climbed down from the buckboard then, bowed and left her. Sally went on to the post-office for the mail, and Cal Essex's spy rode back to the ranch ahead of her.

"She went to see the sheriff," he reported. "They set in the buckboard for quite a while, talkin' together."

"Now what the heck is she framin' up with that potato-nosed hunk of lard?" wondered Cal Essex. "If he gets smart with me, he'll wish he'd stayed in a theater, I'll tell yuh that."

"I heard a feller sayin' in the Tonto Saloon that Roarin' Bill's nephew will be here pretty quick to take over the lazy R," the puncher said. "He's a city man, and prob'ly don't know beef from bull's-foot."

Cal Essex grinned thoughtfully. "We'll make life tough for that tenderfoot, Art. I'll figure out sometin', after I get a look at him."

"Sure."

"Are you and Steve still watchin' the Lazy R Ranch?"

"We was out there the last two nights until midnight, but all we seen was them two Mexicans."

"Uh-huh. I'd sure like to know who them four men were that shot at us that night."

"So would the sheriff's office," laughed Art. "I heard Judge Van Treece talkin' about it. They don't know any more than we do."

HENRY was back in his office when Lawyer Sam Hartridge appeared.

The man he brought with him seemed far more presentable than Slim, the drifter, had been in Scorpion Bend. His suit was fairly new, shoes shined, a new hat and he was well barbered.

"Sheriff Conroy," Hartridge said, "I want you to meet Frank Neilan, heir to the Lazy R. Frank, this is our sheriff, Mr. Conroy."

Henry showed no surprise. "Frank Neilan, I am glad to meet you, sir," he said. "Welcome to Tonto City. I want you to meet Judge Van Treece, my deputy—and Oscar Johnson, the jailer. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Neilan, new owner of the Lazy R."

Judge and Oscar shook hands solemnly with the newcomer, welcoming him to Wild Horse Valley.

"Mr. Neilan knows all about the trouble here," said the lawyer. "I have told him all the history of the feud."

"My uncle," said Frank Neilan, "must have been rather an interesting character."

"He vars a fighting yigger," declared Oscar blandly.

"Yes, I believe he was," smiled Neilan.

"Is this your first trip west?" asked Henry.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about cattle or horses?"

"Very little," admitted the young man. "I have studied mining, but have had no practical experience."

"You will probably get very little around here," said Judge.

"Mr. Neilan will learn," Hartridge assured them.

"They usually do—in Arizona," said Henry dryly. "You are going out to the ranch today?"

"We are on our way out there," replied Hartridge. "I believe Mr. Neilan will live out there, waiting for the will to be probated. He can learn ranching only by practical experience."

"With Thunder and Lightning to teach him, he should know it all in less than a week," said Henry.

Frank Neilan laughed. "Mr. Hartridge told me about those two. I hope you gentlemen will ride out to see me once in a while."

"Why, certainly," nodded Henry. "You see—"

He broke off, for at that moment Sally Morgan stepped into the doorway.

Henry got to his feet. "My dear lady, come in!" he exclaimed.

Just inside the door, Sally hesitated. "I beg your pardon," she said hastily. "I didn't know I was interrupting—"

"You are not," Henry assured her. "Miss Morgan, you have to meet Mr. Hartridge. May I present Mr. Frank Neilan. Mr. Neilan, this is Miss Morgan."

"Miss Morgan, I am very glad—er—" Then Frank Neilan hesitated.

"Very true," interrupted Henry quickly. "Miss Morgan's stepfather and your uncle—"

The young man stepped toward Sally then, smiling. "But what of it?" he interrupted. "After all, that feud was between Miss Morgan's stepfather and my uncle. I don't see why it's necessary for the two remaining members of the family to carry it any further."

"God forbid!" grunted Judge hollowly. Frank Neilan turned to Sally.

"Miss Morgan," Frank Neilan added, "I did not even know my uncle. In fact, I barely remembered that such a person existed. I hope we can be friends."

She held out her hand.

"I see no reason why not," she answered.

He took the hand. "You're very kind," he said.

Sam Hartridge's face showed the suspicion of a frown.

"I think we will be going on," he announced very quickly. "I have to drive back to Scorpion Bend, you know."

They left then, the young man not without a backward glance at Sally.

Minutes later, as they were driving over the rough road to the Lazy R, he said:

"She's beautiful, Hartridge."

"Sally Morgan? Of course she is. But what of it?" Hartridge growled. "You're in here to help us make some big money; so keep away from women. You can't afford to get mixed up in anything—except our deal."

"I know. Well, the officers accepted me at face value."

"Did they? How do you know?"

"Well, they seemed too, anyway. They didn't ask any questions."

"You were not on trial."

Neilan looked at the lawyer closely. "What's wrong with you, Hartridge?" he asked.

"Not a damn thing. I merely want you to understand that you've got a serious job ahead of you. Don't be too friendly at the Morgan place. We can't afford to have anything go wrong. Remember, Hallam and I are respectable citizens."

"And I'm not, eh?"

"Damn it, *you've got to be.*"

The young man shrugged.

"Oh, all right. I'll take care of my end, but I still think that Sally Morgan's a beautiful girl."

"I won't argue with you."

PECOS CHARLEY PETERS was in the Lazy R ranch house when the horse and buggy came into the yard. He had been trying to get some information from Thunder and Lightning about conditions. There was no chance now for him to leave the ranch house unseen; so he went down into the little root-house under the kitchen, after which Lightning moved the table over the small trapdoor. He had just gotten it in place when Hartridge, without ceremony, stepped into the kitchen, with the stranger at his side.

"This is your new boss, boys," informed Hartridge, indicating the young man with him. "You will take orders from him, just as you took orders from Roarin' Bill Rose."

"Sure," agreed Lightning heartily. "He tells us go to hell—we not go. Jus' like Onkle Beel."

"That's right," agreed Neilan with a grin.

The two then investigated the little ranch house thoroughly.

"My uncle was not exactly a good housekeeper," smiled Neilan when the inspection was finished.

"You can stand a little dirt," said Hartridge.

The two Mexicans went outside then, and Hartridge and Neilan sat down in the kitchen.

"So far, so good," declared Hartridge. "No one has questioned the fact that you are Bill Rose's nephew; and they won't. Stick around here and boss the place, until after everything is settled. Keep sober and keep away from the Quarter-Circle M. As soon as it is possible, we will discover that rich mine. Hallam and I will buy you out, and you'll head for parts unknown, but before that we'll have an agreement drawn up, which will give you one-third of the profits. Don't you worry—you'll get your share."

"Yes, I believe I will," replied Neilan.

When Neilan went back to the buggy with Hartridge to see him off, a little later, Pecos Charley sneaked out of the kitchen and made his way down to the brush past the stable. Through the cracks in the kitchen flooring he had heard enough of the conversation to know that there was a deep dyed and pretty devious plot against the Lazy R.

Down at the stable Thunder and Lightning, unaware of Pecos' discovery, talked things over.

"So that ees new boss, eh?" remarked Lightning. "I'm bet he don' know one cow from two calf."

"Sure," agreed Thunder expansively. "But jus' like Onkle Beel say, theese rolling stone ees wort' two in the hand."

"Sure. You never can tell, that's all I hope."

"I'm bet you get your weesh," added Thunder. "W'en are you goin' make deal weeth those lawyer?"

"I'm theenk eet over. Pecos Charley hes say to me, 'You damn Mexican, you say one word 'bout us and I keel you too dead to skeen yourself all over.' How you like that, eh?"

"You are my brodder—I'm cry like hell."

"He skeen you, too."

"*Por Dios,* thees Pecos ees toff jeeger. I'm theenk we better not talk too much, eh?"

"We better not talk any; I'm only got one skeen."

CHAPTER VII

LEAD WITH THE RIGHT

FRANK NEILAN was not a horseman. In fact, he had only been in a saddle twice in his lifetime. This, on the second day of his stay at the Lazy R, was to be the third. Lightning saddled a horse for him, and pointed out the trail he had said he was taking, the trail to the Quarter-Circle M.

"I hope this horse is gentle," said Neilan apprehensively as he climbed aboard.

"Those horse ees so gentle that hees eat off your hand," assured Lightning. "Those horse never do notheeng wrong in my life."

It was about five miles to the Morgan ranch house, but the trail was wide, and Neilan had no difficulty in finding the place. He dismounted stiffly at the patio gate. Sally was cutting roses, as he came into the patio. There was no one else in sight.

He walked up to her, doffing his hat, suddenly a little embarrassed.

"I—I just wanted to be neighborly," he told her lamely.

Sally smiled at him. "I'm glad you do," she said. "And how do you like your ranch, Mr. Neilan?"

"It isn't much like this one, Miss Morgan," he laughed. "I'm afraid my late uncle wasn't an adept housekeeper. And those two Mexicans!"

"Funny, aren't they?"

"The way they crucify the English language. Half the time I don't know what they're talking about."

"Neither do they," laughed Sally. "Your uncle liked them, though."

"Well, maybe I will—in time."

They sat down on a shaded bench and Sally told him about the folks of Wild Horse Valley. Neilan was a willing listener. He wanted to know something of the cattle business, admitted that he knew nothing. For an hour or more they talked, while Neilan's old mount dozed beside the patio gate.

Then Cal Essex and two of his riders came home. They recognized the old horse.

"Four bits against a duck egg it's that new owner of the Lazy R," said one of the boys. "Got plenty crust—comin' over here."

A few minutes later Sally came to the patio gate with Neilan, and then went back. Neilan mounted and rode out. Essex, a scowl on his face, accosted him at the main gate.

"Yo're the new owner of the Lazy R, ain't yuh?" he asked.

"Why, yes. My name is Neilan." He was a little surprised at the foreman's angry scowl.

"Names don't mean much to us folks," Essex told him, "as long as yo're from the Lazy R. The less we see of yuh, the better it'll be for all of us."

"Oh, are you the owner of this ranch?" Neilan asked with seeming politeness.

"I'm the boss," replied Essex coldly. "Bill Rose wasn't welcome here; so I don't know of any reason why his relatives should be."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Neilan. "But on the other hand, you'll always be welcome at the Lazy R."

"Don't worry—we won't come there—unless it's on business."

"Business?"

"Sure. If somebody does somethin' we don't like—we come visitin'."

"I see," smiled Neilan. "I hope I don't do anything to incur your displeasure."

"I'm overlookin' yore visit today, 'cause you didn't know better. Stay on yore own range, Neilan. We don't care for visitors."

"Isn't that laying it on a little thick?" queried Neilan, still politely. "After all, I believe this ranch belongs to Miss Morgan, and she didn't order me to stay away."

"Listen, feller," growled Essex, "I'm runnin' this ranch—and if you give me any more of yore lip, I'll yank yuh off that saddle and rub yore nose in the dirt."

"Really?" gulped Neilan.

"Yuh don't think I can?"

"I don't want any trouble. I'm not a fighter. Anyway, you've got a gun—and I don't like guns. I don't exactly want to get shot."

Grinning wolfishly, Essex drew the gun and balanced it on a fencepost. Then he turned back to Neilan.

"Keep talkin,' feller," he said. "Yo're safe from that gun now." Neilan backed up a step.

"Really, there isn't anything for us to fight over," said Neilan. "I'm not—"

"Get off that horse, before I yank yuh off," interrupted Essex savagely. "When I get through with you—you won't want to come back."

Neilan seemed to sigh. "Well, if I must," he said.

HE dismounted clumsily, Cal Essex swung at his jaw before he had both feet on the ground—but Neilan's head twisted just enough for the blow to smash against the saddle. The force of the blow sent Essex staggering against Neilan. The latter merely shouldered him quickly aside, and stepped a few feet away.

Essex stepped back, breathing heavily. At the corner of the patio the two cowboys grinned widely. They could easily visualize what Cal Essex would do to this fool tenderfoot.

"Rather dirty tactics," remarked Neilan. "Good thing I was looking for that blow, or my nose might be in the dirt."

His hands hung loosely at his sides.

"Are yuh goin' to fight, or stand there?" snarled Essex. His knuckles ached from that smash against hard leather.

"I'm afraid you'll have to do the fighting," smiled Neilan. "It was solely your idea."

"Scared to fight, eh?"

"A little."

"All right, feller, you've got it comin'."

Essex rushed in, swinging a right-hand blow at Neilan's chin—but the blow only met open air. The next moment, the foreman was flat on his back—dropped by a left-hook which had caught him square on the button!

The two cowboys, gasping with amazement, came running. Essex was out for a rather long count, it seemed.

"He led with his right," said Neilan quietly.

"Led with his—huh? Well, I'll be danged! First time I ever seen Cal knocked down. Stranger, you better not be here, when he wakes up."

"I was here before he went to sleep," reminded Neilan.

"Yeah, that's right. He's comin' out of it, I reckon."

Essex recovered sufficiently to stand on wobbly legs, but there was no more fight in him. He looked blankly at Neilan, as though trying to understand what had happened. The cowboys took him by the arms and gently led him up to the bunkhouse; then Neilan mounted his old horse and headed back toward the Lazy R.

He didn't know that Sally Morgan had seen the fight from a front window of the ranch house, that there was a smile of extreme satisfaction on her face as she lowered the curtain and turned away.

Meanwhile, a drink of whisky and a few cold towels drove the fog from Essex's brain, and the two cowboys told him what had happened. When one of the cowboys said he was sure that Sally had seen the fight from a front window, a cold rage showed in Cal Essex's face. The cowboy had seen her drop the curtain.

"I thought you'd whip him easy Cal," said one of the boys. "He don't look like a fighter to me."

"I guess he was just lucky," said Essex painfully.

"If he is, I'd like that kinda luck," said the other cowboy.

"All right," growled Essex. "I'll get him—don't worry."

"Sure yuh will, Cal. But don't lead with yore right hand again."

"Don't tell me what to do! I can whip a dozen like him."

"Oh, sure. You was prob'ly off balance."

"That's right. Guess I slipped."

But down in his heart Cal Essex knew that he had not slipped, nor had he been off balance. All he remembered was that he had lashed out with his right fist—and everything had gone black.

"We'll make it so tough for him that he won't stay," said one of the cowboys.

"You leave him to me," ordered Essex. "He's my special meat."

"You shore can have my helpin'," said the cowboy dryly.

THE heir to the Lazy R spent next day helping Thunder and Lightning clean house. With many gallons of hot water, plenty of soap, and a quantity of elbow grease, they made the ranch house presentable.

"Isn't that better?" he asked Lightning that evening, as they surveyed the scrubbed interior of the house.

"Eet ees ver' good," admitted the Mexican. "But w'at ees the use? *Mañana* eet gets dirty again."

"Well, if it does, we'll clean it again."

Lightning looked a little horrified, then shrugged his shoulders. Apparently the man was crazy, he decided.

That night, while Neilan was reading an old magazine by the lamplight, and the two Mexicans were deep in their jumping-bean game at a table, the outside door was suddenly shoved open. With no other warning, in filed Pecos Charley, Sody Slade, Ed Clovis and Zibe Tucker.

Lightning jerked to his feet.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he blurted.

"That's all right, Mex," assured Pecos Charley. "Set down and play yore game. Don't worry about us."

Frank Neilan got quickly to his feet.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "You startled me for a moment."

Pecos Charley laughed shortly. "Prob'ly startle yuh longer than that, before we git through. Set down—don't mind us."

"I—I don't believe I've met you," stammered Neilan. "Are you from the Morgan ranch?"

"That's shore funny as hell," remarked Sody Slade. "From the Morgan ranch, eh?"

"I didn't know," said Neilan. He could see that there was something sinister about these four rough, bearded men, well armed.

"Well, I can tell yuh—we're not from the Morgan ranch," informed Pecos Charley. "We was pardners with Roarin' Bill Rose."

"With my uncle?"

"Uncle—hell! Listen, feller: I was in this house when you and that crooked lawyer talked things over. I know yore game. Yo're just as crooked as a dog's hind laig—and so is he. Yo're makin' out to be Roarin' Bill's nephew. Well, we know yuh ain't—*sabe?*"

"Is that right!" gasped Neilan.

"Ain't much right to it, as far as we can see," stated Clovis.

"We could go down to Tonto City and tell what we know, and they'd tar and feather you, Mr. Tenderfoot," declared Pecos Charley.

Neilan looked very worried. "I—I suppose they would," he agreed.

"All right," said Pecos Charley. "We'll tell yuh *our* story. After you've heard it, *you better set in the game with us.*"

"Well, I—you seem to have the better of me, gentlemen."

"Yo're doggone right we have," laughed Clovis. "Tell him, Pecos."

Beginning with the day they had ridden in and discovered their old partner Roarin' Bill Rose, Pecos Charley told Neilan of how they had hidden in the old mine on Morgan's ranch, until they accidentally discovered the vein of jewelry ore. He told of the nights of back-breaking work in digging out this vein and carrying it over to Roarin' Bill's old Two-Gun mine, where, after the vein was worked out, they had dropped a chunk of the tunnel in, blocking it entirely.

"You can see what Bill's death meant to us," said Pecos. "It sure ruined a stake for us, when he willed this place to his nephew. Well, we stuck around, waitin' to see what happened—and it happened. You and that crooked lawyer talked too much—and I heard yuh. Mebbe you don't know it, but yo're goin' to pick up where Roarin' Bill left off. You'll reopen the mine, ship the ore we gathered, split it five ways—and we get out. How do you feel about it."

"But it's stolen ore," protested Neilan.

"You half-witted road-runner, you!" snorted Pecos. "Course it's stolen. Ain't you stealin' this whole danged ranch? We're not kickin' about yore crooked work, are we?"

"That's true," agreed Neilan.

"All right—that's settled," said Pecos. "Shake hands with yore new pardners, *Mister Neilan.*"

The four men filed past and shook hands with him.

"How soon can we dig that gold out?" asked Clovis.

"Why—er—the will has to be probated

first," Neilan answered hesitantly. "I—I don't know how soon we can dig it out."

"Well," said Zibe Tucker, "we've talked it over among us. We figure that the law has kinda passed us by, by now. Anyway, we was only wanted for stealin' horses—and things; so we'll take a chance. We're danged good and tired of livin' underground; so we decided to hire on with the Lazy R."

Frank Neilan gasped, swallowed thickly, but seemed unable to speak. "Oh, we're damn good cowpunchers, pardner," Zibe assured him.

"*Por Dios!*" gasped Lightning. "Seex *vaqueros* for seexty cow."

"Ten cows apieces, eh?" grinned Pecos Charley. "Well, that's about my size."

"But—but they will ask questions," protested Neilan.

"That's all right," assured Pecos. "We heard about you needin' men, while we was over in Black River City; so we rode over the hill—and got the jobs."

"All right," choked Neilan. "I—I guess you're hired, boys."

"THAT'S the right spirit!" exclaimed Sody. "We'll add a lot of class to this here rancho. Another thing, if them Morgan chickadees come pokin' around here, we'll plumb ventilate 'em for yuh."

"Wait a minute!" gasped Neilan. "I told them they'd be welcome."

"Lovely dove! You ain't buried the hatchet, have yuh?"

"Well—not exactly. I was obliged to knock out their foreman today."

"You—wait a minute! You knocked out Cal Essex?"

"I think that's his name. He led with his right, and I countered with my left. It was all very simple."

The four outlaws looked at each other for several moments in silence. Roarin' Bill had told them that Cal Essex had whipped every fighter in Wild Horse Valley. They had seen the Quarter-Circle M foreman, and they knew he had a great physical advantage over this young man.

"I reckon we'll go out and pack in our warbags," said Pecos Charley finally. "If I didn't know positively that yo're a danged liar, I'd almost believe yuh *are* Roarin' Bill's nephew."

"What about these Mexicans?" queried Clovis. "Can we trust 'em?"

"Them two?" sneered Pecos Charley. "One peep out of them, and I'll slit their throats. They won't talk. C'mon."

"W'at ees a peep?" queried Thunder fearfully, after the four had gone.

"A peep?" parroted Lightning. "A peep ees—well, you make one."

"You like see me get your neck sleet?"

"Eef you do, I know damn well what ees a peep."

"Good Lord!" groaned Frank Neilan. And he quoted, " 'What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.' "

"Sure," agreed Lightning soberly." Theese crooked business get you een trouble clear up around my neck."

"Yes, I think you're right, Lightning," Neilan said. "Well, I've always longed for excitement—and I guess I'm going to get plenty of it. Good night."

"*Buenas noches,*" replied Lightning.

"I suppose I'm going to have to learn Spanish," Neilan said.

"W'at ees the use? Me and Thonder spik damn good from Englis'. I'm learn first, and then I'm learn heem. He's pretty damn good, too."

"Do you and Thunder talk Spanish to each other?"

"No-o-o. You onnerstand theese Spanish ees not so damn good for saying theengs. Eef I am spiking Englis' I can onnerstand myself better than you can eef you are leestening to Thonder spiking Englis' to me. That ees the deeference—I hope."

"I hope so, too," agreed Neilan. He was choking again, but not from fear . . .

CHAPTER VIII

BULLETS AT THE SPRING

"MR. HARTRIDGE, I have no personal interest in the case," stated Judge Van Treece. "I am merely telling you that Judge Myers will not accept that

will for probate, because of *corpus delicti.* If you had really studied law, you should know that."

Sam Hartridge flushed quickly. Henry, seated behind his desk in the sheriff's office, emitted a faint chuckle.

"I am aware of that point, sir," stated Hartridge. "But the circumstances are peculiar. We all feel satisfied that William Rose is at the bottom of Devil's Chimney."

"But you can't prove it."

"The law can't prove he isn't," flared the lawyer.

"My dear young man," propounded Judge, "the law doesn't need to prove anything. It will say, 'Produce the body as evidence of death.' "

"An impossible thing, under the circumstances."

Judge nodded with seeming sadness.

"The limit is seven years, I believe. After seven years, the law may declare him legally dead, you know."

Hartridge snorted indignantly. "Why, it would be ridiculous for Frank Neilan to have to wait seven years to get title to the Lazy R." He could see his well-planned scheme falling to pieces.

"You might find a rope long enough to let you investigate the Chimney," suggested Henry.

"Impossible," replied the lawyer. "I've been out there. It's at least two hundred feet to where the horse smashed up on that ledge. Why, if you toss a big rock over there, you never hear it strike bottom."

"Yes, that's true," nodded Judge. "I am very much afraid that poor old Roarin' Bill's remains are not available."

While Hartridge sat silent in glum meditation, Oscar Johnson came riding up the street. He tied his horse in front of the office. In his high-heel boots and big sombrero Oscar Johnson was a giant. He came clumping into the office, brushing his hat off on the top of the doorway. He picked it up, sent it sailing into a corner and looked seriously at Henry.

"Ay vent up dere," he announced. "Yumpin' Yudas, he's got four of de toughest cowponchers Ay ever seen."

"Wait a minute," said Henry. "You went up to the Lazy R?"

"Ay vent to de Lazy R," nodded Oscar. "Yust like you ordered, Ay vent to see how dis tanderfoot vars getting along. Yah, su-ure."

"All right, Oscar. You went to see how this tenderfoot was getting along. And what happened?"

"Ay met four of de toughest cowponchers Ay ever seen. Van of dem says to me, 'What de ha'al do you vant ha'ar?' "

"Ay told him Ay came to see how dis tanderfoot vars getting along. Yust den de tanderfoot coom out, and he introduce me to de four cowponchers. He says he hired 'em."

"Hired four cowpunchers?" gasped Hartridge. "Why—why, there aren't a hundred head of cattle on the Lazy R! What on earth is he thinking about? Who are they and where did they come from? They aren't local men, are they, Oscar?"

"Loco?"

"Not loco!" snapped Judge. "Local! Men who live in the valley."

"Yah, su-ure," nodded Oscar. "Living at de Lazy R."

"Vitrified, even unto the cerebellum," sighed Judge.

"Where are they from?" queried Henry.

"Black River City. Dey are hord-looking fallers, Hanry."

"I'll have to investigate that," declared Hartridge. "Neilan hasn't any money to pay to cowboys. Why, he hasn't enough to pay those two Mexicans. I can't understand what he's thinking about."

He got up abruptly and left the office.

"There is something queer about that Lazy R deal," declared Judge after he had gone.

"Just what?" queried Henry.

"Hartridge is too blamed interested in that ranch, Henry."

"You don't think that Neilan—"

"Is an impostor?" finished Judge. "Henry, I told you I wouldn't trust Hartridge as far as I could throw a bull by the tail."

Henry smiled thoughtfully, but finally shook his head.

"It doesn't exactly make sense, Judge. That Lazy R isn't worth the risk of puting an impostor in there."

"I realize that. Perhaps I am wrong. The young man looked honest."

"Anyway, it isn't our business, Judge."

"That's true. Henry, have you heard that Sally Morgan has made Cal Essex manager of the Quarter-Circle M?"

"No, I did not hear such a statement. Who told you?"

"I suppose that Mr. Essex circulated the report himself."

Henry polished his nose thoughtfully.

"It is possible," he admitted. "I—er—Judge, just how far is it possible to throw a bull by the tail?"

"Not a damn inch, sir. Meaning, of course, that you do not believe Mr. Essex."

"No, no, not at all. I was merely wondering if there were any records in throwing a bull by the tail. Rather impossible, it seems, because of lack of leverage, and the natural animosity of the critter. Still, it might be done. Nothing is impossible."

"One thing is," declared Judge.

"What is that, Judge?"

"Making you look at things seriously."

"You wrong me, my friend. Behind this mask of mirth lies a serious and determined spirit. I might say, a granite interior."

"Hardening of the arteries, Henry. I'll buy a drink."

OUTLAW spring was a waterhole about ten feet across and perhaps eighteen inches deep, in the bottom of a brushy swale. On two sides the brushy, cactus-covered hills stretched away for several miles. For possibly an acre the brush had been cleared away. There were several of Ab Morgan's posts still standing, but the barbwire had disappeared.

Dan Leary and Steve McClung, two of the Morgan riders, came down through the swale. McClung carried a shovel across one shoulder, while Leary carried a hammer. Cal Essex had sent them to re-fence Outlaw spring. With Roarin' Bill Rose entirely out of the picture, there was no danger.

They dismounted near the water and began assembling scattered posts.

"This makes three times we've built this damn fence," growled Leary. "She'll stay this time, y'betcha. That tenderfoot don't even know there's water over here."

