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by Eustace L. Adams

The Big Wind Blows

ARGOSY

JUNE 19

WEEKLY

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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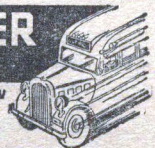

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The Big Wind Blows

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Revolution—with Pictures," "Skyway to Peril," etc.

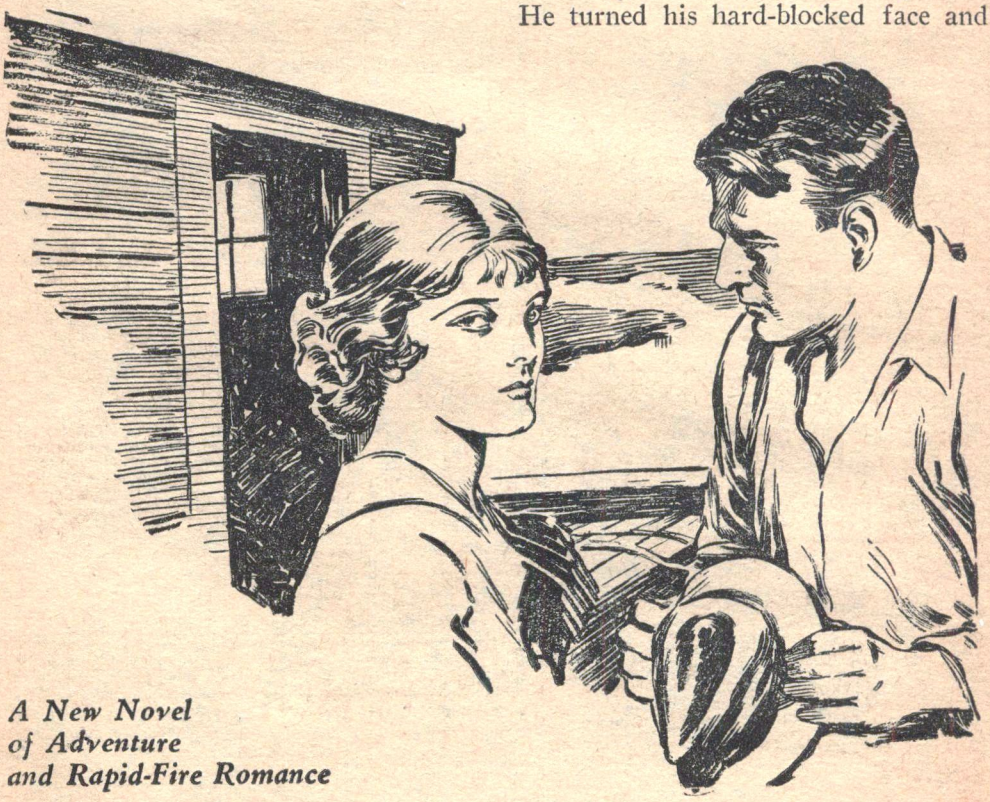
CHAPTER I

VIOLENCE

THE superintendent looked at Marvin Lee with a pair of eyes that didn't match. One of them was gray and pretty venomous. The other was brown and soft and almost womanish.

Marvin Lee noticed the gray eye first, and after the first shock of surprise, took it, as it were, in his stride. He had plenty of other things to bother him that bright Florida morning, what with the mosquitoes, and the rumors of a hurricane fooling around south of Cuba, and the memory of the coldness in Jennifer Foster's voice when he had left her the night before after telling her he would be away a full month or more. What—with all these things to worry him—did it matter that the boss of the big construction job had a couple of mismated eyes?

"So you're to be assistant timekeeper, are you?" Scoop Sloper asked, his tremendous knuckles making a faint scratching noise against the three-day stubble on his bristly chin. He turned his hard-blocked face and



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looked at a man who was standing uncertainly beside him. "Hamilton," he said in a rasping voice, "did you put in for an assistant?"

"Of course I didn't, Scoop," said the man, shifting his feet uneasily and letting his eyes drift to Marvin Lee and then away, hastily. "What's more, I don't want one, and I won't have one."

"I know you won't," said the superintendent, softly. "One timekeeper is enough on any job, isn't it, Hamilton?"

The man in the neat white linen suit looked down at his white buckskin shoes and coughed uncomfortably. "Of course, Scoop, of course," he said, apologetically.

The engineman and the pile-driving crew and the laborers had just come aboard the floating house barge for their midday food. They stood now in wet dungaree pants and singlets, watching silently as the superintendent ran his eye—the hard gray one—up and down the young man who had been put aboard the barge by the biweekly supply boat from Miami.

"You said you were to be assistant timekeeper?" the big man purred.