"Course he don't," agreed McClung, straightening up a post. "But he shore knows how to hit with his left hand."

"Ain't that true?" agreed Leary. "Wait'll I straighten up a couple more posts, and we'll see how they line up. I like things accurate."

Leary fussed with two more posts, until they satisfied him.

"Take a squint, Steve; she's as straight as a rifle bar'l."

Steve humped over, one eye shut, close to the post.

Sock! The post jerked out of line, and a rifle shot echoed back from somewhere up on the brushy hill. Both cowboys jumped back. There was a neat, round hole in the fencepost. Possibly fifteen feet away was Steve's hat on the ground, where he had left it.

Pluck! Squee-e-e-e! A bullet ruined the crown of the hat, struck a rock and went whining away down the swale.

Such shooting was too much for Steve and Dan. Risking the chance of more shots, they raced to their horses. They mounted on the run, and headed for the high brush down the swale, then toward home.

"Tenderfoot—hell!" gasped Dan, after they were safe from further shooting. "That rifle was at least two, three hundred yards away, and he hit my hat. Hit that fencepost, too."

"Mebbe he was shootin' *at us*," suggested Steve.

"You can believe that if yuh want to—I don't. That feller's a ringer, Steve. Played tenderfoot with Cal Essex, didn't he? And now he shore made life pre-car-ious for me and you."

"That's a nice soundin' word, even if I don't know what it means. Let's go home and tell Cal Essex he can build his own

fences. I'll be blamed if I'm goin' to turn carpenter and git dry-gulched."

THERE had been a warm argument between Sally Morgan and Cal Essex that morning. After breakfast Cal had come to Sally.

"It's about my pay," he told her. "As foreman of this spread I've been gettin' sixty a month. As general manager I reckon I'll have to get about a hundred and fifty."

"When and if I ever make you general manager," replied Sally coldly.

"I've taken over the job," he assured her.

"And I still sign the checks for the Quarter-Circle M," reminded Sally. "You'll get sixty—or nothing."

"You're not tryin' to make me mad, are yuh?" he asked.

"You may get mad, if it suits you, Mr. Essex; but you aren't going to blackmail me."

Essex laughed at her. "Blackmail is a hard word, Sally."

"Miss Morgan to you," she said quickly.

"And another thing," remarked Essex calmly. "Tell that tenderfoot from the Lazy R that he ain't wanted here. I don't reckon he'll ever come here again—but if he does—"

"After what I saw," said Sally with the trace of a smile, "I shouldn't think he would be afraid to come here again."

Essex flushed hotly. "It won't be with fists next time."

"From behind a tree?" asked Sally.

"Wait a minute!" snarled Essex. "I'm not that kind."

"Any man," declared Sally coldly, "who will steal cattle on orders will shoot a man from behind a tree."

Essex turned on his heel then and walked swiftly away to the stable. He saddled a horse and started for Tonto City. Sally had more nerve than he had thought she had. He had thought she would knuckle down under the threat of exposing Ab Morgan as a thief—but she was not knuckling down very fast.

Cal Essex realized that Sally Morgan would never marry him. With that hope gone, all he could expect was a chance to run the ranch and try to make some easy money for himself. But he was not going to let Neilan see Sally—not if he could prevent it. That knockout blow still rankled in Essex's heart, especially since he was sure Sally had seen it delivered.

"I'll get that tenderfoot," he swore to himself. "I'll make him wish he'd never seen Wild Horse Valley."

AND while Essex rode to Tonto City, and Steve and Dan rode back to the ranch from Outlaw spring, Frank Neilan rode up to the patio gate at the Morgan ranch. He dismounted and tied his horse. Sally saw him from a window and came into the patio.

"It was so awful lonesome at my place," he told her.

"You aren't afraid to come here?" she queried.

"My dear lady, what is there to fear?"

"After what happened the last time?"

Neilan laughed and shook his head. "Nothing happened to me."

Sally's eyes were serious as she said, "But don't you understand that some men don't always fight fair?"

"Why, yes, I've heard that said—but Miss Morgan, surely you aren't warning me against your own men."

"I have no control over the personal likes and dislikes of my men, Mr. Neilan."

"No, that's true," he agreed. "Maybe I should have stayed at home. From your angle, it would have been the wise thing to do—but I never have been noted for my wisdom. It—it makes me feel like a trespasser. I—er—really rode over here to ask you a very personal question, but now—"

"What is it?" asked Sally curiously.

"I hope you won't be angry with me, Miss Morgan. Mr. Hartridge told me that you're engaged to Mr. Essex. Of course, if you are, possibly that would account for his actions."

"I see," mused Sally soberly. "Is your object—matrimony, Mr. Neilan?"

"Why, no—that is—well, I didn't want Mr. Essex to think—"

"Just what did you mean, Mr. Neilan?"

"I don't . . . know," admitted Neilan helplessly. "Golly, I guess I mixed that one all up, didn't I?"

"Then let's drop that subject," suggested Sally with a smile. "How are you getting along at the ranch?"

"Fine. I mean I'm getting along very well. I can almost understand Thunder and Lightning now."

Sally laughed. "Have they explained the difference between a horse and a cow?"

"No, I haven't had that pleasure. I'll ask them. Or do you mean that I don't know the difference?"

"The last time you were here you told me you didn't."

"That's right. But I have learned a lot since then."

They were laughing, as Dan Leary and Steve McClung stalked into the patio. At sight of Neilan the two punchers stopped short, looking keenly at him.

"Is Cal Essex around?" queried Steve.

"He left about an hour ago," replied Sally. "Is there something?"

"I'll tell yuh there's somethin'. Cal sent me and Dan down to fence Outlaw spring, and some dry-gulcher drove us out with a rifle. If yuh ask me, it's the Lazy R. They'd be the ones to do it."

Sally looked quickly at Frank Neilan.

"What is the meaning of 'dry-gulcher'?" asked Neilan.

"A feller who hides in the brush and shoots yuh in the back," replied Steve, and added, "if yuh don't happen to know."

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask," replied Neilan.

"Yea-a-ah! Well, I don't mind tellin' yuh that you could have been that dry-gulcher. You could have cut across the canyon and beat us here, so yuh could prove an alibi. You cached yore rifle, before yuh showed up, eh? Well, that's fine. If yuh ask me, yo're a smart *tenderfoot,* Neilan."

"Neither of you were hit?" queried Sally.

"Na-a-aw," growled Steve.

"Sounds like my marksmanship," smiled Neilan. "Except for the fact that I don't know where Outlaw spring is located, and that I haven't fired a rifle in over a year, it might have been me."

"We didn't expect yuh to admit it," growled Dan.

"It couldn't have been Mr. Neilan," declared Sally.

Steve scowled darkly, by no means convinced.

"We'll see what Cal Essex has to say about it."

The two cowboys stalked out and went to the bunkhouse.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be here when Cal Essex comes back," said Sally. "No, I'm not asking you to run away, Mr. Neilan; but there's no use for you to be inviting trouble."

He turned and looked for a moment at the retreating cowboys; then he nodded.

"You're right, Miss Morgan," he said. "And thank you for the advice. There really is enough accidental trouble, without looking for it purposely. Thank you for a pleasant hour."

He walked to the patio gate. Then he turned and looked back at Sally, who had stopped at the door.

"You really haven't answered my question, you know, Miss Morgan."

"You might tell Mr. Hartridge that he was misinformed," she replied.

"Golly! Say! Isn't this a wonderful day?"

But the door had closed. Neilan smiled foolishly and went to his horse.

Down at the stable, Dan and Steve watched him ride away on the old horse.

"Wait'll we tell Cal about that dry-gulchin'," said Steve.

"Yeah! And when he knows Neilan has been courtin' Sally in the patio. Whooee-e-e-e!"

When Cal Essex came back from Tonto City and was told what had happened at Outlaw spring, his wrath blazed profanely. But when he was told that Frank Neilan had come to see Sally, he went, in the

vernacular of the range, straight up. Cal was already about half drunk, and now he was completely mad.

"All right," he said ominously. "Don't say anything where that woman can hear it, but just as soon as it's dark, we're goin' to the Lazy R. Either me or that tenderfoot are leavin' this valley—and I like it here pretty well. We'll wear masks, in case them two Mexicans are there. No use advertisin' ourselves."

"I'd just as soon git me a couple Mexicans," declared McClung.

"Do as yuh like," gritted Essex. "All I want is Neilan—and I'll shore make that handsome road-runner wish he'd kept his hands off this outfit."

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT THAT FAILED

THE more that Henry Harrison Conroy thought about the Lazy R, the more curious he became. He got especially curious when he saw that Sam Hartridge, the lawyer, did not take his horse and buggy and go back to Scorpion Bend. Hartridge instead spent the day at the Tonto Saloon, drinking quite a lot. Henry said nothing to Judge Van Treece, but watched Hartridge, who seemed to be merely waiting.

It was after dark when Henry saw Hartridge at last go to the livery stable. There the lawyer procured a saddle horse and moments later rode away in the direction of the Lazy R. Henry saddled his own horse and followed him. Evidently Hartridge had intentionally waited for dark before making the trip, and Henry was all the more curious to know his reason for the trip.

It was a long five miles over the old road. Henry rode slowly. There were no dogs at the Lazy R; so there was a possibility of his being able to get in close enough to hear something. There was a dim light in the main room, shining through flimsy curtains.

Henry dismounted before reaching the gate, and tied his horse off the road. There was not a sound to break the stillness as he walked carefully toward the house. His goal was a lighted window, but just before he reached there he heard the rattle of hoofs beyond the house. It was the Morgan outfit coming to visit Frank Neilan, but Henry did not know this.

He could see the milling horses, as the men dismounted, but it was too dark for identification. He crouched in near the window, unable to see the interior, but trusting that he might hear something.

There was nothing furtive about the Morgan men. Masked with handkerchiefs, and with guns in their hands, they came boldly to the door, yanked it open and strode into the first of the three rooms. Including Cal Essex, there were six masked men in the party.

There the six men hesitated. The door closed quietly behind them, and they heard the rasp of a fastener and the click of a padlock. They all looked quickly at each other.

"Somebody locked it!" whispered a cowboy.

"Look!" grunted Essex. He was pointing at the table, where a large square of cardboard had been propped in the light of the lamp. On it in bold black letters was printed this warning!

DON'T MOVE!
DON'T PULL YOUR GUNS!
WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

"What in the hell!" gasped Essex nervously. He jerked his head from side to side as he tried to puzzle out the warning.

"They locked the door behind us," whispered a cowboy.

"They've trapped us!" gasped another. "Listen! Horses runnin'!"

"Trapped—hell!" exploded Essex. He picked up a chair, ran across the room and flung it through a window. Essex was halfway through the window before the others realized what he intended doing.

Then, like five frightened rabbits, all trying to get into the same hole at the same time, the five cowboys made a dive for the smashed window.

Henry Harrison Conroy had no idea

what was going on in the house—not even when a heavy chair smashed through the window, taking most of the window with it. A leg of the chair hit Henry on the head, knocking him flat on his back, while six galloping cowboys jumped, stepped and stumbled on him. As fast as he tried to lift his head, it was knocked back on the ground.

Dazed and bleeding he got to his feet, stumbled toward the corner of the house. At that point a man ran into him. But Henry did not go down this time; not Henry Harrison Conroy, the Sheriff of Wild Horse Valley.

His groping left hand hooked over a belt, and he began to belabor his victim with his right fist. Not with any science nor desire to reach a vital spot, because he was too dazed for that; but with an aroused fighting instinct, brought out from being battered around.

His victim was grunting, groaning and whimpering, but Henry was relentless. Smash . . . smash . . . smash, with the regularity of a ticking clock. Then he swayed back for a supreme effort, put every ounce of his weight and muscle in one mighty swing—and missed.

In fact, his miss was so mighty that he whirled himself around, caught his heel, stumbled wildly and went flat on his back, with an audible *woo-o-osh!* And for the next several moments, Henry was "out."

WHEN consciousness returned he found himself gazing into the light of a lantern, held in the hand of Frank Neilan. A few feet away, propped up on one elbow, was a disheveled object. Henry now realized that this was what was left of Sam Hartridge, the attorney.

"It seems that you gentlemen might have selected a better place to fight," said Neilan soberly.

"Fight?" queried Henry huskily. "Was I fighting Mr. Hartridge?"

"It seems that you were, Mr. Conroy."

"Well," Henry blinked solemnly in the lantern light, "it—it was a nice night for it."

"Wh-what on earth hap-happened?" whispered Hartridge.

Hartridge had one eye swollen nearly shut, a split lip, a bruise on one cheek, and he had lost his collar and tie.

"Don't you know?" asked Henry.

"Certainly not!"

"Well, neither do I," said Henry. "I—I remember something about—well, something was thrown through a window—and hit me. Then I have a rather hazy remembrance of men jumping on me, kicking me. That," he squinted up at Neilan, "didn't happen to be you, did it, Mr. Neilan?"

"No, I had nothing to do with it."

Neilan placed the lantern on the ground and disappeared around the house in the darkness. Henry caressed his sore head and looked at Hartridge, who managed to get to his hands and knees.

"I—I feel awful bad," he told Henry. "Awful bad."

"I will match sore spots with you, sir," declared Henry. "If you—"

Henry hesitated. Several men had suddenly moved in close to them, and their faces were concealed with masks.

"That damn, fat-nosed sheriff!" snorted one man disgustedly.

"And that bat-eared lawyer from Scorpion Bend!" exclaimed another.

"Judging from the remarks, we are among friends," said Henry dryly.

"Yo're crazy, if yuh think so, feller!" snapped another. "Where are our horses?"

Henry felt in his pockets and shook his head.

"Think yo're damn funny, eh? Where didja put our horses?"

"Mr. Hartridge," said Henry, "have you misplaced the horses of these masqueraders?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

The sheriff nodded with an appearance of deep concern.

"Well, neither do I; but there is no harm in asking."

His air of innocence, genuine as it was, seemed lost upon his masked and surly questioner.

"Where's Frank Neilan?" asked the man savagely.

"Great Heavens!" gasped Henry. "Is he missing, too?"

The man cursed bitterly and very profanely.

"Well," remarked Henry dryly, "after all that, there is little left for any ordinary curses."

"Some day," promised the man, "I'm goin' to tack yore ears on a fencepost."

Two of the men went around to the front of the house, but came back quickly. They were still cursing.

"The front door is still padlocked," one of them reported. "There ain't anybody in the house."

"Well, we won't do any good around here," decided the one who had filed a claim on Henry's ears. "No use huntin' for them broncs in the dark. C'mon."

They moved away in a body. Henry got to his feet, flexed his muscles and walked around in a circle.

"What outfit was that?" asked Hartridge painfully.

"I'm not even making a guess," sighed Henry. "If I wasn't sure that Jessie James and Billy the Kid were both dead—"

"They want your ears, Conroy."

"I vote unanimously with them, sir; I want them, too. Shall we ride back to Tonto City together—if we can bend ourselves to fit into a saddle?"

Hartridge tested his legs and arms painfully.

"I think we're a pair of fools, Conroy," he said.

"You merely *think* we are? Oh, yes I understand; a lawyer never commits himself. I do not mind stating that I *know* we are. And if it comes down to direct testimony, I'm sure I can prove it."

Groaning and grunting, Hartridge went down into the brush to get his horse, while Henry limped down the road and untied his steed.

"As I have often said," he remarked to the horse, "anything might happen in Arizona—and it did tonight."

Hartridge rode slowly out of the brush, and they moved off down the road to Tonto City.

"IT doesn't sound reasonable, Henry," declared Judge, as they sat in the office next morning. "Men jumping through windows onto you, masked men threatening to tack your ears to a post, when you would not tell them where you put their horses. Isn't it possible that you dreamed all of this, sir?"

Henry groaned and shifted in his chair.

"Does one dream bumps and bruises such as mine?" he countered. "Just in my middle is the perfect print of a high-heel boot sole, etched in a gorgeous purple. I know I couldn't have dreamed that; not even if I believed in dreams. Go to Scorpion Bend and take a look at the estimable Mr. Hartridge. If I dreamed mine, what sort of a nightmare did that man have?"

Judge nodded thoughtfully, his eyes closed.

"Henry," he said, "I have about come to the conclusion that there is some mystery connected with the Lazy R Ranch."

"Remarkable!" grunted Henry. "I congratulate you, sir."

"Yes," continued Judge, ignoring the sarcasm, "I believe there is. And I have a notion to go out there and sift it to the bottom."

"Very good," agreed Henry. He reached across his desk and picked up a pencil. "Your real name is Cornelius, isn't it, Judge?"

"Why, yes. But what—"

"Merely a peculiar kink in my make-up, Judge. I detest seeing nicknames on tombstones."

"Then you think they would resent investigation?"

"Look at me."

"You, sir, were snooping."

"I suppose there is a difference."

AT about the same time that morning, Sam Hartridge and Ira Hallam were in Hartridge's office at Scorpion Bend. Judging from the appearance of the law-

yer's face, Henry did a fairly good job as a fighter. Hallan's fat face was the picture of deepest gloom.

"You didn't question Neilan at all, Sam?" he asked.

"How in the devil could I? The only time I saw him was when he came with that lantern. Even if I had been in shape to talk, you couldn't expect me to ask questions in front of the sheriff."

"You—you didn't see the four men—the ones that damn fool hired?"

"I didn't!" snapped Hartridge. "I crawled up to a window on the far side of the house, trying to hear something. I had been there a few minutes when I heard riders coming. They went into the house. Then I heard the horses running away.

"Then I heard a noise, which sounded as though a window had been smashed out, and men were running in the house. Well, I—I wanted to see what was going on; so I ran around the house, where at least six men attacked me. That was all I knew until I awoke and found—er—Neilan, standing there with a lantern, and the sheriff sitting on the ground."

"Then the men came back, Sam?"

"I suppose it was the same ones."

"What explanation did the sheriff offer, when you rode back to Tonto City together?"

"Not a damn one. All he said was that he believed he had discovered latent possibilities in himself."

"What did he mean by that, Sam?"

"I don't know, and I felt too miserable to ask him."

"Do you suppose he suspected you of something?"

"No more than I suspected him," growled Hartridge. "Damn it, Ira, that will can't be probated, unless we can prove that Bill Rose is dead. Not a thing on that ranch can be sold until after it is probated. I never thought about that."

"You're a hell of a lawyer, Sam!"

"We won't argue about that. But I am the administrator of the will, without bonds, and I believe the court will allow our man to occupy and operate the ranch, until everything is settled. It's a sure thing that Rose is at the bottom of Devil's Chimney; so we will eventually get that mine. In the meantime, I believe it can be discovered, and some ore dug out. How would that be?"

Ira Hallam shrugged his shoulders.

"You're supposed to know the law, Sam; I'm only an assayer."

FOR a young man, who should feel that he was between the devil and the deep sea, Frank Neilan seemed to be getting a lot of sober fun out of the situation. Lightning was doing the cooking, while Thunder waited on the table, and the four outlaws were really enjoying life at the Lazy R.

Pecos Charley Peters and Sody Slade were the ones who had fired the shots at the two Morgan cowboys at Outlaw spring.

"We didn't aim to hurt 'em," chuckled Pecos.

"They blamed me for it," said Neilan.

"That's why they came here last night," laughed Sody. "I told yuh they would. They was all primed up to hurt somebody. That sign on the table was shore a great idea. You'll have to give me credit for that."

"It cost me a window," reminded Neilan.

"You got off cheap," declared Clovis. "If we hadn't been here to help yuh, they'd have killed you. Yo're green as hell, Neilan."

"Oh, I admit it," laughed Neilan. "But sooner or later they'll know you're here, and there'll be a pitched battle."

Pecos Charley hitched his gunbelt.

"Suits me," grinned Pecos. "I like trouble. But I'd shore like to know why that fat sheriff was here. Do yuh reckon he's lookin' for us?"

"I hope for his sake that he don't find us," remarked Zibe Tucker.

"Well, don't be a danged fool—and start shootin'," advised Pecos. "It's against the law to kill sheriffs in Arizona."

"And don't forget that my lawyer was here, too," said Neilan.

"You let us handle him," said Clovis. "We can't let that feller go too far."

"There is also Ira Hallam, the assayer," added Neilan.

"We'll handle him, too," stated Tucker.

Frank Neilan laughed quietly as he lighted a cigarette.

"Did somethin' strike you funny?" queried Pecos.

"It did," smiled Neilan. "I was thinking of an old, old proverb: Too many crooks spoil the broth."

"It was 'cooks,' wasn't it?" asked Sody Slade.

"Not in this case, Sody. Here is the situation: You fellows come in here, dodging the law, discover gold on Morgan's land, which you proceed to steal and hide in a tunnel on the Lazy R. Bill Rose dies and leaves the Lazy R to his nephew, which prevents you from realizing on your theft.

"A crooked lawyer and a crooked assayer, who know that Bill Rose discovered a rich vein on his property, pick me up, make me the legal heir, and plant me on this ranch. You gentlemen force me to hire you to help run the ranch, when everybody knows that the ranch is without any visible means of support. You have managed to continue Rose's feud with the Morgan outfit—and the sheriff's office is suspicious. Isn't that worth laughing about?"

"Do you weesh chili con carne for sopper?" asked Lightning, "or do you weesh chili con carne weeth frijole? Or maybe you weesh theese frijole weeth yourself."

"W'at he means," explained Thunder, "ees that you can have chili and beef by myself, or you can have frijole yourself and theese beef and chili together with eath other, and eef you do not weesh for these beef and frijole, you can have—I hope."

"That will be all right," nodded Neilan gravely, and added, "I hope so, too."

"Just what the heck are we goin' to have for supper?" asked Pecos Charley.

"Beef and beans, with a few chili peppers for seasoning," replied Neilan.

"Is that all?"

"That is all the ranch can afford," declared Neilan. "I have just a dollar and thirty cents left. If you gents expect to live here, you'll have to contribute to the larder."

"Yeah, I reckon that's right," agreed Pecos. "Well, we know how to get money, when we need some."

OVER at the Quarter-Circle M, Cal Essex was assembling his information. Through a pair of field glasses he had watched the ranch house of the Lazy R, and had seen the four strangers. Essex knew every man in Wild Horse Valley, or thought he did, until he saw these four.

Thunder and Lightning, riding home from Tonto City next day, were stopped by Essex and three of his cowboys. The two Mexicans were fairly well filled with tequila, and when they understood that it meant information or losing their ears, they became willing to talk.

Cal Essex wanted to know who the four strangers were. It seemed a simple request, backed up by a sharp knife; so Lightning told Essex and his men all about Pecos Charley Peters, Sody Slade, Ed Clovis and Zibe Tucker.

"They was dodgin' the law, eh?" queried Essex.

"Theese law ees want to 'ang them," admitted Lightning.

"Murderers, eh?"

"*Por Dios!*" exclaimed Lightning. "They keel mos' everybodee een New Mejico."

"All right," nodded Essex. "That's fine. But remember—don't tell anybody that yuh told us—or I'll cut off yore ears."

"We cross my heart and hope you die," replied Lightning fervently.

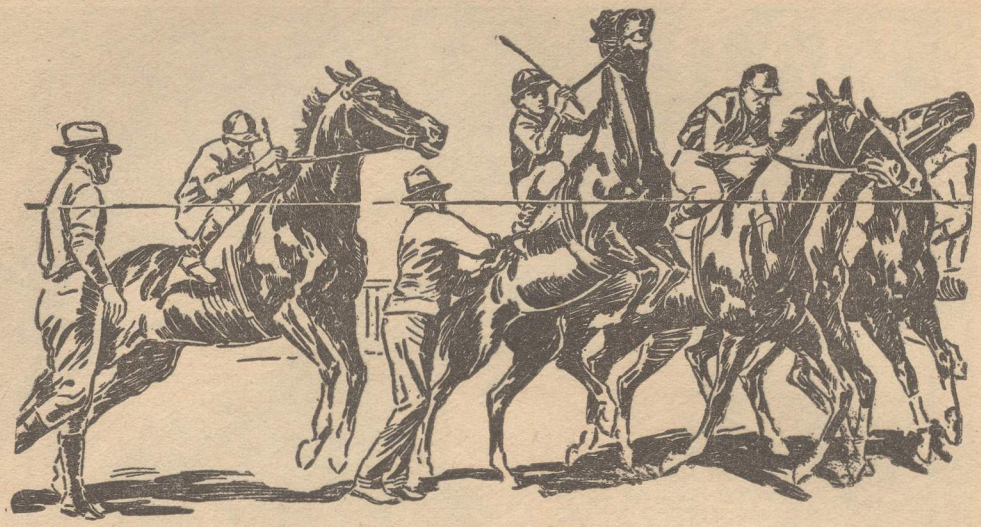
"Well, that's fine," replied Essex. "Go home and shut up."

"Or lose your ears," added Thunder.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK


MEN 9
Air Wizard
GERMAN AIR ACE, ERNST UDET, IS STILL RIDING THE LUCK AND COURAGE THAT MADE HIM THE SOLE HIGH-RANKING FLYER TO SURVIVE THE WORLD WAR. STUNTING HIS PLANES AND GLIDERS, UDET HAS LEARNED TO LOOK DEATH IN THE FACE--AND GRIN.
HE DOWNED 62 ALLIED PLANES!
UDET
BAVARIAN BORN, UDET FIRST FELT THE URGE FOR FLIGHT AS A 13-YEAR-OLD READING ABOUT THE WRIGHT BROTHERS. UNDERSIZED, PLUCKY, HE HELPED FORM THE AERO CLUB OF MUNICH, WHOSE MEMBERS, SPROUTS LIKE HIMSELF, SAILED HOME-MADE MODEL PLANES AND GLIDERS. IN 1912, HE LED HIS MATES INTO THE AIR, TAKING OFF IN A HAND MADE GLIDER. 30 SECONDS LATER HE NOSEDIVED INTO A TREE. THE GLIDER SMASHED, BUT ERNST TUMBLED OUT INTO A CABBAGE-PATCH, STOOD UP--AND GRINNED!
HE WENT INTO THE WAR ON A MOTORCYCLE, AS A DISPATCH RIDER, BUT DIDN'T REST UNTIL HE'D GOT INTO THE FLYING CORPS. VON RICHTHOFEN, IMPRESSED WITH UDET'S SPUNK AND DARING, ENROLLED HIM IN HIS FAMOUS CIRCUS; AND IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE UDET HAD MADE A NAME FOR HIMSELF SECOND ONLY TO THE RED KNIGHT'S!
HIS PET STUNT WAS TO TACKLE A WHOLE FLIGHT OF ENEMY PLANES, SHOOT DOWN AS MANY AS HE COULD, AND THEN SKIM OUT OF DANGER. IN SUCH A COMBAT, HE BROUGHT DOWN THREE OUT OF FIVE BRITISH PLANES AT ONE TIME!

Next Week: Blackburn and Short—Courage at Sea and in Sky



Grand National

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

Author of "Off-Side," "Golden Gloves," etc.

EVEN with half a million at stake, Philip Jadwin wasn't interested in running a horse at Aintree. Philip Jadwin didn't like horse racing, and particularly he hated steeplechasing—hated it for what it did to the animals that he loved. When he was young, he'd seen his father's Grand National entry, Bright Princess, impaled on a stake just when it seemed she was going to fulfill Lucky Jadwin's lifelong ambition to be the owner of an Aintree victor.

That had been a black day for the Jadwins. The fabulous Lucky, Philip's father, ex-cowboy, oil millionaire and gambler, had counted so much on Bright Princess to win that when she was killed he was afraid that at last his lucky streak had broken.

And when the acid-tongued Sir Humphrey Tarrant goaded him about his failure, Lucky threw discretion to the four winds and made the half-million dollar wager: five hundred thousand dollars deposited in a London bank against Sir Humphrey's estates that within ten years the Jadwin stables would produce a Grand National winner.

Eight Grand Nationals passed—eight failures for Lucky Jadwin. Lucky's luck had really deserted him. When he died, he left Philip nothing but his depleted stables, that weird wager, and endless debts.

TO PAY the debts, Philip auctions the stables, but buys in one big gray—Gray Dawn, dubbed "Bad Bill"—for Danny Shane, the Jadwins' faithful trainer. And when Guy Tarrant, Sir Humphrey's son, offers him enough money to settle the rest of Lucky's obligations if Philip will forfeit the wager, Philip almost agrees.

But things happen. First, he overhears Guy Tarrant make a remark that he, Philip, had begged Guy to settle the wager for a small amount of cash. Second, he finds a shady private detective spying on Dan Shane's farm, trying to buy Gray Dawn because Guy is afraid the horse is potential Grand National timber.

And the third and most important thing is Philip's growing affection and confidence in the big gray horse—affection and confidence that are shared by old Dan Shane and by Connie Heath, the girl who is too rich for Philip to marry.

GRAY DAWN proves himself in the Fairfield Club hunters' trials, and once more Guy Tarrant makes an unsuccessful attempt

This story began in the Argosy for May 1

to buy Philip off. Guy's arrogant coolness arouses in Philip the same sort of antipathy that Lucky had felt for Guy's father. And in Philip burns now a hot determination to smash all Tarrants far and wide.

Talk of the wager, of Philip, of Gray Dawn is on every tongue, on every front page in America and England. Philip is too poor to afford the cost of training Gray Dawn for the meet, but he doesn't lack for backers interested in a share of the million dollar jackpot. The most unwelcome of these is Speed Carey, night-club owner and racketeer, who, when Philip wants no part of his proposition, makes unpleasantly unveiled threats about what might be going to happen to Philip and to Gray Dawn in the very immediate future.

Philip finally accepts the *New York Globe's* offer to back him financially in exchange for Philip's exclusive story of the race.

MOST disturbing incident of all is a visit from Jessica Tarrant, Guy's violet-eyed sister. Philip remembers her from years before as the only one who had shown any sympathy for a boy's grief over the fate of Bright Princess.

"We can't afford to lose," Jessica tells him frankly. "And betraying one's family is not a pleasant job. But you have a sporting chance to win and I want you to have that chance unhampered."

Guy Tarrant, it seems, has found a taker for half of the Tarrant bet. Philip sees nothing wrong in that.

"No," Jessica says. "I suppose not. It's the man who worries me. I think he means to make certain that you do not win. His name, you see, is Speed Carey. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

DANGEROUS ALLIANCE

JESSICA'S eyes widened as she saw the sharp and sudden change that came over Philip's face at the mention of Walter Carey's name. Her ivory white hands were clasped very tightly together in front of her.

"You know him, Philip?"

"I know him," said Philip harshly. A wave of fierce anger had swept over him that turned his blue eyes very cold. Carey! "When did he approach your brother?"

"Last night—about ten o'clock. I had seen him before, at the hunter trials at Fairview. As a matter of fact he and Guy had some conversation together at the course, but I had no idea what it was about until he came to the hotel later. He asked Guy if he had made his decision. It wasn't till then that I knew what he proposed doing."

Philip laughed, mirthlessly. "It might amuse you to know that a few hours earlier he had offered to finance me if I would give him a share of my winnings."

"And you refused!"

"I refused because the man is a crook!" Philip said sharply. "I refused because I was certain he would rest at nothing to assure me of winning. I didn't want to win that way."

"Then—then I *was* right about him! He's dangerous."

"Dangerous!" Philip reached out and took a cigarette from his case and lit it. "I would say, Jessica, that you and your brother can go back to England with the comfortable assurance that the Tarrant estates are no longer in danger."

"Bad as that, eh?"

"There isn't any use kidding about it," said Philip bitterly. "Speed Carey doesn't lose bets of that size."

"But Philip, that simply mustn't be! I—I shouldn't object to going to the authorities with this information. I know it would be the end between me and father and Guy. But you have a right to a fair chance, Philip." She was terribly in earnest.

Philip smiled sardonically, but his voice was very gentle. "You've done a swell thing—coming here this way, Jessica. But there isn't anything you can do about it, my dear. Going to the authorities would simply make things unpleasant for you, and it wouldn't alter the situation by a hair."

"But Philip, if the man is a criminal—?"

"That statement," said Philip dryly, "is not for publication. Mr. Carey would sue me for defamation of character and probably win his case. He's a criminal, but

he walks our city streets a free man. He's a racketeer, but the law has been unable to touch him. He's been suspected of murder, but he'll never burn for it."

"But if it were known that he was sharing this bet with my father and Guy?"

"It would damage their reputations in certain quarters, and that's all!" Philip said grimly. "No one will ever be able to touch them—or Speed Carey. I know how Carey works."

JESSICA reached out and took a cigarette for herself. Philip held a match for her and then she leaned back in the chair and blew a little cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"What will Carey do to you, Philip?" she asked, quite steadily.

"Probably nothing," said Philip. "But he doesn't have to do anything to me to keep me from winning at Aintree. You see, Jessica, the thing is so problematical. My horse may not round into condition for the race. He may suffer some injury before I can take him to England. Carey won't do a thing until he's made certain that the laws of chance aren't working in his favor."

"And if you finally get to Aintree with your horse in shape to run?"

"How could I prove, in a race like the Grand National, that there is any criminal intent if a jockey on another horse smashes into me at a pump and knocks me out of the race?"

"That would be a foul."

"Indeed it would be," said Philip, "but you can't win any race if you're lying in a ditch. You lose races on fouls—you never win 'em. And all Mr. Carey wants is to see me lose. It would make very little difference to him if another horse was disqualified in the process."

"You think he might enter a horse himself?"

"He might. But that is a last ditch method, Jessica. I think Mr. Carey would try to make certain that Bill never went to the post. He has months in which to get at the horse—damn him! I can't hire a squad of policemen to sleep in the barn with Bill. I can't prove any criminal intent. The mere fact that Walter Carey now shares in this bet is no legal proof of any kind of skullduggery. I'm afraid, my dear, that Speed Carey is an antagonist with too many weapons for me to fight successfully."

"Does that mean that you'll give up?" Jessica asked. Her violet eyes regarded Philip steadily.

"Not by a damn sight!" Philip flashed. His lean brown face looked hard as granite. "I shall fight it through to the last ditch. But I'm afraid I haven't enough guns for Carey."

"I'm glad, Philip. I'm glad you're going to fight," Jessica said. Her eyes shone very brightly. "And I want you to understand one thing from the outset. I'm fighting on your side!"

"Jessica! My dear girl! You must stay out of this. You've done a great deal more than you need to have done already," Philip said sharply.

"For nine years I've prayed that you'd never win," Jessica said. "Every time I've walked through the garden and the woods at home I've prayed that you'd never win, because that would mean that the place would be yours. But it never occurred to me that the bet wasn't fair. It never occurred to me that the Tarrants wouldn't play their end of the game like gentlemen and sportsmen. But this—! This makes it all different, Philip. You've been straight as a string from the start. If Guy had behaved himself decently the whole thing would be over and forgotten by now. Now you have a right to a fair chance—because if you lost any other way but fairly and squarely I could never enjoy my home again. I'd always think that perhaps it should belong to you."

"That's a very romantic way of looking at it, Jessica," he said, gently.

"It's the only way I can look at it," she said. "And I *can* help. So far I have been completely in Guy's and father's confidence. I'll know if they're planning anything that will harm you—and I'll tell you.

Oh, I know that isn't playing fair, Philip! But you can only fight fire with fire, deceit with deceit!"

"You must forget it," said Philip. "You're not dealing with your father and brother alone. You're dealing with Speed Carey. By warning me now, so that I can be on my guard, you've done more than the fair thing. Now stay out of it, or you'll put yourself in a very dangerous position."

Jessica Tarrant stood up. "Whether you like it or not," she said, "I'm fighting on your side. It's the only side I can fight on and go on living with myself." She held out her hand.

Philip took it in both of his, impulsively. "You're a swell egg," he said, and grinned. "But you're quite mad, Jessica. This is no game for you to mix in."

"All the same, I must," she said.

As Philip looked into the lovely, straightforward face he felt his pulse beating just a little faster than it should. "I'm very proud to have you for an ally," he said softly, "but—"

"There are no 'buts,' Philip," said Jessica Tarrant.

"AND so," said Philip grimly, "on the same day that the ways seems to open up for me to compete, Mr. Speed Carey plans to shut the door in my face!"

Philip, Connie Heath, and Jimmy Baxter sat at a corner table in a little French restaurant where Philip liked to dine. They were at the brandy and coffee stage, and Philip had loaded his pipe and was leaning back in his chair. During dinner he had told Connie of the *Globe's* plan to finance his venture, and of his subsequent call from Jessica Tarrant and the information she had brought with her.

Connie had a curious tight set at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were narrowed to keep out the smoke from her cigarette.

"What's she like?" Connie asked.

"What's who like?" Philip said.

"Jessica Tarrant, you ass. Whom have we been talking about!"

"Oh," said Philip. He tamped down the tobacco in his pipe. "She seems like a very decent sort," he remarked casually. "She certainly meant to play fair with me."

"And boy, is she an eyeful!" said Jimmy Baxter.

Connie crushed out her cigarette, her eyes averted from Philip's face. "It's a nasty mess," she said. "That man Carey gave me the creeps when we saw him at Danny's place. If he's moved in with the opposition it—it makes things look a little less promising."

"Decidedly," said Philip. And then he brought his fist down on the table. "When you think that a rat like that can walk around this town, free to prey on anyone he chooses—"

"But what can you do, Philip? How can you fight him?"

"I can't do anything until I get a glimmer of what he plans to do himself. And even if I can guess at that—and I think I can—Lord knows what I can do to stymie him." He looked at Baxter with a crooked little smile. "Your boss may not think so highly of his deal with me now!"

"Don't be nuts," said Baxter, his eyes bright. "This makes a better story than ever."

"You can't print accusations against Carey in the paper," Philip said.

"Not by name. But we can say that crooked interests have taken a hand in the game; that you're in danger; that your horse is in danger. Hell, man, that will keep the story hot as a rivet."

Connie was twisting her napkin tightly around her fingers. "Philip, I've been urging you to go ahead with this thing for weeks. Now I wish you would give it up. It isn't worth the risk. That man Carey has killer's eyes. He won't stop at anything to—to—"

"Do you think I'll lie down and play dead for Carey!" Philip flared. "If ever there was any doubt in my mind about this business it's gone. I can't turn down a challenge like this, even if I wanted to. Lucky wouldn't have quit under these circumstances. Neither can I."

"GOOD boy!" Baxter said, enthusiastically. "We'll fight—and we aren't so damned helpless either, Miss Heath. Publicity is a great weapon. We'll play this story up till everyone in the country will know that some crook is gunning for Philip and his horse. We'll keep the spotlight of publicity on this affair so brightly that Carey won't have any desire to make a move until it's absolutely necessary. That should give you time to get ready. With Miss Tarrant ready to tip their hand if they plan anything, with the *Globe* ready to place its resources at your services, I don't think you're exactly helpless, Jadwin."

Philip looked at him keenly. "You really think the paper will take an active part in the fight?"

"With the exclusive right to the biggest story in years? Of course they'll take an active part. They'll hire private investigators to chase down murderers in the hope of scooping the police. I think they'll pay out dough to help protect you and that horse of yours. I think Speed Carey has bitten off a bigger chunk than he knows."

"Let's have another drink on that!" said Philip. He beckoned the waiter. While they waited for drinks Jimmy Baxter leaned forward.

"Forget Carey for a minute," he said. "Give me a line on what you plan to do to get your horse ready."

"He's got to be raced," said Philip. "Jumping in someone's back yard or in a hunter trial has no element of competition in it. I've seen horses that were hell on wheels in a hunter trial that would fold up when they had to compete with other horses. He needs experience. That's the only thing he lacks."

"Have you any doubt about Gray Dawn being able to stand up in competition?"

Philip smiled. "I'll be the most surprised guy in the world if he bats an eyelash. All the same he's got to be put through the mill. And that's where Carey's going to have his best chance. The horse has to travel from place to place, stay in strange barns. With so much money at stake you can be certain that Carey will go plenty high to touch stable hands, jockeys, and hangers-on. If he wants to get at the horse I'm afraid that sooner or later he will. But if he does—" Philip's face hardened.

IT was later in the evening after Baxter had left them that Connie drove Philip downtown in her roadster. She was unusually silent, but Philip, engrossed in his own thoughts, failed to notice it. They scarcely said anything to each other on the way. At last the car drew up outside the building where Connie lived. When they were out together in the evening Philip always took the car on to the garage for Connie and then walked to his own place which was just a couple of blocks away.

"It's funny," Connie said. "This morning I was all steamed up over your going out for the race. Now it's different." She laughed. "I wasn't much good as a ways and means committee. Everything happened without my lifting a finger."

"It certainly was a stroke of luck, Baxter turning up with that offer from the *Globe*," Philip said.

"It makes me feel as if I didn't have any part in it any more," said Connie. The tone of her voice made Philip look at her sharply.

"Hey, what's eating you?" he said. "You know what this whole business means to us! If I come through, Connie—"

"You're apt to come through on a stretcher, now that Carey's in it," she said, and her voice broke sharply.

"Connie, don't be an idiot. It's the horse that'll be in danger. That's bad enough, but it needn't worry you."

"No?" Connie asked sharply. "And if something happens to the horse you'll go after Carey—and that will be that. Darn it all, Philip, I want some place in this. There's Danny, looking out for Bill, and Baxter taking care of your finances and publicity, and Jessica Tarrant spying for you in the enemy camp—and me sitting and doing nothing but cheering rather weakly from the sidelines."

Philip frowned. "I wish Jessica would keep out of this. If Carey finds out she's stool-pigeoning to me—well, he'd make it very unpleasant for her, to put it mildly."

"You can't very well stop her if she's made up her mind. But you haven't told me where I fit in." Connie's voice had a sharp edge on it.

Philip's teeth were clamped hard on the stem of his pipe. "I don't think she has the faintest idea how really tough Carey is. They don't have his kind in England."

Quickly Connie opened the door of the car and slid out from behind the wheel. "Goodnight!" she said abruptly, and went quickly across the sidewalk to the door of her house.

Philip looked after her, astonished. "Now what the devil—?"

CHAPTER XII

NO ACCIDENT

FOR the next week or two Philip found himself living in a sort of a daze. First off he received a check from the *Globe* and banked it—a check that meant he had no more worries for the coming year. Then Jimmy Baxter began writing the first articles in the long series. As he had told Philip, he laid heavy stress on the story that criminal forces were interested in preventing Gray Dawn from winning at Aintree.

Philip found himself immediately swamped with fan mail. He was grateful that he hadn't got around to having a telephone in. Over five hundred people called the *Globe* offices the first day asking to be put in touch with Philip. Baxter brought suitcases filled with letters to Philip's apartment. People offered advice on training the jumper; people proffered their services as bodyguards; detective agencies wrote soliciting letters; advertising concerns wanted Philip to endorse their products; women offered themselves in marriage; steamship companies wanted the privilege of ferrying Bill to England when the time came.

Meanwhile there was not a move of any sort from Carey, and there may have been reasons. Jimmy Baxter had arranged for a private detective to board at Danny's place and keep an eye on the horse. This detective was also a skilled camera man. Flocks of curious people hung around the farm in hopes of seeing Bad Bill at one of his workouts. The detective took pictures—hundreds of them—of the hangers on. Each day these pictures were shipped to Jimmy in New York and promptly checked up with the police to see if any criminals were in the lot. Jimmy had hopes of being able to prove Carey's connection with things by getting evidence that one of his known henchmen was interested in the horse. He was disappointed in this.

"If he is watching the horse," Jimmy told Philip, "he's not using anyone we can place. It's not surprising. He must guess that we're on to him and he'll be extra careful."

IT was about a month after all this started that it was decided to enter Bill in the annual Dorchester Gold Cup race, one of the richest steeplechase stakes. This was to be Bill's first taste of racing. He was to be trucked to Dorchester about a week before the running, and put through an intensive course of sprouts at the scene of the race.

"Winning isn't important," Philip explained to Baxter. "Of course we'll go out for it if we get the breaks. I simply want to get him around the course in competition. I want to see if he jumps with less assurance when he's being crowded by other horses."

Baxter was Philip's almost constant companion. Pictures of Philip had appeared in almost all the papers, and he found it difficult to walk about the city or dine in public places without being approached for his autograph, or for tips on the races about which he knew nothing. In all this time Philip saw very little of Connie. Under ordinary circumstances he would have realized that something was wrong, but he was kept so busy that he did not notice anything unusual. He didn't know

that Connie actually kept in touch with what he was doing by phoning Jimmy Baxter from time to time.

"I'm just trying to keep out from under foot," she explained lightly to Jimmy.

"I suppose you'll go over to Dorchester?" Jimmy asked her one day.

"I hadn't thought much about it," Connie lied. She had been waiting for Philip to ask her—waiting anxiously.

"Well, if you'd like to take pity on a young man in distress," said Jimmy, "you'd drive me up to Danny Shane's farm. They're trucking Bill tomorrow. Philip's gone ahead to Dorchester. I'm going to stick with the horse—just in case anything pops."

"You think something might happen?" Connie asked anxiously.

"Nope. But I'm not missing any tricks. Want to be a good Samaritan?"

Connie hesitated. "All right, my lad. I'd like to see Bill and Danny again."

"Ouch!" said Jimmy.

"And you, Mr. Baxter, *and* you!" Connie laughed.

"That's better," said Jimmy.

IT was a gorgeous spring day when Connie and Baxter motored up to Danny's farm. Danny was in a dither of excitement. He had been walking on air ever since the definite decision to race Bill had been made. His trailer truck wasn't to be used to take Bill to Dorchester. A fancy padded horse truck had been hired, and was already at the farm when Connie and Baxter arrived.

"This is somethin' like, eh, Miss Connie?" Danny said, as he greeted them. "No more makeshifts for Bill, the scoundrel!"

"All the same, the trailer was kind of fun, Danny," Connie said wistfully. "It all seemed very much simpler then."

"But Bill's ridin' Pullman now, Miss—the way he deserves."

One thing was certain, the fanfare of excitement had not affected Bill. The big gray was coolly unruffled as he had been from the start. He stood perfectly quiet while Danny bandaged his legs and tail. There was no need for the hood in the big closed truck which would carry him. He walked up into the truck as quietly as if he had spent his whole life traveling.

Danny and Delaney, the private detective, were to ride on the truck with the horse.

"And we go on ahead to Dorchester?" Connie asked.

"If it won't drive you crazy, we'll just mosey along after the truck," said Baxter. His tone was light, but his eyes were grave. "Delaney tells me there were some suspicious looking guys hanging around here who beat it when the truck turned up. I'd like to sort of keep an eye on things."

The yellow roadster followed the big red truck out of the barn yard and onto the main highway. It was about forty miles to Dorchester, and Connie knew the road well. It was something of a novelty to her to hold the roadster down to thirty five while they trailed the truck.

"You're sure there isn't more to this than Delaney told you?" she asked Baxter after they'd driven a few miles.

"More?" he asked.

Connie's eyes were fixed on the road ahead of her. "I was wondering if perhaps Jessica Tarrant hadn't reported something to Philip."

"Not that I know of," said Baxter.

"But he's seen her, of course," said Connie casually.

"If he has he's kept it strictly to himself," Baxter laughed. He looked at Connie with a faintly amused twinkle in his blue eyes. "It couldn't be that you—" he began, in a bantering tone.

"It couldn't!" Connie cut him off, firmly.

It was rather a dull trip. They trailed closely behind the truck for miles. Connie could see Bill riding complacently, his ears pricked forward. They were within about ten miles of Dorchester when the thing happened which turned Connie's heart to a lump of ice in her breast: If she hadn't been so familiar with the road she would never have seen it.

"Jimmy!" she cried sharply. "Look!" Her voice was high-pitched.

BUT before Baxter had any chance to guess at what she was talking about, his head was nearly snapped off as the Packard leaped forward. Connie jammed her hand down on the horn and kept it there. Around the horse van she raced and while Baxter's heart came unceremoniously up into his mouth, she swerved in front of it and jammed on her brakes. There was a screeching of tires on macadam as the van smashed into the back of the roadster. At the same instant a huge dump truck came hurtling out of a side road and cut directly across their path—across the highway—and then plunged off the opposite side of the road and down a steep embankment.

"Great Jehovah!" Baxter whispered.

Connie was leaning over the wheel of the roadster, her shoulders shaking. Baxter seemed frozen where he was; couldn't move. He heard Danny and Delaney shouting excitedly to each other as they climbed off the horse truck, and Danny went to the back to look at Bill. Delaney came forward to the roadster.

"Holy Toledo!" Delaney said, in an awed voice. "If you hadn't stopped us, Miss Heath, that truck would have run us down surer than hell!"

Connie looked up, her face very white, her lips trembling. "I just happened to remember this side road," she said, in a shaken voice. "It comes sharply down hill into the main road. I've often thought there might be an accident here. That's why I looked up the hill to see if anything was coming."

"That poor devil in the truck. We'd better see if he's badly hurt. It must have got out of control."

"I don't think there was anyone in that truck," said Connie, her voice steadying.

"*What!*" Baxter and Delaney chorused.

"You see," said Connie quietly, "it wasn't an accident."

And then her nerve cracked and she began to cry hysterically.

OLD Danny Shane had his arm gently around Connie's shoulders. "There, there, Miss," he soothed. "There, there." It was the same voice he used when he talked to Bill. It made Connie want to laugh. Her fingers gripped Danny's other arm tightly as she struggled to get control of herself.

"Bill?" she whispered.

"Him?" said Danny in a scornful voice. "The black hearted heathen never batted an eyelash—even if he was banged kind of hard against the truck. Remember my tellin' you that's why we ride 'em backwards. He'd of smacked his head plenty if he'd been ridin' the other way. But I'm afraid we ain't done your roadster no good, Miss Connie."

Just then Baxter and Delaney returned to the roadster along with the driver of the horse truck.

"You were right," said Baxter grimly. "There was nobody in that runaway truck. But how the devil did you know, Connie?"

"Lend me a handkerchief!" said Connie severely. She took one from Baxter and wiped the tears from her face. "I knew this spot," she told them, "and I looked up the hill automatically. I saw a man standing on the stone wall up there and he was pointing at us and signaling. Then I caught a glimpse of that truck starting down the hill. I—I saw the driver jump after it started rolling. There was no way to get you all to stop without cutting in front of you."

"I started to put on my brakes, miss, when you began blowin' your horn," said the driver. "But I wouldn't have stopped dead. I thought you'd had a flat or somethin' and wanted help."

"It was damned quick thinking, Connie, and damned courageous acting," said Baxter gravely. "Let's go up the hill, Delaney, and have a look around."

Delaney made no bones about drawing the gun he carried in a holster under his arm as they walked up the side road. There was no one in sight, but dust was settling further along the road, indicating that a car had just gone in the other direction

at a rapid rate of speed. Delaney scratched his head.

"The way I figure it, Mr. Baxter," he said, "is that those guys I saw hangin' around this morning were waiting to get a look at the truck. They knew we'd take this road to Dorchester—it's the only decent road. When they spotted the truck comin' they were ready to give her the works. If it had come off it'd have been good night horse."

"We'd better have a look around," said Baxter grimly. "If they've dropped anything or left any sort of clue it may give us the lead we want to Carey."

"You think he's back of it?"

"What do *you* think?" said Baxter grimly.

OF course it was a scoop for the *Globe,* and they made the most of it. Delaney had his camera with him and he took pictures of the runaway truck, of Connie's roadster with its rear end smashed in, of Connie, and of Bill looking complacently out of the back of the horse truck. Extras were on the streets in New York before any of the other papers had wind of the accident.

It was a sensational scoop.

Baxter and Delaney had found no clues to the criminals, but they could no longer be in any doubt of the reality of the danger to Philip and his horse. Some of the other papers had hinted that the talk of criminals was simply a publicity stunt cooked up by the *Globe.* The *Globe* now took delight in reminding them of their unjustified cynicism.

It was about ten o'clock that night that some smart reporter on another paper went to the Golden Pheasant, the night club which Walter Carey owned and used as a business front. This reporter had no notion that Carey was involved, but he knew that the tall, stoop-shouldered racketeer with the piercing little black eyes usually had the inside dope on things of this sort.

Carey received the reporter in his private office, suave and smiling. "Have a heart," he laughed, when the reporter asked his question. "I don't know *everything* that goes on in this town."

"But somebody *is* trying to mess up Jadwin's chances," said the reporter. "I thought it was a gag up to now, but this was no accident. Somebody tried deliberately to knock off that horse."

Carey lit one of his long thin cigars. He was smiling that mirthless smile of his. "Well, I can't help you," he said. "I'd like to know the answer myself. There's a lot of dough to be made betting on Jadwin's chances, if a fella knew which way to lay his money."

The reporter's eyes might have opened wide with astonishment if he hung around the Golden Pheasant for about fifteen minutes longer. It was just about fifteen minutes after he'd left that Guy Tarrant arrived at the club. His dark, handsome face was quite pale and the loud voice he used in demanding that he be taken to Carey at once suggested that he'd been drinking. He was swiftly ushered to the private office.

At sight of him Speed Carey's hawklike face took on a baleful expression. "What the devil do you mean by coming here?" he asked, in a dangerously quiet voice. "Do you want to tip your hand?"

Guy Tarrant flung himself into a chair and lit a cigarette with shaking hand. "Good Lord, Carey, if you're going to botch things up the way you did this afternoon, we'll all wind up in jail!" Guy flared angrily.

"Nothing was botched up," said Carey coldly. "We missed out in a little attempt to settle matters, but there's nothing to connect you or me or anyone else with what happened—unless you've aroused someone's suspicion by coming here tonight. I told you distinctly that we mustn't be seen together. It's particularly important since all these insinuations have appeared in the *Globe.*"

"But suppose you'd killed that girl and the reporter?" Guy said, hoarsely. "It was a miracle that truck didn't smash into them. That would have been murder!" His voice lowered to a whisper.

"There would still have been nothing to connect us with it," said Carey in an icy tone. "Let's get things straight, Tarrant. You've taken my money and you've cut me in on this. Well, I'm running things. And let me tell you, if you insist on endangering us by trying to see me or get in touch with me, you'll find that I won't deal gently with you. I don't intend to lose the money I've advanced you."

"But this sort of thing is going to land us in the soup. They'll be twice as careful now."

Carey's teeth clamped tightly on the butt of his cigar which had long since gone out. "They've already been too careful," he said, his shiny little eyes fixed searchingly on Guy Tarrant's face. "I thought the *Globe* was just guessing when they said some big shot racketeer had bought an interest in this business. If I thought you'd done any talking, Tarrant, I'd—"

"Before God," said Guy Tarrant, earnestly, "I haven't whispered a word to anyone. You don't suppose *I* want it known, do you? It was a guess—a lucky shot in the dark."

For a moment their eyes met in a steady stare, and then Carey reached for a fresh cigar. He was satisfied that Tarrant was telling the truth. "Okay, Tarrant," he said, "but stop coming here and don't try to get in touch with me. If I want to see you *I'll* arrange the meeting. Now you can go out this side door without the risk of being seen by someone in the club."

CHAPTER XIII

TROUBLE IN THE WIND

PHILIP found himself in a badly upset frame of mind. When the horse van arrived at Dorchester and he heard the story of what had happened he felt a sudden great anxiety for Connie who had not appeared.

"She stayed behind to look after her auto, Philip," Danny explained. "It was smashed up kinda bad. Lucky for us this truck didn't git nothin' worse than a bent bumper."

"But you're sure she's all right, Danny? You're sure she wasn't hurt?"

"Sure and I'm sure," said Danny. "And she'll probably be along later. Mr. Baxter's with her, sir—him telephonin' in his story to the papers."

But Connie didn't show up later. As a matter of precaution Philip had a veterinary in to see if Bill had a bruise or a wrenched muscle or tendon that might not be immediately visible. And just about the time when the vet had decided that Bill had escaped without a scratch, Baxter arrived at the Dorchester track in a hired car.

"Where's Connie?" was Philip's first question. "Is she all right?"

"Right as rain," said Baxter. "She went back to New York on the train."

"Oh," said Philip, disappointment in his voice.

"By Godfrey, Jadwin, if it hadn't been for her, the chances are there wouldn't be any horse in that barn at the moment. She was swell."

Philip inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "It was Carey, of course."

"Of course," agreed Baxter. "But not a shred of evidence to tie it up with him."

"The runaway truck? Can't it be traced?" Philip asked.

"Easily," said Baxter, with a rueful little smile. "It belongs to the street cleaning department of the town of Dorchester. It was stolen last night. They're having a fingerprint man up from New York to go over it in the hope of finding evidence of some sort. I doubt there'll be anything."

Philip dropped his cigarette and crushed it under the heel of his riding boot. Baxter realized that his lithe, wiry body was taut with nerves. "If anything had happened to you and Connie," he said, in a dark smouldering voice, "I think I'd have been in the papers on another count. Murder!"

"Take it easy," said Baxter. "Every cloud has a silver lining. We aren't going to have so much trouble convincing the authorities that you need protecting from

now on. Almost everyone figured the *Globe* was just pulling a publicity stunt when we talked about danger. But now Carey's tipped his hand, and we're none the worse for it."

Bill was taken out that afternoon for a quiet saunter around the fields adjoining the Dorchester track. No jumping for him on top of his trip—just a little limbering up. It wasn't until Philip had been in the saddle for about ten minutes that he realized how tightly screwed up his nerves had been. Something about the easy movements of the horse, something about the calm imperturbability of the big gray, served as a sedative to him. Philip knew it was imagination, but it seemed as if Bill knew what they were up against and was offering a calm assurance that everything would be all right. Philip reached out and stroked the gracefully arched neck.

"If we can stay out of trouble, son," Philip said, gently, "I've got a hunch we're going to make the whole cockeyed world eat our dust."

Bill shook his head a little impatiently. He wanted to go places.

Late that afternoon Philip succeeded in getting Connie on the telephone. "You're all right?"

"Of course, Philip." The constrained note in her voice troubled him. He knew something was wrong. Something had been wrong ever since that night she jumped out of the car in front of her house and left him so abruptly.

"Look here, Connie, I—I don't know what to say or how to say it. If it hadn't been for you . . ."

"Don't try to say anything, Philip," she said quickly. "It wasn't anything. I simply did what anyone would have done in the same circumstances."

Her laugh was nervous, jangling.

"All the same, I want to tell you," said Philip. "I'm giving Bill a workout over the jumps in the morning. I can catch the eleven o'clock train in to town after that. Will you lunch with me somewhere—anywhere you say?"

"Of course I'd love to see you," she said quickly. "Shall we make it Maurice's? I'll be there at one."

"Right—and a million thanks, darling."

BUT Philip didn't lunch with Connie the next day. He had just retired to his room in the Dorchester Inn that night, after making certain Bill's stable at the track was being properly watched by Delaney's relief, when a bellboy came up with the announcement that there was a telephone call for him from New York.

There were no extensions in the rooms in Dorchester's old-fashioned hostelry and Philip slipped on his jacket and went down to a phone booth in the lobby. He expected to hear Jimmy Baxter's cheerful voice reporting what had been going on in town. Possibly the fingerprint man had found something of importance on the wrecked truck.

But it wasn't Jimmy Baxter. Philip felt a curious sense of excitement as Jessica Tarrant's low, throaty tones came over the wire.

"I've only a minute or two to talk," she said earnestly. "Could you possibly come in town tomorrow and lunch with me? There are—new developments."

"Of course I can," said Philip eagerly. And then he scowled. "Hold on. I already have an appointment for lunch. I—"

"It's terribly important that I see you," said Jessica. "I know that Guy has an appointment at that time. It might be difficult for me to get away at another time without answering questions. Can't you break your other engagement?"

Philip's lips tightened. "Of course," he said decisively. "Where shall I meet you?"

"Shall we say under the clock at the Biltmore at one?"

"I'll be there," said Philip.

He hesitated a long time before he got the operator back and called Connie. She sounded frightened when she came to the phone.

"Is anything wrong, Philip?"

"Just some bad luck," he said. "I'm going to have to break our engagement to-

morrow, darling. There isn't any way out of it."

"It's all right, Philip," she said cheerfully.

"You see," he said uneasily, "Jessica Tarrant just phoned me. She says there's something up. I—"

"Oh," said Connie, that distant quality suddenly returned to her voice.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Philip. "But I'm afraid it's important that I should see her."

"Of course."

"Perhaps I can come in the next day—or see you later tomorrow afternoon."

"You can call me if you're free," said Connie briskly. "Goodnight, Philip."

Philip stood frowning at the telephone after he had replaced the receiver. "Damn!" he said, emphatically.

JESSICA was waiting for him when Philip arrived the next day. He was a little astonished at his own eagerness to see her, at the feeling of pleasure that swept over him as he saw her, chic, lovely, serene, waiting for him.

"I'm afraid I'm late," he said.

"You're actually five minutes early," she told him, with a quick smile. "I haven't got used to distances in New York. I allowed myself too much time."

"Where would you like to lunch?" he asked.

"Can't we stay here? I really should be back at my own hotel within an hour or so. Let's not waste time going places."

"Fine," said Philip.

When he had ordered cocktails and luncheon, he lit a cigarette and leaned forward. "You said last night that something was stirring?"

A dark shadow seemed to pass over her ivory-white face. The deep violet eyes had a troubled look in them. "I was simply horrified when I read about the accident yesterday," she said.

Philip shrugged. "It was unpleasantly close," he said. "But no harm done."

"Guy said nothing about it—nothing direct, I mean," Jessica said. "But of course I knew that Carey was back of it. But what I have to tell you is that they've more or less changed their plans."

"Ah!"

"In the beginning they didn't count on doing anything until much later in the game. Carey seemed to think there was a good chance that fate would take care of things—something might happen to the horse in a natural course of events."

"But he feels different now, eh?" Philip said angrily.

Jessica nodded. Conversation was interrupted while the waiter placed dry martinis on the table. When he had gone Jessica continued, "He's afraid now that your defenses may become too well organized. They're planning to make a serious attempt against you at Dorchester on Saturday."

"They'll never get at the horse in the barn," said Philip grimly. "There's an armed detective on guard night and day, and Danny, my groom, sleeps and takes his meals in the stable. The local police will have an eye open, too."

"The plan is to get you in the race," said Jessica anxiously. "As I understand it Carey has two riders in the race who are taking orders from him. Those orders will be to see to it that you come to grief."

"I see," said Philip grimly. "Who are these riders, do you know?"

She shook her head. "I simply know that Guy told me there would be two men in the race who would see to it that you were put out of commission." And then Jessica rapped the table with a tightly clenched hand. "This whole thing is too dreadful, Philip! Isn't there something I can do by going to the authorities?"

"You must promise me not to do that!" Philip said promptly. "Both Guy and Carey would deny any charges you made, and we have no evidence. If we ever get any corroborative testimony then your evidence will be invaluable. But for you to say anything now would simply be to place yourself in danger. I want you to give me your word—"

"Philip!" Jessica interrupted him, her

eyes widening in amazement and fear. He saw that she was looking past him toward the entrance to the dining room and he turned quickly. A faint cold chill ran along his spine. Coming purposefully across the room toward them was Speed Carey.

THE tall, stoop-shouldered racketeer was smiling, but his little black eyes were cold as splintered ice. He was dressed in a perfectly cut double-breasted blue suit, and he wore a white carnation in his buttonhole.

"Ah, Mr. Jadwin—and Miss Tarrant!" he said, with a suave little bow. "This is really a story for Winchell, I should say. Friendly enemies lunching together, eh?"

Philip felt the muscles along his jaw rippling. He sat perfectly still, his blue eyes meeting Carey's cold black ones steadily. "I wasn't aware that you knew Miss Tarrant," he said.

Carey's smile had a mocking quality to it. He recognized that Philip had rather adroitly made the first thrust. "I've had the pleasure. Met her at Fairview along with her brother when your horse ran in the trials."

"Very interesting," said Philip. "And now, if you have no objections, Mr. Carey, we'll go on with our lunch."

The smile on Carey's face faded slightly—looked a little sickly. The black eyes were bleak, threatening. "I'm sorry if I intruded," he said, very softly. He turned and walked very slowly toward a corner table. Philip's face was suddenly cast in a worried mold.

"That's torn it!" he said grimly, to Jessica. "Your brother will be told that we were here together. I'm afraid I've got you in a mess, Jessica. I'd have given my right arm to keep you out of trouble."

She tried to reassure him. "I can manage Guy," she said. "After all, what can he do about it? The thing that troubles me is that I'll no longer be in their confidence."

"I hope that's the worst of it," said Philip, gloomily.

The waiter brought their lunch. Philip found himself without appetite. A cold feeling of apprehension had settled over him. He had wished Jessica out of this from the start, and yet she had insisted. The whole business was taking on a sinister aspect that he had never dreamed of weeks ago.

His eyes clouded fretfully.

It had seemed so simple then. He would train his horse and enter it in the race, and if luck was with him he might win. Now it meant constant danger, constant watchfulness, with the evil shadow of Speed Carey constantly thrown across his path. The race at Dorchester had been planned as a simple workout for Bill. Now, if Jessica was correct, it meant a great deal more than that. It meant sharp and poignant danger to both him and Bill. And suppose he escaped? It would only mean that he must face it again. It meant months of sleeplessness, of worry, of tension. It meant that his every footstep would be dogged by a relentless force of evil bent on his destruction.

A waiter tapped Philip on the shoulder. "Mr. Jadwin?"

"Yes."

"A Mr. Baxter is calling you on the telephone. You can take the call at the public phones just across the lobby."

For an instant Philip hesitated, glancing across the room at Carey who was calmly and deliberately eating his lunch. Then he remembered he had told Jimmy he was meeting Jessica at the Biltmore. Baxter had evidently taken the chance that they were lunching there.

"Will you excuse me?" he said to Jessica. "I'll be right back."

He went quickly out across the lobby to where the public phone booths were situated, wondering why Baxter should call him. Perhaps they *had* discovered something that linked the accident with Carey. And then a more disturbing possibility occurred to him. Had something happened to Bill since he'd left—in spite of their precautions?

"I'm Mr. Jadwin," he told the operator. "Have you a call for me?"

"Just a moment, please," said the girl in a droning voice.

Philip stood restlessly by the switchboard, beating out a tattoo with his fingers on its mahogany surface. The operator manipulated the little cords and plugs of the switchboard with maddening slowness. He heard her calling other numbers.

"Please!" said Philip, "I was told there was a call for me."

"Just a moment, plea-us."

Philip lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply on it. "You've got to get a firm hand on the reins, young fella," he told himself. "Your nerves are all at loose ends. Damn this delay anyhow.

"Look here," he began sharply. "Either you have a call for me, or—"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the operator, in that droning, impersonal voice, "there *was* a party for you but they seem to have been disconnected. Shall I have you paged again if they call back?"

"I'll be in the dining room," said Philip, and he turned back across the lobby.

Philip stopped abruptly at the door of the dining room. He felt the blood in his veins suddenly turn very cold. Jessica was no longer at the table. He glanced across the dining room. Carey was gone!

"Waiter!" The captain came across to him. "Where did the young lady who was lunching with me go?"

The captain shrugged Gallic shoulders. "She went out with the tall gentleman who spoke to you a moment ago," he said.

Philip suddenly realized he was clenching his hands so tightly the nails were biting into the flesh of his palms.

CHAPTER XIV

GLOVES OFF

PHILIP paid his check and went directly back to the switchboard telephone and put in a call for the *Globe* offices. A few moments later he was connected with Jimmy Baxter. He felt a momentary sense of relief.

"You called me here at the Biltmore a while ago?" he asked.

"You're off your trolley," said Baxter. "I didn't call you. Why?"

Philip's mouth tightened into a straight slit. "Get on your bicycle and come over here in a hurry," Philip said. He slammed down the receiver and went out to the switchboard. "Look here," he said, in a hard voice, "you know damned well there was no call for me a few minutes ago. You were stalling!"

The girl looked up and Philip groaned. It wasn't the same operator who had been on a few minutes before. "I'm sorry, sir. If you had some trouble it was with the operator who's just gone off. Can I do anything for you?"

"You can tell me where she's gone," Philip rapped.

"I'm sorry, sir, we're not permitted to answer questions of that sort. You'll have to see the manager if you—"

"Damn the manager!" Philip cut in angrily. "I've got to find that girl at once."

"I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to see the—" But Philip had turned and left.

He went back to the dining room and beckoned to the captain again. "Did Miss Tarrant—the young lady I was with—seem to go willingly with the gentleman?"

"Oh, yes sir. I—pulled out her chair for her and handed her her gloves and her purse."

"And she left no message for me?"

"None, sir."

The waiter seemed amused.

There was nothing more to be learned here and Philip went in search of the manager. Before he found him he changed his mind. It would be futile to prefer any sort of charges against the telephone operator. She would claim there had been a call, and while he could prove it wasn't Baxter who'd telephoned as the waiter had told him, the operator could always say she had misunderstood the name. As a matter of fact, on second thought, Philip decided that very likely there *had* been a call. Carey wouldn't risk bribing hotel employees—and Philip was certain that it *was* Carey who had arranged to have him called from the table. Carey had undoubt-

edly had one of his men make a legitimate call.

IN the midst of these jumbled thoughts Jimmy Baxter arrived on the run. Evidently the tone of Philip's voice had persuaded the blond newspaper man that speed was urgent. Quickly Philip told him what had happened.

"But if she left voluntarily, Jadwin—"

"What the hell difference does that make?" Philip demanded angrily. "There are a dozen ways Carey could have persuaded her to leave. The point is, he's found out she's the one who's been double crossing him. God knows what sort of spot she'll be put in."

Baxter's eyes narrowed. "Has it occurred to you that she might be giving *you* the run around? That she may actually be getting information from you to pass on to Carey? After all, she is a Tarrant!"

"Don't be an utter damned fool!" rapped Philip. "She was right about Carey. She told me today that he's planning to knock me off in the Dorchester chase on Saturday."

Baxter whistled. "Any particulars?"

"He's got a couple of riders in the race on his payroll!"

Baxter pushed back his hat and mopped at his face with his handkerchief. "I don't like it. Don't like the whole show," he said. "If she's on the level you'd better withdraw Bill from the Dorchester running."

"Not a chance," said Philip sharply, "for two very good reasons. She may swear to Carey and her brother that she hasn't passed on any information to me. If I withdraw Bill that'll make a liar out of her. And in the second place, we'll have to run up against this kind of tactics sooner or later. We might as well see it through now!"

"The hell with whether you make a liar out of her or not," said Baxter, hotly. "You've got a million bucks at stake."

"Do you realize," said Philip, very slowly and distinctly, "what it means if Carey decides it's dangerous for Jessica Tarrant to run around loose? It means some sort of hell for her—and I'm responsible. Before I do anything else I'm going to find her!"

His fingers rolled an unlighted cigarette, sent it spinning around, as he talked.

"But, man, she left of her own free will! What are you going to do about it? You can't call the cops on this kind of evidence!"

"I don't need cops," rapped Philip. "I'm going to see Guy Tarrant now and have this out with him once and for all. If you want to see the fun, come along."

They went to the Ritz but Tarrant was out. They had no idea at the desk when he'd be in. Philip determined to wait. There was nothing else he could do. It was nearly five o'clock before he saw Guy Tarrant go over to the desk for his keys.

"Oh," Philip heard him say to the clerk.

Five minutes later Philip and Baxter went up to the ninth floor and knocked at the door of the H Suite. Guy Tarrant himself answered their knock. At the sight of Philip the color drained slowly out of his face, and Philip saw a little nerve twitching at the corner of his mouth. Philip walked grimly into the suite.

"WHERE'S your sister?" he demanded, without ceremony.

"My sister?" Tarrant was struggling for his usual suavity. "My dear fellow, what have you to do with Jessica? And by what right do you come barging into my suite this way?"

"Let's take off our gloves and get straight to the point, Tarrant," said Philip. "I was lunching with your sister at the Biltmore today. In the middle of luncheon Speed Carey came over to our table and spoke to us. Shortly after that I was called away from the table by a fake telephone message. When I came back Jessica was gone. She'd left with Carey. I want to know where she is!"

The nerve at the corner of Tarrant's mouth twitched fiercely. "Speed Carey!" he said. "Who on earth is Speed Carey?"

"I said let's take off our gloves," said Philip ominously. "You know damned well who Carey is. And I know of his connection with you."

"So Jessica told you, eh?" said Tarrant, softly. "By Jove, I'd never have dreamed that—"

"Listen, Tarrant, you have gone in with this crook to prevent my winning at Aintree. I can't prove it, so I'll have to fight you as best I can. But you have also let your sister fall into Carey's hands. Now I want to tell you something. If she suffers any harm through this dirty business of yours on my account, so help me, you'll pay for it!"

Tarrant's eyes sparkled with icy fury.

"I don't like threats, Jadwin!"

"That's not a threat; it's a statement of fact!" said Philip. "I want some assurance before morning from Jessica herself that she's all right. If I don't get it, I'm going to forget all about horse racing just long enough to *make* you tell me what I want to know!"

Tarrant drew a long breath. "All right, Jadwin, gloves off!" he said, and he suddenly looked very tired. "I don't know where Jessica is. I didn't know she'd lunched with you and I didn't know Carey had taken her anywhere. So there's nothing I can tell you."

"You'd better have the answers before morning," said Philip grimly, "because I'm coming back to get them."

A moment later out in the hall Philip felt suddenly limp and exhausted. "I can feel it coming, Jimmy!" he said, in a savage voice. "They'll try to use her to make me throw up the sponge!"

CHAPTER XV

"BREAK FAST!"

PHILIP spent a sleepless night pacing the floor of his small flat, torn between an almost uncontrollable fury that urged him to nothing short of murder if he couldn't locate Jessica, and a weary desire to give up the whole thing and forget it.

Red-eyed and gaunt of face, he called Jimmy Baxter at eight o'clock the next morning. "I'm going up to the Ritz to see Tarrant. If I don't communicate with you by nine you'd better come and get me!"

"Hey, wait, you lunatic. You—" But Baxter's protest was cut off when Philip replaced the receiver sharply.

He dressed with mechanical haste, swore when a shoelace snapped, and left his loose change lying on the dresser-top.

Philip took a taxi to the Ritz. He didn't have himself announced, but went straight up to the ninth floor. The door of H Suite stood slightly ajar. Philip knocked, and when he got no answer he walked boldly in. There was no one in the suite. The beds had been stripped down. There was no sign of clothing or luggage. With a cold sense of misgiving he went back down to the desk and inquired for the Tarrants.

"They left rather unexpectedly last night," said the clerk. "Sailed for England on the *Queen Mary* at midnight!"

Philip stared at him, dumbly.

"Some sort of sickness at home, I believe," said the clerk.

"Did you see Miss Tarrant leave yourself?" Philip asked, in a flat voice.

"I wasn't on duty when they checked out, sir."

As Philip stood there he saw Jimmy Baxter come through the revolving door and sprint across the lobby to him.

"Well?" Jimmy panted.

"They've gone. Sailed for England last night on the *Queen Mary*."

"Whew!" said Baxter, and mopped his face. "I didn't know what kind of a mess you might have got yourself into."

Philip turned away from the desk and both men went into the bar. Philip ordered himself a double scotch and drank it down at a gulp. He turned to Baxter.

"I want you to check on that sailing, Jimmy," he said. "I want to be certain they're *both* on the boat. I won't be content till I know this isn't a stall of some sort."

About an hour later Baxter reported that

passage had been taken on the *Queen Mary* by Mr. Guy Tarrant and Miss Jessica Tarrant. Philip looked almost as if he didn't believe it.

"I don't understand it, Jimmy," he said slowly. "I'd have sworn that Carey would keep hold of her to use as a club over my head."

"That would come close to making him guilty on a kidnaping charge," said Baxter. "I don't think he'll try that until everything else has failed. The thing we've got to worry about is that race on Saturday. Don't you think it would be a good hunch to withdraw, since you know what Carey's got up his sleeve?"

"No," said Philip, doggedly. "We'd only have to face it somewhere else later. What you can do is check on the entries . . . find out anything you can that may give us a hint whom we have to watch out for. If I know that I'll take my chances.

IT WAS a week of hard work and of a tension that grew until it was almost unbearable. Philip worked out with Bill each day, and only those moments he spent in the saddle seemed free from strain. Bad Bill was so perfect, gave everything you asked of him so willingly that Philip could feel nothing but a great warmth and affection for the horse when he was in the saddle. But the excitement around the stable was nerve-racking. The *Globe* redoubled its guard on the horse. Danny, looking haggard and all in, was never ten feet from the big gray except when Philip was riding him. Delaney and his assistant attended those workouts, and Philip knew they were armed and ready to spring into action if anything untoward occurred.

Most of the time Philip felt nervous and fretful. The sudden departure of the Tarrants worried him, and Connie's queer behavior was little solace. It was only when he was astride Bill's broad, powerful back, galloping cross country, did he feel any measure of contentment.

It wasn't until the Friday before the race that Jimmy Baxter had anything to report.

"It's been tough sledding," he said. "On the face of it all the entries seem to be perfectly on the level. But after boiling it down there's one that'll bear watching. Montague Rayburn has a horse in the race, and it's being rumored along Broadway that Rayburn owes Carey a flock of jack he lost in a big dice game. Rayburn's horse is called the Raven, and he's a damned good jumper. He's being ridden by Shag Meadows, one of the toughest professionals in the business. He'll bear watching."

Philip nodded.

"As to the second one—Miss Tarrant said there were two, didn't she? Well, you pays your money and you takes your choice. There isn't another questionable entry in the field. Of course that doesn't mean that one of the riders on a perfectly honest entry hasn't been reached." Baxter looked grim. "I'm afraid I've let you down. I can't be sure—even about Rayburn's horse."

"Carey wouldn't leave loose ends hanging around," said Philip. "You've done the best you could. I've decided the best thing for me to do is to try for a quick break at the barrier and set the pace the whole way. Bill's got the speed. If we set the pace nobody can do us any harm no matter what their intentions are. It's the break at the start that's going to count."

Philip slept fitfully that night. He knew the past week had taken a heavy toll on his nervous energy, and that he wasn't going to be in the best shape to ride the next day. He was worried about Connie. In the excitement in New York he had failed to call her. He *had* called her when he got back to Dorchester and explained what had occurred. He had expected her to be on hand for the race but she hadn't appeared. It wasn't like her not to be on deck at a critical moment.

CROWDS began pouring into Dorchester the next morning. The Dorchester Cup was the steeplechase classic of the season, and this one was tremendously publicized because of Bad Bill.

People who had never seen horse races before were eager for a glimpse of the horse that had a million dollars waiting for him at the end of the trail. Curious women wanted to get a look at lean, handsome Philip Jadwin in the flesh. The *Globe* had rumored that there might be some rough stuff in the race, which had resulted in a frantic investigation at the last minute by the stewards—which in turn had resulted in nothing!

Philip had a late breakfast in his room —a breakfast which consisted of a small steak and creamed potatoes and coffee. He would eat no lunch before the running of the event and he knew it was important for him to have a hearty meal. He didn't dare face the hotel dining room, for he knew he would be pestered to death.

Baxter reported to him from the track every hour or so. Bill was in fine fettle. Danny said he seemed to be right at the top of his condition. Danny, under the watchful eye of the detectives, had taken him for an easy workout about five in the morning. Nobody was being allowed within yards of the stall where Bill was kept. It simply wouldn't be possible for anyone to "get" the horse.

Baxter appeared at the hotel in person about two in the afternoon. Philip, who had been trying unsuccessfully to concentrate on a book, was delighted to see him.

He'd been caged up like a lion all day, bored and jittery. Damn it, why couldn't he have some of the splendid, healthy calm that made Bad Bill such a wonder?

"Thank the Lord you're here," he muttered. "I was developing a first-rate case of prima donna nerves. Look like a good crowd?"

"The place is packed. They could have sold twenty thousand more tickets if there'd been any place to put the customers," said Baxter. "You certainly are good box office, my friend."

"No more dope on who I have to watch?"

"Sorry," said Baxter. "The *Globe* story had the stewards scurrying about without results. Carey's covered his trail carefully. You know, Philip, it's just possible he's given up the scheme. He must have found out that Jessica warned you. He may not risk anything when he knows everybody's on the lookout."

"I hope you're right," said Philip. "I rather dread the whole business. It's not that I'm afraid for myself. But if anything were to happen to Bill—"

"Don't even say it!" said Baxter, his fingers crossed.

A FEW minutes before three Philip and Baxter went out through the deserted lobby of the inn and Baxter drove them to the track. They had a tough time getting to the stables, Philip having to show his rider's badge a dozen times. They had timed it to a nicety. In just fifteen minutes the bugle would sound, summoning the starters for the main event to the track.

Fourteen entries were posted for the race. All of them, with the exception of Bill, were in the paddock, being walked slowly up and down by their grooms. Danny, in a dither of nerves, greeted them at the stable.

"I was afeared somethin' had happened to you, Mr. Philip. I thought you wasn't comin'."

Philip patted him carelessly on the shoulder. "Didn't want to get here too soon, Danny. You can bring the big fella out to the paddock now."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Philip," Danny said, fairly crowing with his pride and affection. "Right away, Mr. Philip."

A murmur of excitement from the crowd around the paddock broke out as Danny appeared leading the gray. The horse was surrounded by Delaney and a handful of detectives. Bill looked very proud, his mane braided with red ribbon, his neck arched, his tail held high. Philip walked up to him and stroked his soft muzzle. The horse was quiet, but Philip sensed that he was keyed a little higher than usual.

He put his hand on the gray's arching neck. "Steady on, old fellow."

Baxter glanced at his watch. "I guess I'll be gettin' to my seat," he said. "By the bye, Connie is here. I thought you'd like to know." He looked at Philip.

But Philip hadn't heard him. Philip was standing like a man transfixed, looking out at that crowd. He suddenly grabbed Baxter's arm. "Look! Behind that man in the light brown hat!"

Baxter turned quickly, and then his breath whistled out between his teeth. "Tarrant!" he said. "Guy Tarrant!"

He pushed his hat back on his head and stared, jaw sagging, at Jadwin. "What the— How in blazes . . . ?

Philip turned on the newspaper man sharply. "He couldn't be here if he sailed on the *Queen Mary!* But you checked on it, Baxter!"

Baxter moistened his lips. "I called the steamship office. They said the Tarrants had taken passage."

"But you didn't find out if they'd actually sailed!" Philip exploded. He started striding for the paddock fence. At the same moment the clear notes of the bugle sounded.

Philip hesitated in a state of tortured indecision. The other horses were being mounted—started out toward the track. He swung back at Baxter. "Find him—find him if you have to tear the whole damned place apart! They're holding Jessica somewhere just as I thought!"

HE WAS trembling as he climbed up into the saddle. One thing he had been comforted by was the knowledge that Jessica was back in England—out of danger. Now he knew almost certainly that she wasn't! And then he was distracted by Big Bill. The big horse felt taut, nervous under him. It was his first race. Philip knew that he should be giving the horse some reassurance through his own steadiness.

Instead of which, he was assailed with all the piled-up uneasiness that had been accumulating for the past weeks. Plus his anxiety over what might have happened, or be happening, to Jessica Tarrant.

"You're going to have to go, son!" he said softly. "You've got to break fast and stay in front." He stroked the horse's neck and Bill seemed to move just a trifle more quitely.

They were on the track now, moving slowly up toward the starting gates. With a tremendous effort Philip forced himself to concentrate on the business at hand. Up ahead of him was Rayburn's horse, the black gelding called the Raven. Number five! Shag Meadows, the jockey, was carefully avoiding looking at Bill. Philip smiled grimly. The others were all looking with frank curiosity at the "mystery horse." Meadows' act convinced Philip that Baxter had guessed correctly. This was one of the horses he had to watch.

They moved up into the starting gate now—fourteen of them. Bill held his head very high—moved forward gingerly.

"Easy, son," said Philip softly. His voice quieted the horse who moved into his own starting stall without hesitation. Philip's lips tightened. Somewhere among these horses was another rider out to get him—another rider besides Meadows who kept his glance studiously averted.

Somewhere up the line a horse plunged forward out of his stall and the start was delayed. It was a big bay—Number 11. Philip had memorized the entries and knew that Number 11 was Crusader, the Vickers entry, with Milliken up. As Crusader was backed into his stall again Philip felt something like an electric shock run up his spine. For an instant his eyes had met Milliken's and the jockey on the Vickers entry was staring at him with cold fury. Instinctively Philip knew he had spotted his second enemy. Milliken was keeping Crusader on his toes—wanting to make certain that he got away ahead of Bill.

"We can't afford to be pocketed, son!" said Philip, softly. "We got to break fast. We've got to—"

"Go!" The starter's voice cracked like a pistol shot.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Bo Gestures

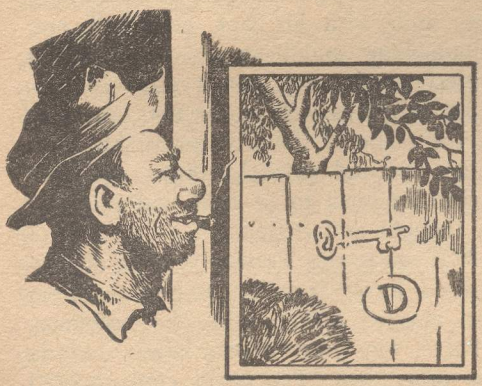
By Martin McCall

IS YOUR town a hobo haven? There are plenty of them scattered around the country, and the chances are that even if yours is one, you won't know it.

To you it may seem only a coincidence that two or three times a week, you hear an uncertain, experimental knock at your back door and find a tramp outside, asking for a meal or a sandwich or a cup of coffee.

But, a hundred to one, if you'll look at your door or porch railing or front gate, you'll find somewhere a small hieroglyphic looking like an **X** enclosed in a circle. And to itinerant weary-Willies, your house is forever marked down as the residence of a generous and friendly soul.

All over the country, by grapevine telegraph or tomato can telephone, this information will be broadcast among the vagrant clan. A hobo always knows which town is good, which bad. He knows where the mission is, and where he can get something to eat.



He'll work a little if he has to, and then travel on. And, incidentally, there's more method than you'd suppose to his peregrinations. Hoboes have an instinctive preference for being in on the year's highlight events. This winter's floods drew literally thousands of them to watch the year's biggest and most exciting show—and incidentally to provide them with unusual opportunities for free food, clothes, and lodging, obtainable by the simple expedient of posing as flood victims.

For above all else, the hobo is an ingenious gent. His sign language, already mentioned, proves that beyond all cavil.

When a hobo chalks an **M in a box** on a house, that means that a minister of the gospel lives within. A **cross** is used to label all church property.

A **key** drawn on a fence in the outskirts of a town means that the town is friendly. A **lock with no key** signifies the reverse.

A **D circled** says to hobo eyes: Watch out for dog! A **line through the D** means that the dog in question is either gentle or timid. This is pretty important information to the 'bo.

C is for cheerful: "They'll give you carfare to town, at least."

R in a box indicates that the visiting vag will get along with this particular householder if he discusses religion at some length.

There are literally hundreds of these symbols, and to the happy hobo the right sort of a mark means far more than four stars in the Baedeker to the less unconventional tourist. Take a look around you. Maybe you'll see some where you least expect them.

Destiny placed Mr. Hallock in a blind alley . . . Destiny gave him a gun, and the fear to use it. Could Mr. Hallock defy destiny?

The Gentle Gunman

By PAUL ERNST

Author of "Highway to Hell," etc.

"THREE guys knocked off, and the police haven't done a thing to get the killers yet," said the star salesman in his loud, assertive voice. "These racketeers can shoot each other up—and women and kids who happen to get in the way, too—and not one thing is done about it."

The little group in the office, smoking the cigarette that falls naturally between the end of lunch and the time to start routine jobs for the afternoon, nodded. All but Hallock, credit manager, who simply blinked mildly through his bifocals at the senior salesman.

"In a way," continued the salesman authoritatively, "you might say that the more these gangsters killed each other, the better it was. But it plays hell with law and order."

The other salesmen and clerks nodded again. Hallock ventured to nod, too. He was an inconspicuous figure in his neutral gray suit, with his lank gray hair and mild-looking, middle-aged face. He was a perfect credit man, conservative in personal habits as well as business, cautious to the point of timidity concerning anything new and untried, retiring and low-voiced, inclined to be slow and plodding in thought and action.

"Of course this Frankie Chester double-crossed Jigger Loomis, the guy that's up for murder now," said the salesman. "That's why Jigger's pals killed him and the other two. The dumb cops couldn't

prove it, of course, but Frankie was to get Jigger out of the neighborhood after he shot that garage owner who wouldn't shake down for protection money."

The senior salesman took a puff at the expensive cigar given him by the boss for a high-pressure sale that morning. "Jigger couldn't get away on foot. So the cops got him for murder, and his pals got Frankie and the others who hadn't driven out for him like they were supposed to."

Hallock lifted a chocolate peppermint to his mouth as the others raised cigarettes. He didn't smoke, himself. . . .

IT had been an absurd outgrowth of small happenings.

He had driven to Chicago that Saturday morning with his wife instead of commuting, because she wanted to do some shopping with him after one, when the office was closed. There was a dressmaker's shop near the Boulevard on the near north side. She had gone in there, and he had stayed in the car.

There was no place to park around there, of course. There never was. So, since he was remaining behind the wheel, he had decided to draw up before the entrance of a narrow blind alley. He would partly block it, but he could move if necessary.

He was almost in place when he noticed that there was a car in the alley, facing the street. Three men were in it, and they were waving him urgently out of the way. He started to back out again, and stalled his motor.

There was a sharp report down the street, to which he had paid little attention. Backfire, he thought idly, whirring the starter so he could get his motor going and move.

But he didn't have time to move. The sedan in the alley leaped forward. The driver must have thought he could squeeze through anyway. But he miscalculated by a few inches and jammed the sedan between the high round curb and the car in the alley entrance.

There was a smashing of metal. One of the three men yelled, "Shove ahead!" The driver ground in first gear and nearly tipped both cars over.

"Get outa the way!"

Fuddled by their violence, he had meant to go ahead the six inches or so between his front bumper and the rear bumper of the car parked in front of him. But he was still in reverse gear; and when his foot left the clutch he moved backward instead, pinning the sedan more immovably than ever.

"Give it to him—"

Then there was a dying wail as a squad car stopped beside them. Three plainclothesmen got out, walking warily.

"Hello, Frankie. You seem to be in a hell of a hurry."

No answer from any of the three in the sedan, but the look on their faces was such that the plainclothesmen drew guns.

"Back into the alley, Frankie, so you don't block the sidewalk. We'll take a closer look at you guys."

THERE was a half-minute pause to make the hair crawl on your scalp, and then the sedan, able to move backward if not forward, scraped free and backed into the alley.

The detectives and the three in the sedan were staring at each other with deadly tensity. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to the man who had caused the tie-up. He backed into the street, with his right rear fender a crumpled mass and his bumper hanging low.

There were cries, and a scream, from down the street, now. And a patrolman pounding past, shouting at the three from the squad car, "Something's up, down there!"

No one had been paying any attention to the man who had blocked the alley for a moment. At least, so he had thought. But as he started forward toward the shop where his wife was, he had caught the gaze of the man addressed as Frankie on him. His eyes were something to see again in the night, when you're trying to go to sleep and can't.

Then his wife, bewildered, had said, "Why, Harold! What happened to the car?—"

"Get in! Quick!"

"What *is* the—"

"Something's happened down the street. Murder, I think. We might be held as witnesses or—or something."

*

The senior salesman was saying, "It's funny Jigger Loomis don't talk. He was put right in the electric chair by Frankie Chester when Frankie didn't show up in a getaway car. And right after that, Frankie went gunning for Jigger's pals at the St. Paul station—"

Hallock straightened a neat pile of letters on his desk, which was already tidy to the point of fussiness.

*

The look in the eyes of the man called Frankie! He'd had cold sweats over that. And yet he couldn't believe the man would really do anything. Surely the fact that it had all been an accident was obvious. He had stalled his car, and had been confused so that he backed instead of going forward. Surely nobody could think that had been deliberate—and act in retaliation.

He was afraid—but would not admit it to himself. The business was closed, he told himself. There had been no mention of him in the papers, and the police hadn't tried to get in touch with him. Evidently the three plainclothesmen had been too intent on the men in the sedan to waste attention on a middle-aged man with bifocal glasses driving off in a car with the rear bumper and one rear fender crumpled up.

The business was closed. . . .

He lived forty miles out from town, where he could own twenty acres even on his moderate salary, and commuted to the office. His wife took him three miles to the St. Paul rural station, and he walked from the city terminal to the office building. The rest kidded him about the punishment he took in order to live in the country.

HE had walked out of the St. Paul terminal at a quarter after eight that morning.

He was not afraid, he had insisted to himself. There was nothing to be afraid of. The glare in the eyes of the man called Frankie as the police walked up to him? That had been a momentary thing, of course. It had obviously all been so accidental.

There was nothing whatever to be afraid of . . .

But with the swift scream of the woman near him as he left the terminal exit, something like a scream had come from his own lips and he had thrown himself to the sidewalk and scrambled for the shelter of a yellow cab at the curb.

He had had no more reason for the move than just that startled scream; he hadn't seen a thing. But he had barely hit the walk when the first stuttering of a machine gun splintered the traffic noises.

He lay almost under the cab, with queer small noises coming from his mouth. And then the deadly stuttering ceased. There were policemen around and one of them grinned quizzically at him as Hallock got up and brushed himself off, and then the bluecoat joined the other police in a search for some underworld character who might have inspired the attack. The ashen-faced man with the bifocals was only one of the dozens of innocent bystanders, of course. Now who in the name of Mary had been shot at, and who had done the shooting?

The stopping, by a lucky fluke, of a sedan with Frankie Chester in it a dozen blocks away seemed an indication as to the latter. But there was no machine gun in the car by then.

*

". . . half the trouble is our legal setup," the senior salesman was saying rather pompously. "They knew damned well

Frankie Chester was in on the garage owner's kill. And they knew damned well Frankie was tied up somewhere in the St. Paul station business. But they could only hold him a few days. . . ."

*

Three days of torment. With his wife repeating, "Harold, what *is* wrong? You don't eat, and you've lost weight and color. Are you ill?"

He had wanted to tell her, but he couldn't. The great event of their lives was impending. A prayed-for event. Childless for twelve years, what had seemed to be a curse of barrenness had lifted from them. At thirty-seven, his wife was going to have a child. Thirty-seven is not any too young for that sort of thing. There are more than normal hazards involved. He dared not let her know what was wrong with him—dared not reveal the cancer of numbing terror that gnawed at him. A gangster—a killer—after *him!*

Three days of racking questions. Should he give up his job, sell his place as quickly as possible, and move? That would be economic suicide. The mortgage would take all the money a forced sale of their place would bring. And you don't pick up credit manager's jobs wherever fancy blows you. Should he go to the police and ask protection? But he was forty miles from the jurisdiction of the Chicago police, in the open country where police protection was impossible. Such a request would do no good, and might get to the ears of the man Frankie, and spur him to swifter and more urgent action.

"Harold, aren't you well? Is something on your mind?"

Only dying was on his mind, that was all. Dying, and a stunned incredulity at the fact that this was real and not a fantastic nightmare.

HE lay awake night, sweating, shivering, staring into the dull glare of Frankie's eyes and holding imaginary conversations with their owner.

"But look here—I didn't *mean* to stop you! It was all an accident. Don't you know that? You *must* know it! What reason would I have to stop you from anything you wanted to do? I'm not with the police, and I have nothing to do with crime. I've never known a criminal. I've never even spoken to one in all my life."

By now the papers had told him just what he had done that Saturday afternoon. They had headlined the murder of the garage man by one of Frankie Chester's gang, and the capture of the murderer. Reporters had speculated about the pickup of Frankie in the vicinity.

Jigger Loomis had waited in a building lobby for the garage owner because no one had known at just what hour the man was due there. Jigger couldn't wait in a car because there was no parking space near the entrance, and a car parked double might have drawn attention. Wasn't it reasonable to suppose then, that Frankie Chester had been lurking in a car nearby to dash out when the shot was fired, and get Jigger away from there? Only—Frankie hadn't showed.

Lying awake nights, sweating, talking to Frankie. "I know one of your men is going to the chair because of me. I know you must have spent thousands of dollars to get clear because you were caught half a block away. But *I* didn't plan it. It was just an accident. Why blame me? It's . . . *stupid* to take it out on me."

But, incredibly, it was being taken out on him. As a man kicks at an inanimate chair that has tripped him in the dark, so Frankie Chester was lashing reasonlessly out at the unwitting stumbling block to Saturday's escape plan.

"You must eat, Harold. And you ought to take a sleeping powder or something to make you sleep."

There was only one thing he could do—which was little enough; change his daily schedule around so that he would not be in the same places at the same times as usual. Ordinarily he got the train bringing him to the St. Paul station at a quarter past eight. Each morning, now, he

took a different one, getting him in at eight, at seven-twenty, and at six-fifty, respectively.

"There's a lot of work piling up at the office, darling. I don't like to get home later at night, so I'll have to get to the office earlier in the morning."

Every night he left the building he worked in by going quietly through the basement to the alley door. And he walked only in the thickest crowds, with perspiration running down under his arms any time he saw a car with several men in it.

But these precautions couldn't apply to their out-of-the-way home.

*

"Nobody will never know what Frankie's men were doing so far from town," the star salesman declared. "Unless," he added wisely, "they were chased out there by Jigger's pals. Maybe they drove for forty miles trying to get away, and then were run to the ground by Jigger's friends. By the way, Hallock, that happened in your section of the backwoods, didn't it?"

Hallock nodded, blinking through his bifocals. Strange, even now he couldn't feel anything personal about it. His feelings were those of a man who has vividly, but impersonally, witnessed a stirring play.

*

There was no way to avoid pursuit at home. He lived in the horror that death would come calling for him some day, openly, with his wife at hand to witness it. But he should have realized that this was not a logical picture. Witnesses are not wanted when death goes visiting.

He was alone in the house when it came. His wife was off with a friend four miles away. And Hallock comprehended later that the men must have lurked near the place waiting for just such a chance.

IT was Saturday afternoon again, one endless seven days from the Saturday he had stalled his motor in the alley entrance. He had driven his wife to a bridge party at a friend's home six miles away. He had come home again and was in his den upstairs, looking out the window.

Real farming country surrounded him. His twenty acres was much the smallest place around. The houses in the vicinity were far apart, separated by smooth, fat fields. The place across the road was vacant, tenantless; and the next nearest house was over a quarter of a mile away.

Quiet, clean, peaceful, out here. His deep fondness for the country was ample compensation for the long grind of his daily commuting. But now their solitude had turned into a terrible thing—

A great hand clamped around his chest and squeezed it until his heart stopped and his lungs had no room for air. Into his driveway a car was turning. A low black coupé with two men in it. And he had seen those men before.

It stopped before the porch. One of the men moving with leisurely and almost indifferent assurance, got out of the car. There was a heavy banging at the door. The man was knocking with his left hand, probably; his right, perhaps, had gone up toward his armpit as he ascended the porch steps.

*

". . . . funniest thing was that the death car was bullet proof," said the star salesman. "Wouldn't you think those two guys could have just kept on rolling, with the windows up, and not been caught by Jigger's boys? Unless they'd been forced into the ditch. But there wasn't a scratch on the car when it was found. . . ."

*

A banging at the door, unhurried, almost indifferent. Death knocking for him.

He had dropped down below the window sill as the coupê stopped, so he wouldn't be seen. Maybe if he stayed there, the men would think there was nobody at home. . . .

But he knew better than that. He knew they had seen him come in here, alone, after driving his wife away. If he didn't go to the door they'd simply kick it open and come in anyway.

Death visiting him. Stupidly, illogically, for a thing that had happened through such a crazy freak of chance that it was almost in the realm of fantasy. Those men down there weren't creatures of fantasy.

He was a cautious, rather timid man, going on forty-seven, soft and sedentary, nauseated by the very thought of violence. But as he cowered there, with death downstairs waiting to chat with him, with his heart shaking his body in its terrified hammering, some flint within him answered with at least a feeble spark the steel of this blunderingly, stupidly grim emergency.

In the old mission oak desk on the other side of the room there was a pre-war .32 automatic. He had bought it for his wife's protection out here, and had discovered afterward that she was more afraid of the sight of the thing than she could possibly have been of any actual peril. Having bought it, he had amused himself with it now and then by potting at tin cans and bottles, always a little afraid of the gun himself, always pointing it out a window when he cleaned it. His relationship with the gun was less an acquaintance than an armed truce. But he crawled on hands and knees to the desk, now, and got it from its drawer.

THE banging was repeated at the door, more loudly. He went down the stairs, not feeling the treads beneath his feet, holding the gun rigidly before him. He went softly to the door, and softly he slid the bolt that had locked it.

Afterward, he didn't think he had been breathing at all during that moment. And he must have been ghostlike in his pallor—a rather frail little man blinking through bifocals, with his lips parted in a grin of utter terror and holding that gun shrinkingly forward in his hand. He turned the knob and jerked the door open with his left hand.

His body quivered inside his clothes.

It was all like a movie. The man who had been knocking held a gun, not aimed, just ready. He was looking over his shoulder at the coupé when the door was jerked open. He whirled back, but it is doubtful if he ever really saw the pallid little man with his teeth exposed in his grin of fright.

The .32 spoke three times. And then, as the second man scrambled from the coupé with his own gun coming out and his jaws slack with stunned amazement, the .32 cracked out four times more. And then the little man with the bifocals, who considered himself an impossibly bad marksman because he missed a bottle more often than not at thirty paces, stared stupidly at a dead man with three bullet holes in his body and a dead man with four bullet holes.

All dreamlike, all something that he must surely just be seeing at a movie or something.

He moved like an automatic thing, stripped of feeling and comprehension. Part of his mind was working in a businesslike, numbed way; the rest of it was dead. Dimly he knew that later the terrific shock of this thing would hit him like a sledgehammer. But there was no shock now.

Shots. Probably no one would pay any attention to them out here. There is always shooting going on in the country, at targets, or rats or crows, or just for the hell of it. As far as that went, he had potted with the .32 enough so that no one hearing them this afternoon would have thought anything about it.

There was an old raincoat in the basement. He went for that, still moving woodenly, uncomprehendingly. And he got a pair of dark glasses from the buffet drawer.

*

"The tramp they picked up near the woods keeps saying he saw the coupé on Saturday afternoon—and they didn't find it until morning," mused the senior

salesman importantly. "He swears there were three men in it. But he must have been tanked up on canned heat. Because why would Jigger's pals bother to drive the two guys away in their car, as the hobo says he saw it being driven near the woods? That's not the gang way. They just kill 'em and let 'em lay. Yeah, there are some funny angles to this. . . ."

*

The raincoat caught the blood when he got the two bodies somehow into the coupé. Water took the puddles off the porch floor pretty well, and the hose fixed the gravel driveway where the second man had fallen.

With the raincoat collar turned high, and dark glasses over his bifocals, he backed the coupé out of the lane and went down the road toward town. He was still waiting for the reaction to set in. He, a person who had never so much as shot an animal in all his life, had shot and killed two men. The heavens would fall on him soon. But his apprehension was drowned in his gladness, atavistic in its savagery, at the fact that he was still alive.

HE drove the car along a road paralleling the railroad tracks, and turned it into a little glade where the trees and bushes would hide it at least until he was well away from the spot. Then he started across the fields for his home, covering the five miles fast, so that he would get back in time to burn the raincoat before his wife was driven home by her friend's husband.

And still he felt no surging nausea of horror—only the relief of his reprieve.

*

"I suppose," the star salesman was saying, "Frankie Chester knew about who had knocked over his two men. So they had to hurry and knock him over, too, before he and his gang really got going to get their revenge."

It was a good, gangster-picture word. The salesman repeated it, almost smacking his lips over it.

"Revenge!"

*

"I think I'll drive in today," he had said at breakfast, "if you can do without the car. I may have to work late tonight, and I'd hate to miss the last train and have to stay at a hotel."

His wife had nodded, with less worry in her eyes than had been there for the past few days. He was still pale, but he didn't seem as preoccupied, as frighteningly keyed up, as he had been.

"I can get along without the car all right, she said." Ada will drop in for me if I have to go anywhere. But do be careful, Harold. That dreadful thing they found in the woods yesterday! Two men —shot to death. . . ."

She had shuddered. And he had felt no emotion at all. He thought he had figured out that lack of emotion, however. All feeling of guilt, of horror, was still suspended because he was still in deadly danger—would be until Frankie himself was as definitely, as possible, out of his way as those two men were.

He had kissed her and gone to the garage for the car. Her eyes had been tender on him—kindly, not too strong little man with mild eyes behind meticulously polished bifocals. How his overcoat pocket sagged. She must keep him from carrying notebooks and things in it. The coat was getting quite out of shape.

But the pocket was not sagged down by notebooks.

HE could remember little of that day of routine at the office. He read and dictated letters, saw two or three men who wanted extension of credit, talked to those around him. He must have appeared fairly normal because no one said anything.

All he could really remember, though, was that night.

A dark, narrow areaway between two

big apartment buildings just on the edge of Chicago's Gold Coast. A mild-looking little man standing in it, noticed by only a few who passed on the sidewalk, peering out through polished bifocals, with his hand in his topcoat pocket.

The building to his left was the one in which Frankie Chester lived. There was no secret about the address. The police had it, and all the newspapers. He didn't know whether Frankie was in or out; but he did know that the man would probably show up at this entrance some time during the evening or early morning.

He didn't even look at his watch while he stood there. It didn't seem to matter how many hours passed. He was still in that near-trance of automatic and primitive action. Pull the string of self-preservation, and the figure does thus and so. Actually it was at about a quarter of three in the morning when he saw a sedan with a new front bumper and a straightened front fender stop in front of the building to his left.

Two men got out. And one of them was the man who had stared with dull and deadly eyes at him in the alley when the police had picked him up. The two started for the building entrance.

The little man sighted down the barrel of the .32 through the fussily polished bifocals. He had the gun propped on his clenched left hand, and his left hand rested against the corner of the areaway. Frankie was walking a bit behind the other man, looking nervous, puzzled, and angry.

The .32 barked just once. The other man crouched. His hand went for his shoulder. Then he realized what an exposed position he stood in and jumped for the building entrance.

The little man put the .32 in his pocket. He hadn't known enough to aim for the body—that larger and more certain target than the head. But it didn't matter. Because he hadn't missed.

He walked down the areaway to the alley behind it, got into his car, and drove away, feeling no more agitation than if he had just shot one more bottle or tin can. . . .

And the peculiar part of it was that he *still* felt no differently about any of this. He could not comprehend that he had shot three men, taken three lives; he could only reflect on the fact that he was no longer subject to the stupid vengeance demanded by the underworld characters across whose path he had had the bad luck to stumble.

Sometimes now he stared nearsightedly at nothing while he polished his glasses, and wondered if he really had done those things, destroying in order to avoid being destroyed himself. He could hardly believe he had; there was no reminder of it anywhere. Not even the gun. He had thrown that into the river on his way home that night. . . .

*

"There are funny angles to it, all right," concluded the star salesman. "But the answer is clear enough. Jigger Loomis's pals got Frankie and Frankie's two top men because they didn't pick Jigger up and get him away from the murdered garage man. And it's an outrage that the cops don't get the guys that killed them and put 'em in death cells alongside of Jigger."

He winked at the others,, and turned to the credit man.

"What do you think about it, Hallock, old son? You ought to be an authority on blood and thunder and gangsters on the rampage." He laughed at his joke.

They all grinned at the precise-looking man who stared mildly at them through his bifocals. Hallock looked at the clock, which said four minutes past one, and cleared his throat diffidently.

"I think," he said, "that we had all better get to work before Mr. Patterson comes and finds us wasting company time."

He set an example by picking up the first of the stack of letters on his desk. He was very much afraid of Mr. Patterson, the boss.

War For Sale

By MAX BRAND

The girl tensed and drew back to the wall, as the dog came forward

TWO questions are tormenting every chancellery in Europe. What has become of the Maginot Line plans? And: Who is Monsieur Jacquelin? They are questions which, as events move to a more sinister position, become very much entangled.

Monsieur Jacquelin is the ace of agents, a glamorous super-spy who has worked—and magnificently—for at least a dozen governments. An ex-associate, Jules Cailland, a French journalist, begins a series of articles about Monsieur Jacquelin, but runs away before the series is finished.

And the Maginot plans—the exact map of the line of fortifications along France's eastern frontier—have been stolen, recovered, and stolen again—the last time in London from the hands of Lady Cecil De Waters and her American friend, Willie Gloster who had helped her get them back from the original thief.

DESPERATE, the lovely Lady Cecil believes that only one man in the world can help her—M. Jacquelin. Because of Cailland's abrupt discontinuance of the articles that had the whole world agog, Lady Cecil has about decided that Cailland himself is Jacquelin. Willie Gloster, wealthy, gay, six feet and over of ne'er-do-well muscle, scoffs at Lady Cecil's idea. But he knows Cailland and reluctantly makes the introduction. Impulsively Lady Cecil runs off to Berlin with Cailland in search of von Emsdorf, top-man of the Nazi secret service—and the Maginot plans.

Berlin. Thither have come Lady Cecil and Cailland. Thither also, Willie Gloster, more angry than hurt, and much more interested, it seems, in recovering Lady Cecil than the plans. And thither, finally, have come a cabal of representatives of the world's great powers, interested only in brewing war and dividing the spoils.

One of them, Raskoi, the Russian, is a drunken bull of a man whose general dimensions correspond roughly with Willie's own. So Gloster scrapes up an acquaintance with him. In Raskoi's room he finds a girl, Elise, and when he and Raskoi come to blows,

This story began in the Argosy for April 24

Elise kills the Russian with a blow on the head with a wine bottle.

SO Willie Gloster becomes Gregor Raskoi. He fools von Emsdorf and the other members of the conclave and learns a good deal about their plans. But at the last moment, von Emsdorf becomes suspicious. Raskoi is too kind to von Emsdorf's dog.

Von Emsdorf, who is as sure as Lady Cecil that Cailland is Monsieur Jacquelin, tries to hire his services. It is Cailland who will determine if Raskoi is an impostor or not. Cailland and Lady Cecil, meeting Gloster at tea, do not give him away, and Willie carries his impersonation off with a high hand.

Von Emsdorf is almost content. But when Lady Cecil visits Raskoi's rooms, and von Emsdorf hears about it, his suspicions are roused once more and he plans a final test.

LADY CECIL is not the only one in Berlin who visits Raskoi on that afternoon. Elise, half in love with Willie, returns to be sure that no one finds Raskoi's body, stuffed in the closet. And the mysterious Mr. R., head of the British secret service, pays a personal call to be sure that all is going well. He is displeased with the murder, but jubilant at the good work Willie Gloster is doing.

"Tonight will tell the story," he says. "If you are careful—and very lucky and very clever, we'll have the plans and all."

At von Emsdorf's that night Cailland reveals the Prussian's trap to Gloster; and Willie, audaciously, decides that this is the last opportunity they will have to find the plans. And he does. All other hiding places failing, he conceals them hurriedly on von Emsdorf's own bookshelves. He has just finished when Gleich, the conclave's delegate from Austria, comes in, and Willie, in his Raskoi characterization, begins to roar insults at him. For Cailland, the moment is nerve-racking in the extreme. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

HOW TO TELL A RUSSIAN

ELISE, walking up and down through the hotel living room of Gregor Raskoi, heard not a sound, but a fresher draught of wind blew suddenly through the window and when she turned in her walking she saw four men in police costume entering the door.

The lieutenant at their head was a gray man with a head so closely clipped that the scalp shone pink through the bristles.

"*Fräulein?*" he said.

She stood still and watched the four. "Well?" she asked.

"We shall be engaged here for a short time," said the lieutenant. "Don't let us disturb you. Anton. Johann. Wilhelm. Take the other room first."

The three disappeared into the bedroom. The lieutenant sat down. "Be seated *Fräulein,*" he said. "And have a cigarette with me. *Nein?*"

"Why not?" asked Elise, smiling on him.

"You know Herr Raskoi well?" asked the lieutenant.

"I know him for a day and a half," said Elise. "But quite well!"

"A good Russian?" asked the lieutenant.

"Did you ever know a good Russian?" she asked.

The lieutenant looked at her again. Then he laughed. From the other room came the noise of opening drawers, opening and closing doors.

"But still, you know him?" asked the lieutenant.

"Not very well," she said. "It's my wish not to know men too well. . . . Why have you come here?" asked the girl.

"Do you care?" he responded.

"I? Not a bit!" she said.

"You don't care if Herr Raskoi falls into a little trouble?"

"I hope it's a trouble that makes the Russian in him sweat. . . . Oh, that would be nice to see!"

"Hmm!" murmured the lieutenant, smiling again. "The world ripens a woman. Life in the world ripens her. It is like the summer sun for flowers, eh?"

"Thank you, *Herr Leutnant,*" said Elise, smiling. There was a distinct crash inside as a door was pried open. "Are they going to break up the furniture?" asked the girl, reclining on the couch.

"Nothing we are not prepared to pay for," said the lieutenant.

One of the Schupos appeared in the bedroom doorway and saluted. "Ah?" said the lieutenant.

"Herr Leutnant," said the policeman.

The lieutenant rose, bowed to the girl, and saluted her. "Ten seconds—pardon me," he said, and marched into the bedroom. Elise cast one glance at the door, another toward the window. Then, gradually, she composed herself and leaned back on the couch again. She was smiling through a cloud of cigarette smoke when the lieutenant came back into the room with a slow step. He was rubbing his hands together as though he were washing them clean.

"THIS Raskoi, you have only been with him for a day and a half?" he asked.

"That's all. Though I might call it a year and a half," said Elise.

"A good, quiet man most of the time?"

"Perhaps, when he's not drunk, but he's always drunk," said Elise.

"Has he ever been violent with you?" asked the lieutenant.

She put her hand quickly to her side. "No," she said, after an instant. "No, not very."

"I see," said the lieutenant, gently. "Where is he now?"

"He'll be back in a moment," she said.

"Truly—in a moment?"

"Yes," said Elise.

"You don't know where he is?"

"Down in the bar, I suppose. I could find him."

"Ah, could you? If he's not in the bar would you know the next place to look?"

"Why, yes. I suppose so. I could almost trace him. By the smell!" She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

The lieutenant started and then smiled very broadly. "Suppose you go find him and bring him up here?" he said.

"Why not?" asked Elise.

She paused at the door.

"Just some old friends who have dropped in to see him?" she suggested.

"Ah, exactly," said the lieutenant. "Just some old friends who have come all the way from Moscow to see him! You'll remember? All the way from Moscow."

She drew in her breath through her teeth. "I hope you have to use a whip on him!" she said.

"But maybe we shall have to use our boots on him, first," said the lieutenant. "Or gun butts? Would you care?"

"May I stay and watch?" she asked.

"Sweetheart!" said the lieutenant.

He was laughing as she went out into the hallway.

"BURGUNDY! Burgundy! Burgundy!" shouted Gloster. "No more of this filthy wash—this champagne—this white nothing with bubbles in it! I would not give it to a dog! I would not water sheep with it, not if I wanted to cut good wool from them later. Here, you, move your feet, wake up, use your hands, get me Burgundy!"

Behind Gloster's chair, at the dinner table, stood a man much shorter than the others who were serving the guests. He was stocky and dark, with a red color shining through his cheeks.

"I go at once, sir," he said, in Russian.

"Let me look at you," said Gloster in the same tongue. Then he broke into German to say, "Where did you find the color that was put in your cheeks? What did you pay for it?"

"God gave it to me, sir," said the servant.

"You lie," shouted Gloster. "You paid good money for it."

"Not I," insisted the servant.

"Do you hear?" roared Gloster, leaning back in his chair. "The filthy rascal admits everything. He admits that he has worked for a master with a good cellar of wine. He has not paid for his drinking. No, not he. But search his dirty pockets and you'll find that he has in them a good imitation of the wine cellar key. In the cold of the night he goes down into the *cave*. He looks around him at the stacks of bottles. Saliva runs hot into his mouth. He swallows and blesses himself. Where shall he begin? Oh, sun of France, oh blood red sun that cherishes the good grapes of Burgundy and makes them fat and sweet! Oh sun of

France that ever your good wine should go to hearten such a thief as this one! Look at his face and see the lie written there! Wine, wine, wine! Only the juice of the grape could put such color in a human face."

He lifted his fist and turned in his chair. The servant stood still and smiled with stupid, steadfast eyes, waiting for the blow.

"No, Raskoi!" called von Emsdorf.

"Damn you and what you say," answered Gloster. "I am at your table, am I not? I am guest, am I not? And can I not beat one of your servants if I choose? Ah-ha, it is plain that there is no hospitality in this land! Fat, stupid, sweating Germany, there is no wit or brain in you! Ah, if you were in my Moscow house and wished to strike a servant, I would only stop you to put a whip in your hand. Would I not, you dog?"

"Yes, master," said the Russian.

"*He* knows me," said Gloster. "Here, fool. Give me your hand. Do you feel the strength in that hand? If you were mine, I would use that strength to take you by the hair of the head, for a wine thief. Tell me, you rascal, are you not a thief?"

"I am nothing in the world except what you say," said the servant, bowing over the great hand of Gloster.

"Well," said Gloster, "have you anything to say for yourself?"

"I have no words except what you give me, master," said the servant in Russian.

"Keep the words and use them to damn yourself in hell!" said Gloster. "Get out of my sight and never come back again unless you're carrying a bottle of good red Burgundy in each hand. Go, go, before I throw something. Quickly, thief!"

"I SHOULD keep you to find out the thieves in my house," said von Emsdorf, smiling at Gloster.

"Thieves?" said Gloster. "We are all thieves. Mankind divides into two parts and portions. One is a great part. The other is a very, very, very small part. The great part of men are stupid thieves. The small, small, small part is composed of the clever thieves. I hope to God that everybody at this table is a clever thief, or else our business will go to hell. I am myself a very good thief. I smile in your face and kiss you while I pick your pocket. I kneel for the priest's blessing and come away with his golden cross, and curse him if it turns out to be nothing but silver gilt.

"When I think what a thief I am, I thank the God that made me. *Ah-hai,* Emsdorf, I am not very drunk. I am only happy when I think what a great thief God made when He made me. And I thank Him, and call Him brother."

Outside the dining room, Nicolai, the Russian, found himself alone in the hall that led to the pantry and ventured to open the hand into which that drunken guest had pressed a bit of paper.

"My boot is more Russian than he!" Nicolai was saying to himself. "The pigs that make German *wuerstchen* are more Russian than he. The wine he drinks is more Russian than that swine!"

But as he looked at what was in the palm of his hand, his breath stopped and his words with it. Then, because he was a very devout man—because in fact he could not remain in the Russia where priests and all the works of the kind God are so abused, so contaminated with curses, so blocked and thwarted and mocked—because of the very religion in his heart, he crossed himself once, twice, and thrice and he made a little bow such as he always made whenever he passed a holy ikon. For in his hand he found two paper bills and each was for a thousand gold marks.

Two thousand gold marks!

He was a thrifty man, and he had in the bank more than eleven hundred gold marks at that moment, the product of eight years of hard work and close saving, since his flight from an afflicted Russia. And now the heavens had opened upon him and showered him with wealth.

The first words that broke from him were the ones of the Easter greeting which all good members of the Greek church exchange on that loveliest of all the days in the year.

Both the greeting and the answer rushed from the lips of Nicolai, as he whispered:

"Christ is risen again! . . . He has, indeed!"

Nicolai put out a hand against the wall and supported himself. He looked again at the money in his hand and blessed himself once more.

And he said to his secret soul: "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Forgive me the evil thoughts that I had against this man. Explain to me, O God, how such a noble soul, such a great heart, such a devout spirit, could speak such bad thoughts in such bad Russian? O God, forgive me the word that I meant to speak against him! Forgive me, bless him, be merciful to all sinners, and bring at last into the peace of Thy Heaven me and my noble lord who wishes the Burgundy!"

When he had paused for this moment and completed his devout thoughts, he sighed, and put the money in his pocket. As he walked on, he kept his hand pressed over the place.

Two slips of printed paper, so small, and yet with such meaning.

It was one of those nothings which are everything. For instance, how many words we speak, and ask for bread and butter, and say good morning, and farewell, and give good wishes in which our hearts have not spoken freely; and yet the same words may contain miraculous meaning. As when on the day of days one speaks to a woman and in her face the light breaks suddenly.

It was like that—a miracle—a something that was nothing—a nothing that was Heaven itself!

Nicolai went slowly on into the pantry and there the head butler, fierce, tall, stiff as an old wolf, halted him with a glance.

"Well?" he said. "Where are you going?"

"I am going to get two bottles of Burgundy!" said Nicolai.

"Well, but what is he? Is he Russian?" asked the butler.

"Is he Russian?" asked Nicolai. "Is the holy God Russian? Is the blue in the sky a Russian blue? Am *I* Russian? Is the saint I was named for a good Russian?"

"Ah, well," said the butler, "I see that a dog only needs the right stroke of the whip in order to know his master. He was right when he called you a wine thief, then?"

"Brother," said Nicolai, "I never have tasted more than three swallows of wine in my life, and they were at a wedding, and I was sick and vomited afterward; but if my master says that I am a thief of wine, who am I to say no to him? Pray God that we have some Burgundy in the cellar that is fit for his good lips!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAGINOT LINE

"WHAT are they doing now?" asked Lady Cecil. "What is happening in the von Emsdorf house?"

"That fellow Gloster is pouring red wine down his throat," said Winton Holling Jones. "He's found a part that he likes to play."

"But *that's* not fair," said Cecil. "He's simply imitating Raskoi, and I think he does it wonderfully."

"It's impossible to play such a part," pronounced Winton Jones, "without a natural inclination. This Gloster—you know him quite well, Cecil?"

"Once I intended to marry him," she answered.

"But no longer?" asked Jones.

"Should you ask me that?" she inquired.

"My dear," said Jones, "I had intended to give you the entire support, the entire confidence and trust of our service, but if you could give yourself away to a wild, headlong fellow like this Gloster, how could we possibly retain faith in you?"

"You know, you ought to praise him," she pointed out, "because he plays his part so perfectly."

"It may be better to say that he's perfectly cast for it," answered Jones, sharply. "But to go back a bit—you've recovered from the infatuation?"

She considered this remark for a moment and then replied in a somewhat dreaming voice, "Jules Cailland is. . . ." She didn't finish.

"Is that the answer?" asked Jones, looking into her eyes. She shrugged.

At this, Winton Holling Jones began to look closely at her through his big glasses, but he knew enough about women to say no more at the moment.

"What is happening in von Emsdorf's house?" she repeated.

"We're too late," said Jones. "Even for a Jacquelin, we're too late. Whatever is done has to be done tonight, and what can be done in a single night? In the morning, their plans will be completed, the charts of the Line photographed, and the game is lost!"

"And then?" she asked.

He said, slowly: "Germany—Austria—Italy — Russia — France — England—Belgium . . . Then Japan striking in from the East . . . Turkey reaching for the Greek Islands. And we have a war that will make the Great War look like a skirmish. The world didn't know how to kill in those days. Now we're experts. No matter who wins, democracy is dead and we give ourselves into the hands of dictators. Free speech dies. Thought dies with it."

He sighed. "Turn on the radio," he said, "and let us have something to drown our own words; a mental anaesthetic is what I need when I think of the future."

She crossed her room and turned on the radio. "Music?" she asked.

"Yes, music."

She moved the arrow on the dial. It caught on brief tangles of uproar, tore through them, passed on through loud voices, reached a rich German tenor singing a Viennese waltz.

She turned and looked a question at Jones; he nodded and she tuned the radio so that it gave the words clearly but softly.

Even then, he was not quite satisfied with it.

"Louder, please!" said Winton Jones.

She strengthened the music, watching Winton Jones. He did not give a signal until the tenor was shouting into his ears. Then he leaned back in his chair. She sat on the arm of it.

"That's what the world is coming to," said Jones, his voice half drowned by the uproar. "Let's get used to it, or else be ready to die. . . ."

THE music cut off, suddenly, in the midst of a note. Then a loud, harsh German voice spoke, clipping off the words with well-trained enunciation.

"The police want Gregor Raskoi. G-r-e-g-o-r R-a-s-k-o-i . . . Russian . . . For murder. The police want Gregor Raskoi for murder . . . He stands six feet tall, and weighs about a hundred and ninety pounds. Blond . . . loud voice . . . a confident step but a light one . . . clean shaven . . . Speaks good German . . . Constantly singing either in German or Russian. He drinks much red wine. The police want the Russian, Gregor Raskoi, for the murder of William Gloster, an American. . . ."

Lady Cecil cried out. Jones caught her by the hand.

"Don't you understand?" he demanded.

"Yes. Now I remember . . ." she answered, faintly.

The police had ended their SOS. The radio orchestra valiantly and with German precision struck back into their song at exactly the point at which the interruption had cut them off. The well trained tenor began on the very note with the violin.

Jones looked at the stone-pale face of the girl and said nothing for a moment; she kept waiting, haunting him with her eyes.

"Well?" asked Jones at last. "How long will it take them to locate Gloster and arrest him for killing himself?"

"He's been as easy to see in Berlin as a red flag," she answered. "He's carried bottles of wine in his hand up and down the street."

"They'll have him before long," said Jones, nodding. "Besides, the radio may be heard in the house of von Emsdorf, by the servants. We must bring word to Gloster."

"*I* shall," said Lady Cecil.

"You will?" repeated Jones, smiling a little. "How will you break into the house?"

"I don't know," said the girl, "but I *do* know that I'll manage to reach him."

IN the house of von Emsdorf, Count di Parva had straightened in his chair at the dinner table to say, "We have the

energy. We have the will. But two great peoples are throttled for lack of breathing space. They are prevented from growing up by the lack of colonial space. Sooner or later they must strike, and they are insanely foolish unless they strike together. The object for attack is equally at hand, as von Emsdorf points out. It is France, with her enormous and unexploited colonial empire. If Italy attacks from the south and Germany from the west, will England intervene? I think not. England is not ready. She has commenced an enormous program of military and naval rehabilitation; she is spending a billion dollars a year to equip herself for the struggle; but she is not ready now. The lesson of the World War she will not quickly forget.

"At that time she flung herself into northern France and sacrificed the men of her regular army to impede the German advance. Then she advanced a huge army which passed through the four years of hell on the western front. In return for these immense sacrifices she now receives not even the most casual gratitude from France. It is taken for granted that she fought only to preserve her own safety. She did not find France a willing ally in the recent Ethiopian affair. And I feel certain that England will remain—no matter how unwillingly in some senses—apart from the battle at least for a time.

"Before long, however, her peace-loving people will see that they cannot endure a German frontier immediately across the channel. Then they will fight. There would be in the hands of Germany and Italy only a few early weeks in which they could work unhampered by the enormous force of England. What could they accomplish in those weeks? I think we all have considered it.

"The Italian forces have a region of huge mountains to penetrate unless they choose to try to work along the Mediterranean coast, where the terrain is very narrow and the fortifications of France are very strong. The Italian advance, at the best, can only occupy a percentage of the French army, and not the majority of it. To the north, there remains the great German attack. Impeded by the lack of great guns and heavy tanks, units of immense cost, the German army may rush over the frontier quickly, but there it finds a terrible obstacle. I refer to the Maginot Line!

"No doubt we all understand something about the Line, but for my part I have spent three months in as close examination as possible, and at the end of that time, I felt that the Line was invincible. It is a series of forts, sometimes connected by underground passages, and sometimes isolated. But the forts are of enormous strength. We have to conquer, in them, bastions of concrete twenty feet thick, which the most powerful bombs cannot break open. In them we meet with vast underground barracks where soldiers may rest from the fighting in places where even the thunder of a bombardment cannot reach their ears. The shock units and the reserves are both housed on the actual fighting line! Therefore fresh men continually will be serving the guns.

"Now imagine what this means to an attacking army which has pushed forward with great enthusiasm, let us say, and is ready to deliver a great massed attack to break through the obstacle.

"While it is still miles away from the Maginot Line, its masses of troops pour down the highways; they stream across the country, they enter the gullies, they pass into the villages, they occupy the ridges, the woods, the paths, the ravines. All of them feel secure because of distance or because of the natural shelter of some sort that screens them from the eyes of the enemy. But now consider what happens.

"From high observation balloons, and from scouting aeroplanes, messages are rushed back by the French. The position of every body of German troops is given. Words are not needed. Mere numbers will do. The defenders check off the reported numbers on their accurate charts, already prepared. At once the range for every gun, big and small, is known for every target that lies across the front.

"There is no question of missing. The guns are pointed with as much accuracy as though they were shooting at open tar-

gets and at pointblank range. The woods are covered with a stream of shells. A high, angling fire drops explosives, shrapnel, and gas over every recess behind the ridges. The villages, many of them already mined, are blown off the face of the earth.

"Suppose, in spite of this hell of fire, the Germans stream forward. Their ranks are decimated. Half the combatants are dead or wounded. But still they thrust ahead. They encounter then a forest of steel beams through which their charging tanks cannot penetrate. They encounter, also, mined ground, and barbed-wire entanglements prepared for years. What can break through on a broad front against such opposition?

"But suppose that miracles happen and the foremost lines are penetrated? Still the forts maintain a terrible fire from their turrets. And other forts set back behind the foremost lines now open with direct fire. Thousands of rapid-fire guns, tens of thousands of machine guns water the earth with lead. What further advance is possible? In twenty-four hours the finest army in the world could be paralyzed and pulverized by a single attack against those invincible defenses. Gentlemen, I come to a pause. I wait for some answer."

DI PARVA ended; Johann Gleich made the only comment during the gloomy moment of silence that followed. "Von Emsdorf, can you speak?" he asked.

Von Emsdorf rose and smiled on them. "Consider the strongest man in the world," he said, "and what a fine surgeon could do to him by severing the nerves of a single nerve center? His body would be paralyzed, would it not?"

"It would," said the cold voice of Johann Gleich.

"My dear friends," said von Emsdorf, "our spies, of course, have penetrated the secret of the Maginot Line. They are ready to cut a few of the nerve centers of that Line."

"What *are* the nerves of the Maginot Line?" asked di Parva.

Gloster burst out, "The electric power lines! Electricity, the brain of the Twentieth Century! Electricity, the soul of the new Russia."

Von Emsdorf stared at Gloster for a moment. "Our friend Gregor Raskoi is exactly right," he said. "We shall cut the electric lines of a central section of the fortifications; and the whole body of the Maginot Line will be like a body whose spinal column has been severed!"

Louvain remarked, "Those lines must be, most of them, deeply buried, defended in every possible way. Besides, the system must be so intricate that it could be deciphered only on the master charts of the Maginot Line; and God knows those charts are safe in Paris defended by the entire ingenuity and force of the French Republic."

Von Emsdorf was still on his feet. He smiled on Louvain.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you may have been somewhat surprised when I added to our intimate little circle Monsieur Jules Cailland? I may give you one reason for that addition now. The master charts of the Maginot Line no longer are in Paris. What copies they may have, I don't know. But the original of the plans was abstracted from the place of safekeeping in Paris by the extraordinary talent of Monsieur Cailland!"

Gloster shouted, "Then, by God, we already are riding down the Champs Elysée! We are walking through the wine cellars of Burgundy. We are already drunk. We have filled our pockets with the jewels of the Rue de la Paix."

"Is it true?" asked Johann Gleich, turning white with joy.

"It is true," said von Emsdorf. "I will tell you a very brief story. Monsieur Cailland, having taken the plans, despatched them to Germany by a safe messenger. Monsieur Cailland then drew attention from his activity in that direction by beginning the publication of a series of articles about the celebrated Monsieur Jacquelin; all of you have read those articles with amazement and pleasure. But while Jules Cailland was publishing the articles, his messenger was stopped in Germany by the long arm of another power. Can you guess

what power, gentlemen? Not France, I assure you."

"By England," suggested Johann Gleich. "She has the finest secret service in the world."

"By England," nodded von Emsdorf. "Her agents operated with miraculous speed, intercepted the messenger, gained the plans from him, and returned them. Not to Paris—ah, trust the clever English not to have done that immediately—but to London. It was then my painful duty, gentlemen, to fly to London myself. I will not tell you the trail I followed. It is sufficient for you to know that at a certain time tea was served in a room in London to a female English spy who had been instrumental in regaining the plans. She was honored by the presence of a number of important dignitaries. There were so many important men in the room that it was impossible for them to pay any attention to the underlings who carried the tea trays back and forth. Therefore your friend von Emsdorf was able to enter, and when he left the room he was carrying the briefcase which contained the plans."

HE could not help throwing back his head with a smile of triumph.

"Oh, little western peoples," Gloster said, "win your wars with pieces of paper. Get fat eating one another. Mother Russia will swallow you all, one day!"

There was a soft murmur from the others at the table. Johann Gleich, turning brilliant eyes on Cailland, said intensely.

"Monsieur Cailland, you have changed the history of the world!"

Cailland waved the praise away with both hands and a modest laugh.

"I am about to lay everything before you!" said von Emsdorf, and left the room.

Here one of the servants came in and stood behind the chair of Gloster. He tried to keep his voice to a whisper, but his panting excitement made every word clearly audible, as he said: "Herr Raskoi, an S O S has been sent out by the police describing you and asking for your apprehension as the murderer of an American, William Gloster!"

Gloster leaned back in his chair, yawned, and swallowed a glass of the Burgundy.

"They are too far away to matter," he said. "The Americans are much too far away to matter. It will be a long time before Russia notices them, and then swallows them. A good, fat bite. Perhaps the last one that Russia will need to take before she owns the world!"

Johann Gleich said, "Is he drunk?"

"No. He's just Russian," smiled Louvain.

"Do you realize, Raskoi," said Gleich, "that the police will have you in their hands within a few hours?"

"They will have something worthwhile, then," said Gloster. "And God teach them to enjoy me!"

A voice cried out in the library. The sound of it made Gleich leap up from his chair. "That is von Emsdorf!" he exclaimed.

"What would he be yelling about?" asked Gloster. "The police don't want *him*, do they?"

They heard two or three blows struck. Friedrich der Grosse growled like a devil. Then von Emsdorf reappeared in the doorway that led to the library.

His face was a bright crimson, with white spots painted on the center of each cheek.

"*Ah-ha!*" cried Gloster in a great voice. "Look at him! Look at him! He couldn't do what he promised. Has he lied to us, then?"

Von Emsdorf said, "Cailland!"

"Ah?" answered the Frenchman.

"Were you with Gregor Raskoi every moment since he entered the house?"

"Either I or the servants," said Cailland.

"He is the only one who could approach Friedrich der Grosse without having his throat torn out," said von Emsdorf. "And the plans of the Maginot Line have been taken from the place where the dog was guarding them. Raskoi—you are the thief!"

CHAPTER XVIII

TRAP FOR A PLAYBOY

"WAIT here," said Holling Jones, when they had come down the alley to the great, dark rear of von Ems-

dorf's house. "Stay for me here, Cecil. I'll bring the car around near the mouth of the alley and then come back to you."

She stood back against the alley wall, facing the house, and looked up at the lighted windows. There were not many of them. Three or four, only, sent out rectangular patches of light which glowed obscurely on the opposite wall. Even the rear face of the building was imposing, big pilasters springing up to classical capitals above which the heavy cornice rose.

Kitchen noises came out to her obscurely and sometimes a vague sound of laughter—a mere pulse of it rather than a distant voice. A footfall moved discreetly toward her up the alley. It did not come from the direction of Jones. Therefore she turned, drew the collar of her cloak closer about her face, and walked very very slowly down the side of the wall as the footfall approached, was passing her, and then halted. She stopped in turn, for a girl stood beside her in the shadow.

"Ah?" said the voice of Elise. "Are *you* thinking of him, also? Do you know?"

"Know what?" asked Lady Cecil, drawing back close to the wall.

The other girl followed and stood near. "The police . . ." she said.

"I know," answered Lady Cecil.

"We have to reach him!" said Elise. "Is that why you are here?"

"Yes. And I don't know how. . . ."

"There'll be a chance of some sort," said Elise. "You care for him?"

"Yes," answered Lady Cecil.

"Then go away and *keep* yourself for him," said Elise.

"Would you stay here alone?"

"Don't you see?" answered Elise. "What happens to me doesn't matter in the least. I'm only a gesture in the dark. There's no brightness or use left in me. And I owe him something."

"*You* owe him something?"

"Raskoi is dead!" said the girl. "The great beast, Raskoi! Do you know what I saw? I saw that terrible Raskoi driven back by the fists of Gloster. I heard the knuckles smacking against his face. The blood flew out in thin sprays. He could have killed Raskoi with his hands! If I'd only waited, I might have seen him do it. But I was hungry for the end. So I used the bottle and struck at the back of his head."

"It was *not* he that struck down Raskoi?" asked Lady Cecil.

"Do you think he would strike any man from behind?" said Elise.

Here a thin, vague square of light fell all about them, flashing on a small pool of water that had formed on the pavement. The rear door of von Emsdorf's house had opened.

"Don't move! Stand still!" whispered Elise. "If we don't move they may not see us!"

TWO men stood in the illuminated doorway. As they stirred, their broad shadows swayed across the eyes of Lady Cecil. She could see past them down a long hall. The voices of the two sounded dimly.

"Go to headquarters, Anton," said one.

"I would rather go to hell," said Anton.

"No one else will believe you, however."

"There is a man often on duty two blocks from here," said Anton. "I know him, and he might believe me."

"But anyway it can't be the right man they have here."

"No? I tell you that I've heard the name used in the dining room. 'Raskoi'. I've heard them call him 'Raskoi'. I'm going to find my friend of the police, now. Where did you say they'd put Raskoi?"

"In the corner room on the third floor. And he's guarded there like a handful of pure gold."

"Come along with me. If my man's at his post, you won't be away for two minutes."

But the other hesitated.

"Suppose that I'm called for in the meantime?"

"It doesn't matter. They won't suspect. Come with me."

"I haven't the key to the door."

"Leave it a little ajar. Hurry!" urged Anton.

The other turned and looked down the

brightly lighted hall. Then he stepped out, decisively, and drew the door softly shut behind him. A single long ray still escaped from the edge of it into the night. The two walked off up the alley with sharply clicking heels.

"It means that we're too late!" said Elise.

"I'm going in. There'll be no better chance," said Lady Cecil.

"Going in? You *can't* go in," whispered Elise.

"Wait here!" answered Lady Cecil. "A short man with a huge head and large glasses—he'll be back in a moment. Tell him that I've gone inside."

"You can't . . ." pleaded Elise.

But Lady Cecil, shaking off that restraining hand, crossed the alley hurriedly. She had to go swiftly for fear her own thoughts would overtake her. And reaching the door she pulled it open and felt a whispering shadow reach vainly at her from behind.

That was Elise, of course. But she stepped on inside and pulled the door shut behind her until, as before, it was only open a crack. It was a barrier that Elise dared not open, it appeared, and Cecil went softly down the hallway.

She thought of pulling off cloak and hat in the hope that her black dress might make her look like a uniformed servant of the house. But she knew from Jones that there were no women in the place. If she were seen there would be no doubt as to why she was in the residence of von Emsdorf. And von Emsdorf himself could not help but know her face. So she went on, softly, steadily, with a vague feeling that if she kept moving her mind would tell her what to do and where to go, and with a certain knowledge that if she paused a sickness of fear would overcome her.

THE smell and the moist warmth of new cookery lived in the air of the hallway; and the kitchen noises clinked and rattled to her left.

The corridor turned and at a sharp angle entered a great hall. At the base of the hall a double stairway curved towards the next floor and she hurried for this at once, blessing the thickness of the rug that deadened her footfall.

The chandelier above her showered brilliance into the long mirrors. She saw her image drift through a galaxy of reflected stars, like something that swam deep in illumined water, a dark shadow. Then her foot was on the first step of the right-hand stairway.

That was when she heard the descending footfalls. Whether they took the left or the right hand way down, they were sure to see her in another few seconds. She turned, therefore, and fled down the hall. A great, square portal, columned on either side in varicolored marble, offered her an entrance into another room and she hurried into a big, dim library.

A fire smoldered and smoked on a huge hearth; one floor lamp threw a round pool of light on the pattern of a Persian rug. Otherwise the big room was dark. The leather bindings filled the shelves with a faint shimmering of color, except for the vellums which stood out like birch trees in a moonlit forest.

The voices of two men continued down the hall behind her. One, she thought with a leap of the heart, was the voice of Cailland. But that comforting hope was lost from her mind when something moved in the dimness at the end of the room. Right up from under a desk rose a dog as big as a wolf and watched her with pale green eyes.

She shrank away. The beast stood with its head down, pointing in her direction as though it were about to charge, yet remaining fixed in place. Here the voices in the hallway abruptly turned into the entrance of the room. A big couch near a window was the only shelter, though it would shield her from only a part of the room. She dropped down behind it and lay flat with her chin on her folded arms.

She almost forgot her danger, a moment later, when she definitely recognized the voice of Cailland, saying:

"If we put a bit of pressure on him, he may forget his part and lapse back into himself. But I'd advocate a bit of sharper action."

"How far did you get with him?" asked von Emsdorf.

"Farther than he liked," said Cailland.

"What first made you suspect him?" asked von Emsdorf.

"If one starts adding together the little impressions which make a suspicion," said Cailland, "often they hardly total a single unit. But you surely are aware of that."

"Well, naturally," said von Emsdorf. "But I'm stricken, Jacquelin."

"If you please!" urged Cailland, softly.

"That name seems to frighten you to death!" snapped von Emsdorf. "It's your own, isn't it?"

"That name," answered Cailland, "will cut my throat some day."

"Isn't the suspicion about your identity spread everywhere, now?" asked von Emsdorf. "Since *La Liberte* printed that last article about you and suggested that you were yourself the man you had been writing about. . . ."

"A hundred people will be willing to swear that I am not that famous man."

"Let the name go," said von Emsdorf. "But now tell me more in detail exactly what happened?"

"THE police are sending out the SOS about the murder at stated intervals, as you know," said Cailland. "In the last one, they gave a very full description of the dead body which had been found in the apartment of Gregor Raskoi. That was when the first thought came over me."

"Which was what?" asked von Emsdorf. "I heard that same description and nothing struck me particularly in it."

" 'About six feet tall,' " quoted Cailland. " 'Weight about a hundred and ninety pounds. Blond. Age just past thirty . . .' Doesn't that sound familiar to you?"

"In what respect?"

"Why, it describes the dead man in the closet at Raskoi's apartment and it also describes the man in this house who is calling himself Raskoi!" said Cailland.

The girl, behind the couch, gathered herself suddenly. She made in the darkness a screaming face and then pressed both hands over her mouth.

Von Emsdorf was saying, "By God, Gailland, I begin to guess what you mean!"

"I've been talking Russian to him," said Cailland, "and one thing seems reasonably clear. He's not Russian!"

"But Nicolai identified him!" exclaimed von Emsdorf.

"Did you see him shake hands with Nicolai at the table, when they were talking?" asked Cailland.

"Yes. I remember that."

"Well, what may he have left in Nicolai's hand?" asked Cailland.

Vons Emsdorf snapped his fingers. He had moved with Cailland, now, to a place close by the hearth. The light was sufficiently dim so that the glow of the fire threw their unshapely images against the wall; flickers of the living flame tossed these shadows into gross movement.

If she could see the speakers, of course they could see her. But she forgot her danger as she listened to Cailland.

"The point is," the Frenchman was saying, "that if the man in the house is not a Russian, he is most certainly the American of whose murder Raskoi is accused."

"Bei Gott!" cried von Emsdorf.

"Simple, I'd say. Wouldn't you?" asked Cailland. "You can see how it happened. The American, as everyone knows, is a playboy millionaire who runs around the world hunting for adventure. Well, if he met Raskoi I suppose that the adventure seemed very good, indeed. He makes friends with the Russian. They begin to drink together in Raskoi's rooms. They fight. William Gloster brains Raskoi with the bottle. But in the meantime, he has heard enough about the reasons why Raskoi has come to Germany, from Raskoi himself. He has to disguise himself in order to make his escape from the German law on account of the murder. Isn't that clear?

"So he kills two birds with one very pretty stone. He puts on the clothes of Raskoi and assumes his name at the same time. He acts out the usual behavior of that drunken Russian, though of course Louvain did not recognize his face. He could not be sure that this fellow was the

real Raskoi he had seen in Russia. Naturally not! In the house with us we have not Raskoi at all, but William Gloster, adventurer-extraordinary. Isn't it all clear?"

"Perfectly clear!" said von Emsdorf. "I think we can hand the fellow over to the police and let them deal with him for us."

"Hand him over to the police, then," said Cailland, ironically. "And guess what Gloster will tell the police about this house and what goes on in it."

"True. Then we must handle him ourselves," said von Emsdorf.

"That is obvious," agreed Cailland.

"And, as a matter of fact, I think that I'll turn the thing over to you," said von Emsdorf.

"Ah, von Emsdorf," said Cailland, "can't you give the dirty work to another pair of hands?"

"I cannot," said von Emsdorf. "I don't know of a man or a friend I have in the house whom I could trust to do this business in the proper way. Once he is dead, you can dispose of his body in the streets, easily. When he is found, the police will be too glad of the finding; they will not be asking how the murderer's body came to be left on the pavement. But ah, *Gott,* Cailland . . . what a frightful gap it leaves in our plans to have Russia unaccounted for at our backs while we go forward against France—if we *can* go forward at all, now that the Maginot plans are lost to us!"

"When I have finished with Monsieur Gloster," said Cailland, cheerfully, "I'll undertake the finding of the plans, my dear friend."

"Jacquelin!" breathed von Emsdorf. "I can't help the name coming to my lips. I know, suddenly, that you will do as you promise."

"Ah," murmured Cailland, "but what's the trouble with our friend Friedrich der Grosse? I thought he was to do penance by being kept there under the desk the entire night?"

"I should skin the worthless cur alive," said von Emsdorf. "But this is as strange as the very devil. Is he stalking something?"

"He may be sleepwalking," chuckled Cailland, "and hunting the ghost of a deer in his sleep!"

"He's certainly hunting," said von Emsdorf, "but there's no sleep in the green of his eyes."

"Look!" said Cailland.

Around the edge of the couch appeared the big head of Friedrich der Grosse, pointing straight towards the girl. She heard von Emsdorf shout out something at the same instant and saw him come running.

There was nothing else to do. She stood up and looked her danger in the eye.

CHAPTER XIX

CAILLAND MAKES IT EASY

VON EMSDORF, when he saw her, drew himself up short and then came slowly on.

"Monsieur Cailland," he said, "I present to you an unexpected guest, and an unexpected pleasure. Lady Cecil, this is Jules Cailland. Or have you just heard me mention him under another name?"

She looked from von Emsdorf to Cailland and let her eyes rest on the Frenchman with profound and perfect loathing. Cailland bowed to her and turning his back, walked toward the hearth.

"The truth is," said von Emsdorf, "that she must have heard me call you by another name, Cailland. And what can we do about that?"

Cailland said nothing. He made a French gesture of surrender with both hands. Still he refused to look at the girl.

"Will you tell me, Lady Cecil," said von Emsdorf, "what brought you into my house? It couldn't have been your old interest, could it? It couldn't have been the Maginot plans?"

She said nothing. She could not take her eyes from Cailland.

Then she heard von Emsdorf saying, "There's only one really safe room in the house. Will there be any harm in putting her there, while we make up our minds what to do with her? Lady Cecil, forgive me, but you see that something must be done with you?"

She could not speak.

"And so," said von Emsdorf, with a gesture, "if you will come with us upstairs . . . Later on, perhaps you'll be encouraged to tell us why you came, who came with you, how you entered the house, and other details? Cailland, you'll accompany us like a good fellow, won't you?"

Cailland walked behind them up the hall, up the stairs. He did not utter a word.

Von Emsdorf went on, "That dear friend of my country and of me—Mr. Winton Jones—has he sent you? His pride in you, that day in London, was a beautiful thing, dear Lady Cecil. It was more than the pride of a father in a child. It was the pride of an Englishman in an Englishwoman—young—so wise—so lovely . . ."

He could not help laughing a little.

They reached the upper hall; they climbed to the third story. The ceiling was lower, but still there was an air of magnificence about the house. The deep red carpet whispered and crinkled under their feet; and so they came to a door outside of which two men walked up and down.

They drew themselves up and stood back for the master of the house to pass.

"We enter here," said von Emsdorf to them. "For the moment, until you have other instructions, you'll watch this lady as carefully as you will watch the gentleman who is already in the room."

He drew the door open.

"Company for you, Herr Gloster!" he called from the doorway, and ushered the girl before him into the room.

Gloster stood up from the table at which he sat. He had thrown off his coat on account of the heat of the evening and rolled up his shirt sleeves over the thick of his forearms. He looked like a laborer taking his ease at the end of the day.

"You see, my kind American friend," said von Emsdorf, "that I think constantly of your comfort and I leave the lady here to entertain you and to be entertained. Herr Gloster, must I present you?"

The girl went to Gloster and put her arms around his neck. He patted her shoulder but did not kiss her upturned face.

"So?" said von Emsdorf. He laughed.

"Stay a while, Cailland," he ordered. "I have to think about this from several angles. And then we'll talk it all over."

He left the room. The three of them remained in a silence as the girl turned slowly from Gloster and faced Cailland.

"I HEARD him, Willie," she said. "I heard the great Jacquelin—the brilliant Frenchman—I heard him talking with von Emsdorf when they couldn't know that I was near them. Willie, he told von Emsdorf who you are—he told him that it was Raskoi who was dead. I heard him, like a traitor and a coward, behind your back—like a coward! like a coward! . . . Willie, I'm sick at heart. Will you look at him? Do you see now what the face of a traitor is like?"

"De Waters," said Gloster, "be yourself and step down a bit from the high horse. I'm already deep in the soup. Cailland tells von Emsdorf almost everything . . . and von Emsdorf makes Cailland take direct charge of me—and of you! My dear De Waters, use your brain. If we have a ghost of a chance to get away from this devil of a von Emsdorf, Cailland has secured the chance for us now. Could anything be clearer than that?"

Cailland lifted his head, which had fallen slightly as he stared at the two of them.

"As a matter of fact," said Gloster, "it's one of those characteristic Jacquelin strokes, isn't it? He seems to give away everything, and that is just the moment when he is about to *get* everything."

"Jules!" said the girl. "Is it true?"

He shrugged his shoulders, answering, "Talk over the truth of it with Gloster, Cecil."

"It *is* true!" she murmured. "And I've been a gross fool! Jules, will you forgive me?"

"My dear Cecil," said the Frenchman, "of course I forgive you."

"De Waters, step over there to the window and admire the view. Cailland, come into this corner and let's talk."

He went with Cailland into the farthest corner of the room, and said softly:

"You'd sold us to von Emsdorf, had you?"

"I did not say—" began Cailland.

"You don't need to say," answered Gloster. "The fact's as clear as the nose on my ugly face. I saw the crook in your look when you came into the room. But whether as Jacquelin or Cailland, will you talk sense and good business with me, old fellow?"

"Well?" asked Cailland, staring at the American.

"Without you," said Gloster, "we're lost. She's lost. I'm lost. And the Maginot plans will go back into German hands. Which means fifty kinds of hell for the rest of the world. But if you're true to us, we may have all our chances back."

Cailland shook his head slowly.

"You're back on the same footing you were on before, with her," said Gloster. "Does von Emsdorf offer a greater chance than that to you?"

"Nothing in the world means so much," whispered Cailland.

"We both want her, Jules. If you let von Emsdorf wipe me out, you'll never have her. If you join the Germans, you'll never have her. But if you fight it out on our side, you have more than an even chance. Nothing in the world can keep her from you. You'll be the great Jacquelin again, in her mind. Who can stand against you then?"

Cailland turned his head, gradually, as though an invisible hand were forcing his chin around. He stared at the girl for a second or so before he glanced back.

"There are things you know about me," he said, whispering the words.

"I forget them," said Gloster, instantly.

"Do you mean that you give her up?" asked Cailland.

"No, by God!" murmured Gloster. "But if we come away with the Maginot plans, I forget everything except that without you we never could have succeeded."

CAILLAND began to snap his fingers softly, as though he were counting money. After a while, he said, "I'm going through the house to see how many people are up. That fellow Gleich is a cat who never sleeps. Von Emsdorf will probably be stirring, also. And I have to get rid of the two men outside this door." He left the room.

"It's all right," said Gloster. "He's going to try to help us out of this muddle. Turn around and talk to me, De Waters, will you?"

"I'm sick," she said. "Sick at heart."

"Being frightened is almost the same as being sad," said Gloster. "You're frightened, Cecil."

"Maybe—partly," she said.

"Turn around and talk to me," said Gloster.

But she shook her head, slowly, and did not turn.

"I don't want to look at you, Willie," she answered.

"Are you going to weep, or something?" he asked.

"Willie!" she exclaimed, in a breaking voice.

"I'm not going to be nice to you," said Gloster, "if that's what you mean."

She caught a sobbing breath.

"I'll tell you what's the matter with you," said Gloster.

"I don't want to know," she said, shaking her head.

"It's something that time will take care of, De Waters."

"*Don't* use that name!" she cried.

"You're young, De Waters, and time will take care of that. Quite a lot of time."

"Willie, you want me to cry. You're trying to make me cry," said the girl.

"Being young," said Gloster, "you're naturally fickle. *Some* youngsters are not fickle but that's because they've had a good bringing up. The countess never put a hell of a lot of time on your bringing up, did she? And as for the earl—"

"Stop it!" commanded the girl, whirling about at him.

"As for the earl," said Gloster, "he had to think about those polo ponies, and how could he spare time to think about De Waters, I ask you?"

"You are vulgar, and cheap, and American, and awful, and—Willie, please love me a little!" said the girl.

"Not a damned bit," said Gloster, lighting a cigarette. "Look at all the time, brain power, and hard cash I invested in loving you in those old days, De Waters. All wasted. All brushed out the moment the great cutthroat, spy and liar, Jacquelin, appears on the scene."

"How easy it would be to despise you, Willie!" said the girl.

"And even Jacquelin, at the first touch of suspicion, goes down the laundry chute along with the other soiled ideas of yesteryear."

"I thought he had betrayed you, Willie!"

"Darling, if you ever fall in love with a man I'll tell you how to know the real thing. Treachery and lying and cheating and all that sort of stuff won't really matter. You'll love him anyway. The wrong things he does won't be a slap in your face; they'll be a stroke on your heart—what sort of a heart have you, De Waters, anyway?"

"Ah, now I see," she murmured.

"You see what?"

"You didn't want me all wet and soggy with tears; so you've been slapping my face to rouse me a little."

"Don't be so vain, De Waters," he told her. "I'm simply telling you a few selected truths."

SHE shook her head. "There's always some kindness behind whatever you do," she declared.

"I'm a sort of a universal uncle. Is that it?" he asked.

"Willie, do you know what was breaking me down, just now? It was realizing that my fault is what has brought you into horrible danger, here. If I hadn't had my eyes closed with sickening vanity, that day in London, the plans never would have been lost."

"Stop worrying about me," he advised. "Worry a little about yourself. To a von Emsdorf, human beings are units; that's all. Male or female doesn't make a great deal of difference. If he thinks that it's dangerous to have you alive, he'll have you dead. Put that in your pipe and smoke it a while. About the plans"—he snapped his fingers— "I don't care a rap about that. It happened. That's all."

She walked up and down the floor a moment and he watched her from head to foot until she stopped, very close to him.

"Willie, there may not be very much time. We know that."

"That's fairly apparent," said Gloster.

"If you'll hold me a moment and tell me you love me," said Lady Cecil, "I think I can tell you that my whole heart is yours forever and ever—if you're really interested, Willie."

"And suppose Jules Cailland begins to be brilliant and dazzling?" said Gloster.

"I'm not going to suppose. I want *you*, Willie."

"You're not going to have me," said Gloster. "We're going to wait till we're all dead or all out of this pickle. Then we'll see what De Waters has on her funny little English heart."

"Willie, suppose we die and I've never—"

The door opened on Cailland. "There's no one about," he said. "Even Gleich is in his room. I heard him pacing up and down, but at least he's not prowling through the house like a midnight cat. I've sent the two guards from this door to the front of the house. We'll try to get out into the back alley. . . ."

"Winton Jones is somewhere out there with a fast car," said the girl.

"It's going to be simple, after all," said Cailland, and passed a big service automatic to Gloster.

"Because you *make* it simple, Cailland," said Gloster.

CHAPTER XX

ALL JOURNEYS END

GLOSTER went first, feathering his toes so that he glided silently down the hall, and down the windings of the

great stairway. When he had reached the main hall on the first floor, he looked back and saw the girl beside Cailland, descending slowly.

Then the voice of Johann Gleich said from above:

"Well, Monsieur Cailland? Well?"

"Ah—Gleich!" called Cailland, turning, making his voice cheerful.

"You have the lady with you," said Gleich. "But where is the man?"

"Safe in the room, back there," said Cailland.

"You lie!" shouted Gleich. "The room is empty, and you're sneaking away with the pair of them. Cailland, put up your damned hands or I'll shoot. You French fox—you fat-faced rat . . . Von Emsdorf! Louvain! Do you hear?"

Gloster, standing back by the entrance to the library, ran suddenly back into the big room and kneeled by a lower shelf. His hands instantly found the stiff, thick folds of paper and he rose with them tucked under his left arm.

The shouting of Gleich kept ringing through the house. The front door of the building slammed as Gloster ran back to the library entrance. Then he heard the voice of von Emsdorf crying out:

"Coming, Gleich! Coming! What is wrong?"

"Sneaking, damned treachery!" shouted Gleich.

Cailland had not moved from his place on the stairs. He stood there with his hands above his head, and the girl close to him, their heads bent back to stare up at the approaching figure of Gleich, who came down with a cautious, gliding pace from step to step, holding his gun leveled with the greatest care, and a look of pale concentration in his strange face. Footfalls began to beat down the higher stairs.

"Gleich—I'm sorry!" called Gloster.

He waited a tenth part of a second until the eyes and the gun of Gleich had found him. Then he fired. Johann Gleich made a long, blind step into the air and pitched rolling down the stairs. The girl and Cailland ran after that lunging body. They reached the lower hall and turned at full speed into the back hall, with Gloster behind them. The body of Gleich had struck the hall floor and skidded; the gun was still gripped in his hand.

There was only a vague light in the rear hall, but enough to show Cailland lurching to the side, striking the wall, spinning, and then running on again, staggering. He kept one hand pressed to his body. The girl took the other arm over her shoulders, and with the roar of the gunshot from behind in his ears, Gloster turned and saw Gleich leaning on one hand with his automatic, leveling for another shot. Gloster caught him in the sights for a snap shot and fired. The Austrian flattened on his face.

Cailland and the girl had reached the rear door when a figure as big-shouldered as a moose and as long as a moose in the legs ran out from a doorway at Gloster. That was von Emsdorf, who must have taken a rear stairway to come in behind the excitement. He had a gun in each hand and when he saw Gloster he put on the brakes, heaving his body back to stop his impetus. So, slanting back in that manner, he fired point-blank—and missed. Gloster reached in with his own gun and struck the German across the forehead.

A GUST of sudden wind struck him. He saw the rear door opening, and the huge body of Cailland tottering out into the night, supported by the girl.

And behind him, down the hall, there were beating footfalls and shouting voices that bellowed in the ears of Gloster like ocean noises in a cave. He ran low, leaning far forward like a young sprinter, and so reached the rear doorway. He snatched the key from the lock, flung the door shut behind him, and locked it from the outside. He was still seeing only one thing—the long arms of von Emsdorf reaching out and fumbling at the air as he fell forward.

Then a bullet clicked through the thick wood of the door. Another crashed on the metal of the lock.

The girl and Cailland still were appallingly close.

As Gloster started for them, two other figures joined them, another woman and a small man.

They helped Cailland forward at a dragging pace, and his head was falling over on one shoulder, and jogging lifelessly up and down with the effort of walking.

Gloster put the loose, dragging weight of that big body over his shoulder and began to run.

He felt the head of Cailland flopping up and down behind him. He heard Cailland groaning: "Let me down. . . . Let me down. . . ."

But Gloster kept on.

Little Winton Jones ran ahead of them and held open the door of a closed car that stood at the corner of the alley. Far behind them, shouting voices broke out into the night air as Gloster, gasping, poured and thrust and hauled the body of Cailland into the machine.

And they were gone, then, swiftly up the street.

The shouting behind them had ended.

Lady Cecil, in the farther corner of the back seat, supported most of the weight of Cailland, as he spilled back against the side of the car, groaning with every breath.

Gloster sat on the other side of him, working at the huge, loose body with rapid hands. Winton Jones drove without too great speed, taking many corners; and Elise was beside him in the front seat, always with her face turned to watch what happened behind her.

Slashing strokes of light from the street lamps cut into the interior of the car, even though the rear curtains were down; and by those glimpses Gloster saw, as he opened the clothes of Cailland, where the bullet had struck. Through the lungs. It *must* have gone through them. A bubbling sound came in Cailland's breathing, and then Gloster was sure. He took the great bulk into his arms, from the girl.

"We can get a doctor. We've got to stop for a doctor!" she said.

"Not if he were an archangel, my dear," said the calm, small voice of Winton Jones. "We have something with us that's worth more than the life of any man on earth, just now. And we don't stop."

"Willie, *make* him stop!" cried the girl.

"It's no use," said Gloster.

Cailland stopped the deep, slow groaning.

"D'you mean it?" he asked. "D'you mean . . ." He began to groan again.

Gloster could hear Lady Cecil sobbing, and trying to swallow the sounds. He shook his head when she glanced at him.

ELISE, from the front seat, said nothing at all. Her eyes never stopped shifting from Lady Cecil to the wounded man and then, for longer spaces, to the homely face of Gloster.

So the blocks whisked past, hushed moments that were interspersed through the steady, muttering echo of the exhaust, thrown back from the walls on either side. They left the city. They entered the wide hush of the country. And the mind of Cailland had wandered into a far country.

"Give her three points north," said Cailland, "and set that spinnaker, you Lascar rat . . . *Spinning Jenny*, 1765. . . ."

"He's dying!" murmured Lady Cecil.

"He's dying," agreed Gloster. "Jones, pull up into that lane."

"I'm not stopping," said Jones. "It's still an hour to the aeroplane."

"Pull up into that lane," said Gloster.

Winton Jones pulled the car up into the lane and stopped. The east was turning green with the first of the day, as Gloster dragged the weight of Cailland out of the car and stretched him on the green of a meadow. The night mist was beginning to silver, and two grazing cows looked as big as elephants through the dimness.

Lady Cecil sat down and took the head of Cailland in her lap. He looked very bad —knotted around the eyes as though he were reading fine print, and all the lower part of his face loose as though he were helplessly drunk. The front of his clothes were soggy with his blood. The smell of it was in the air about him.

Winton Jones walked up and down with his hands in his coat pocket; Elise sat on

the running-board of the car, mildly indifferent to everything before her.

Lady Cecil kept one hand over the heart of the dying man. "It's almost finished!" she whispered to Gloster. Tears began to run down her face.

"You love him, don't you?" said Gloster.

"He can't be dying!" whispered the girl. "This can't be the end of Monsieur Jacquelin!"

Cailland cried out quite sharply and distinctly, "Jacquelin! Jacquelin!"

Gloster turned his back and lighted another cigarette.

Only little Winton Jones tried lamely to comfort her.

Jones said, "Lady Cecil, too many people, suddenly, had come to know him, beginning with von Emsdorf. He had to die. If not today, then tomorrow!"

"But think what's happening," mourned Lady Cecil. "Jacquelin! The great Jacquelin. . . ."

"Jacquelin!" cried Cailland.

Gloster stopped in front of Elise.

"It's going to be a cold ride in the plane with no more clothes than we have," he said.

"Jacquelin!" called Cailland. "The damned horse is dying under me. What shall I do? The horse is failing and they're gaining on us. . . . Jacquelin! I can feel their knives in me. Jacquelin!"

Gloster ran suddenly to Cailland and crouched by him. He took the Frenchman's hands in his. "Jules—d'you hear?" he called.

"Ah. Ah . . ." murmured Cailland. "I thought you had forgotten me, Jacquelin. . . ."

Winton Jones whispered, and somehow they all could hear. "By the living God—it is *he!*"

Lady Cecil, with both hands lifted to her face, stared at the dying man and his comforter.

"I thought it was happening again," said Cailland, sighing. "I thought I could see the ends of their turbans flapping as they came up on us, Jacquelin. Forgive me. . . ."

"I forgive you," said Gloster. "I am holding your hand, Jules."

"You might have died that day," whispered Cailland. "You took the beaten horse. And I let you take it. . . . Jacquelin, I have been a dog. . . ."

"Jules, you are my friend," said Gloster. "Do you hear me? Friends—the old days have come back to us. We are one man again!"

"Jacquelin . . ."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember Cairo? And the day you came into the dining room of Shepherd's Hotel with the girl, and you all in a sheik's white robes? . . . My God, how my heart laughed when I saw you! I thought the desert . . . Jacquelin!"

"Yes," said Gloster. "Yes, Jules, I remember your face and the bandage still around your head."

"Jacquelin. I thought the desert had swallowed you. . . . That day I loved you. . . . That day I was worthy. . . ."

He began to cough, and as he coughed, he kicked out his feet violently with the pain. Great red bubbles formed and burst into spray on his lips.

Gloster took him in his arms. Cailland's head fell back. He panted, whispering, "But I was afraid—I was always afraid of the things you made me do, Jacquelin. And at last fear ate out my heart. . . . Jacquelin, I can't breathe. Open the window. . . ."

After a moment, Jacquelin stood up beside the dead man. The others had drawn back toward the car.

"We must go! We must start now!" said Winton Holling Jones. "But ah, what a fool I've been. *You* tell him, Lady Cecil. I don't want to be the one who breaks in on him, now. Tell him we must start."

"Hush," said the girl. "Are you trying to give orders . . . to Jacquelin?"

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

OTHERS may theorize, but we have indubitable proof: Prosperity is here again! It's the red ink situation that convinced us. There practically isn't any, any more; it's gotten as rare as radium. And in addition to the fact that this very shortage proves the presence of prosperity, it also insures against another crack-up—for how could we have a Depression without red ink? . . .

This is all very fine, but it certainly puts us in a pretty pickle. It takes a lot of red ink, as you can see, to spread that red band across the top of the cover of ARGOSY. The minute we found out about that scarcity and resultant price rise of red ink a few weeks ago, this office became second cousin to a madhouse. There was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. What were we going to do about the red band? Eustace Adams said we were welcome to the extra gore we cut out of his stories; our youngest editorial assistant, to whom the interests of ARGOSY are above life itself, came forward bravely and offered a modicum of his own blood. But we couldn't allow that; it wouldn't do at all. Rather than such sacrifice, we said, we'll dispense with the red band!

We didn't think you readers would really mind. It won't mean that ARGOSY itself will be different; just the cover, remember. If it really bothers you a great deal, we'll rack our brains some more for another solution, but we don't think it will. Personally, we like the idea—seems to us as if it will freshen up the magazine and make it positively sparkle.

In order to save enough of the costly fluid so that we can occasionally put a splash of it here and there on the cover, we have to drop the red band quickly. In fact, we don't see how we can continue it after the May 29th issue. So, with the June 5th issue, look for the new ARGOSY without the old red band!

And while we wait in fear and trembling for your reactions, we'll make way for such controversial matter as that from

JOHN B. CARTER

I first met ARGOSY in 1903 and if I did not like it I would not read it and as I have the complete copies right here beside me to Dec. 1934, I guess that I read it.

Well here is what I want to say. Is Mr. John St. John right in the March 13 issue, where he tells about the descendants of the mutiny on the Bounty? He gives the impression that all the descendants are still living on Pitcairn Island and Mrs. Beatrice Crimshaw said that Queen Elizabeth moved them to Norfolk Island and that a few of them went back to Pitcairn but most of them are now on Norfolk.

Mr. St. John says that *all* are healthy even if they do interbreed and Mrs. Crimshaw says that they are showing the effects of so much interbreeding.

In case you would like to look this up Norfolk Island is 29 degrees 4 minutes south latitude and 167 degrees 57 minutes east longitude. Mr. Frederick O'Brien also spoke of the move that was made in one of his books.

It does not stand to reason that all of these years that those people have been intermarrying that it would not show by this time and I wish that Mr. St. John or Mrs. Crimshaw would set us right on this.

Wishing the best of luck and a steady increase to circulation to the good ship ARGOSY.

San Francisco, Calif.

FORTUNATELY, we were saved the trouble of proving Author St. John right by getting an answer straight from his typewriter. Says

JOHN ST. JOHN

In reply to John B. Carter's letter concerning the descendants of the mutinous crew of H.M.S. Bounty, I would like to say that I had no intention of giving the impression that the descendants remained solely on Pitcairn Island. Due to scarcity of water and a famine on Pitcairn, the islanders petitioned the British Government to remove them in a body to Norfolk Island (a thousand miles northwest of Sydney) and this move was made in 1856, the entire 187 islanders sailing. Two years after reaching Norfolk, sixteen of the islanders returned to Pitcairn. Five years after that, another group returned to Pitcairn, swelling the total to 47, or about one-quarter of the original colony. In 1878, the colony had doubled itself on Pitcairn, numbering ninety persons. The colony numbers today about two hundred.

As to their health regarding interbreeding, I would like to quote Mr. Harry Shapiro who spent several months on Pitcairn with the islanders and wrote a history of their past and present in "The Heritage of the Bounty," published by Simon & Schuster. He says: "Physically, the islanders are robust and healthy. Their medical record is good. . . . Abnormalities of physical structure are practically nonexistent on Pitcairn. . . . The only general defect I know of among the Pitcairn Islanders which may be attributed to inbreeding is the degeneration of their dentitions . . ."

Since most Americans see their dentists twice a year anyhow, I hardly regard this as any serious effect of interbreeding for the islanders. Mentally they are par and above the average range of intelligence. And to me, inbreeding or no, their record looks particularly healthful.

THAT was an easy one—for us, at any rate. But here's a man who doesn't look as if he'd prove so easy to answer. He's been after us before, has

J. ALBERT LAVERY

You asked for it, so here goes the explanation on which we differ.

It has been my experience that Star boats will stand on their beam ends indefinitely when struck by a sudden blow.

I cannot believe that the mast of the Star boat, part of Government equipment, was rotten or the rigging weak. If these were weak enough to allow the mast to be taken out by a sail that had been lowered, they would have been too weak to allow the carrying of sail in a moderate breeze.

So I claim that it is impossible to blow the mast out of a Star boat.

I infer, therefore, that you had something other than a Star boat dismasted last summer.

If this story had told of any other type of boat, or that she had been dismasted under sail, I could have believed the story possible.

Thanking you for your attention to a not-too-even tempered sailor.

Easton, Md.

AND we have a very strong feeling that Reader Lavery knows what he's talking about. We held the belief that just about any sailboat could be dismasted, if the wind were strong enough. Reader Lavery says "Not a Star boat"—and he knows his Star boats. That leaves us with not a doggoned word to say in answer.

Here is another man who wants to take a crack at Reader Gerald Lindsay. Says

BARKO SOWERS

Just want to tell you that I think you have a swell mag. despite the fact that you print such trash as Gerald E. Lindsay's letter in a recent Argonotes. I resent that as will any true lover of the fantastic and pseudo-scientific (if there is such a word) who gets his few morsels of such fiction by running from one newsstand to another trying to beat other fans to those mags.

I liked "Seven Worlds to Conquer" and practically anything that Burroughs or Roscoe pen. I don't like some of the fiction that Mr. Lindsay calls his favorite, but I'm not asking you to bar it. I know you're not printin' your mag for only me, so I am contented with the way she sails.

Harrisburg, Ill.

SO there you are. Now let everybody calm down and think no more about it, while we listen to the soothing words of

A. MANDEL

I've been reading ARGOSY nearly two years now and I haven't got any complaints. Most of the stories are fine though I like a bad one now and then as it makes me appreciate the good ones. I've been hearing a lot about the old stories, so here's a vote for a quarterly. Please have as many Foreign Legion and sea stories as possible without sickening other readers.

N. Y. City

IN fact, let's listen to a double dose of soothing words. Here comes similar medicine from

J. E. M.

I am anxiously awaiting O. A. Kline's new novel. Philips' sport stories have been absent from ARGOSY too long. "Peter the Brazen" is also A.W.O.L. My favorite ARGOSY character, Gillian Hazeltine, seems to have vanished. Call out the riot squad. There's treachery somewhere.

"Hades" by Lester Dent was, in my opinion, the best story of the year. When I saw some women upbraiding it in Argonotes, I thought of some choice adjectives which would have turned the air blue.

Two men named their favorite stories and the ones they did not like. Those which they did not like were my favorites, while the others were, in my estimation, lousy. So when I saw this, I vowed never to kick again, seeing the job you have pleasing everybody. But I warn you, I'm red-headed and short-tempered so I don't know how long this vow will last.

All in all, ARGOSY is the best buy on the newsstands, so I'll keep on contributing ten cents every Wednesday.

Steubensville, Ohio

WE need hardly mention that Judson Philips' sport stories are no longer among the missing—as witness *Grand National*. How's that for quick service, J. E. M.?

And here's a grandmother who has a great deal that's worthwhile to say about ARGOSY—

(MRS.) E. V. HAMILTON

So many of your men folks tell how many years they have read the ARGOSY, but it is a safe bet that their wives and daughters also read it. It being a man's magazine, the women folks are not talking Argonotes, but being a mother of sons I feel the desire to enter the fold.

Thinking back, I remember times when my boys came home from delivering their evening papers, bringing an ARGOSY, and shouting "Another E. K. Means story, Mother." And that meant I was to read it to all of them before we went to bed. It must have been about 1918, for the last story I remember reading was when "Little Bit" boarded a rattler, calling back "Goodbye Gals, my country needs me." Mr. Means died soon after, and he was a wonderful delineator of Negro activities.

We enjoy western stories, having been raised in Arizona, in the glorious times when Geronimo was making things interesting to the Whitefaces. Signal fires on every mountain top, and burning homes in every valley.

"Riding Gun" was typical of the gay 80's and Henry and the old Judge hunting trails rings right.

Plenty of ARGOSY writers were not whipped by their fathers for telling "unreasonable lies," but they make good entertainment.

I want to thank the ARGOSY for their clean high-minded class of literature, in this day of lewd unprincipled stories that are printed for our children to read. Honor, chastity and virtue as taught in years past, are banned, and the "Rot" is termed modern and scientific.

We who read Scott, Dickens, Thackery and Hawthorne to our daughters, and Henty, Cooper and Kipling to our boys, are glad to read ARGOSY to our grandchildren.

Joplin, Mo.

WE need hardly add how proud and pleased such letters make us feel. We'll only remind Mrs. Hamilton that if ARGOSY is a man's magazine it's also, to our way of thinking, a magazine for the whole family.

And on then to more words, praising in the main, from

F. A. CLINE

Have not taken pen in hand to write you in a long time now, but I just can't constrain myself any longer when I keep seeing the knocks handed to the best writer dear old ARGOSY has found in many a day. Yes, you guessed it, the first time—Eustace Adams, and take it from me, he's plenty good. Just keep on printing his stories, and tell him to keep on writing them the same way and you can't go wrong.

By the way, what has become of Fred MacIsaac? I certainly have been missing his stories in the past months and I rate him and Adams in a class all by themselves when it comes to writing a swell story. And let me put in a good word here and now for George Bruce who runs a close third. Now, Mr. Editor, let me hand you a bouquet for putting four serials back in ARGOSY, for that is all it needed to make it "tops."

I can't find anything much to kick about at all except that Theodore Roscoe's stories seem to get kind of jumbled up, or I should say, over-descriptive at times. He gets one all in a whirl at times trying to keep up with the point of his story, but he is a good writer anyway. While I don't care much for Tuttle's Dogieville stories, his Henry stories and others are plenty good. Other authors I like include George Challis, Max Brand, George F. Worts, C. A. Seltzer, Edgar R. Burroughs and Ben-

nett Foster. I heartily agree with you about his recent story being the best western of the year, and hope to see him in the pages of ARGOSY again soon. Well, Mr. Editor, now that I have gotten that off my chest I'll go back to reading ARGOSY.

Greenville, S. C.

THAT just about leaves room for one of those short but interesting notations, this from

FRED C. WHITE

I have been reading the ARGOSY ever since I can remember, back even when All-Story was combined with it. I have been reading some publication of Munsey Co. since I had infantile paralysis 19 years ago and have always found something of interest and if I miss this copy of ARGOSY it will be the first since 1923.

Probably the most interesting bit I ever found was a short sketch of one of your writers, Theodore Goodridge Roberts. My father happened to read that copy, as I hoped he would, because my father received his education in New Brunswick and my mother was born there. Then I found out that Mr. Roberts and my father went to school together in Fredericton, N. B. That was quite a coincidence for him to read the story of the life of a schoolmate as well as a story written by him.

Newburyport, Mass.

LOOKING AHEAD!

HOCUS POCUS

The Marvelous Merton was an expert magician, used to baffling smalltown audiences by the cunning of his hand and the quickness of his eyes. But when he got mixed up with the long, gaunt Mr. Smith, and the short, round Mr. Smith, and a group of pretty weird evangelists, he found that for once, he was on the baffled end. Beginning a new novel of mystery and strange adventure by

LESTER DENT

ALL NOISY ON THE SPANISH FRONT

Concerning the transmogrification of an ex-artilleryman who is suddenly made to realize that war is merely a lot of murders all happening at once. Not such a startling thought, but it shook Judson Stairway to the depths of his being. And before he was through, Judson Stairway did his best to shake up the world. A complete novelet by

THEODORE ROSCOE

SCREWBALL

Lem Bickel had a gift for baseball. Not for pitching or hitting, though, and certainly not for fielding. His fingers seemed to be composed of margarine, and when running bases, his feet behaved like unfriendly ferryboats meeting in a foggy harbor. But Marranton felt the Green Sox needed Bickel . . . and only Marranton knew why. A hilarious short story by

RICHARD SALE

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—MAY 22nd

PAY NOTHING

UNTIL AFTER YOU GET RELIEF

ATHLETE'S FOOT (Foot Itch)

According to the Government Health Bulletin, No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot. Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent On Free Trial

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. **M. G.**

860 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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ADDRESS .....

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Real Values

ASPIRIN TABLETS

19c Doz. Tins

U.S.P. Packed twelve 5 grain tablets to a lithographed tin

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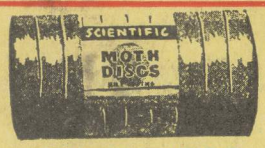
½ inch by 1 yard . . . DOZ.	22c
1 inch by 1 yard . . . DOZ.	29c
½ inch by 5 yards . . DOZ.	52c
1 inch by 2½ yards . . DOZ.	52c

MERCUROCHROME H.W.D.

Medium Size 36c Doz. Large Size 48c Doz.

IODINE

Medium Size 24c Doz. Large Size 34c Doz.



MOTH DISCS

3—10 large round discs to cellophane package. DOZEN PACKAGES 84c

DENTAL CREAM

"Millbrook" brand restores natural whiteness to teeth. Extra Large Size . . Doz. 72c

LARGE 54c Doz.

SHAVING CREAM

"Hudson Bay" lather shaving cream. Extra Large Size . . Doz. 75c

LARGE 55c Doz.

MEN'S QUALITY HOSE

1—Fancy rayon plaited over cotton. 1 doz. ass't. pairs to box. Dozen Pairs 78c

3—Celanese and rayon. Fancy patterns. 1 doz. pairs to box. Dozen Pairs $1.20

7—Pure thread silk hose carefully reinforced with rayon. Dozen pairs $2.00

7 CAKE SOAP ASSORTMENT

Best quality! Seven different kinds packed in attractive lithographed box 10c Box

BIG PROFITS ARE EASY!

Be Your Own Boss

Men and women everywhere are making big profits selling our high quality, low priced daily necessities. Everybody is a prospect—sales are quick and easy.

The items listed on this page are tested and proved "BEST SELLERS". Note these low prices—and the profit possibilities for you. Send 10c (refunded on first order) today for catalogue of 3000 sensational values.

"RIO RITA" COSMETICS

The Talk of the Town for Quality and Value!

This famous line of cosmetics offers the utmost in quality and variety. Every item has an irresistible appeal to the lady. The entire line is covered by Products Public Liability Insurance. 64 attractively packaged items every woman needs.

A Real Profit Maker for YOU!

60c DOZEN

FIRST QUALITY SILK HOSE

All sizes and newest popular shades

11—High grade, perfect fitting chardonize silk hose very specially priced. Per DOZEN PAIRS $1.85

12—Our finer grade chardonize silk hose that is unexcelled for appearance and service. DOZEN PAIRS . . $2.25

13—Sheer and clear quality pure silk hose with fancy top and foot. Per DOZEN PAIRS $3.50

CARDED GOODS

FIZZ-O-SELTZER Alkaline effervescent tablet. 20 envelopes on display card 19c

PURE ASPIRIN TABLETS 20 envelopes of 4 tablets each on attractive card. CARD (80 tablets) 9c

144 ASPIRIN TABLETS 36 envelopes of 4 tablets each. Mounted on attractive display card 18c

BREATH PELLETS Delightful breath sweeteners in envelopes. 20 envelopes on card 10c

POCKET COMBS Assorted colored combs in individual cases. 12 on display card . . . 40c

DON'T DELAY

Act now to make 1937 your most prosperous year. Send 10c for big catalogue. Will be refunded on first order.

TERMS: Net F.O.B. shipping point, 25% deposit on all C.O.D. orders

Quick Sales

SHOE CLEANER & WHITE LACES

Famous "Piccadilly" white shoe cleaner and 27 inch white mercerized laces attractively cellophane wrapped.

$7.35 Gross Combinations

SUN GOGGLES

3—round glass assorted colored lenses with high bridge nose rest. Mounted 1 dozen on display card.

Doz. 78c

SHOE LACES

A good quality in black, brown or white.

27 inch Gross 44c

40 inch Gross 58c

"VIC" RAZOR BLADES

Fine steel single edge blades at a new low price.

100 for 48c

"Time" Blades

Double edge blue steel blades. 5 to a package.

100 for 35c

Fine Perfume

"Odeurs de Paris" packed in beautiful gilt box.

Doz. 65c

PERFUME & 'KERCHIEF

Both for 10c

2 dram bottle assorted odors and lovely pattern silk handkerchief.

PEN and PENCIL SETS

Doz. Sets $2.40

Assorted colors. Lever filler pen with gold plated point. Propel, repel, expel pencil to match. Packed in box.

MILLS SALES CO.

27 South Wells St., Chicago, Ill. EASTERN DISTRIBUTORS 76 Washington St., Boston, Mass.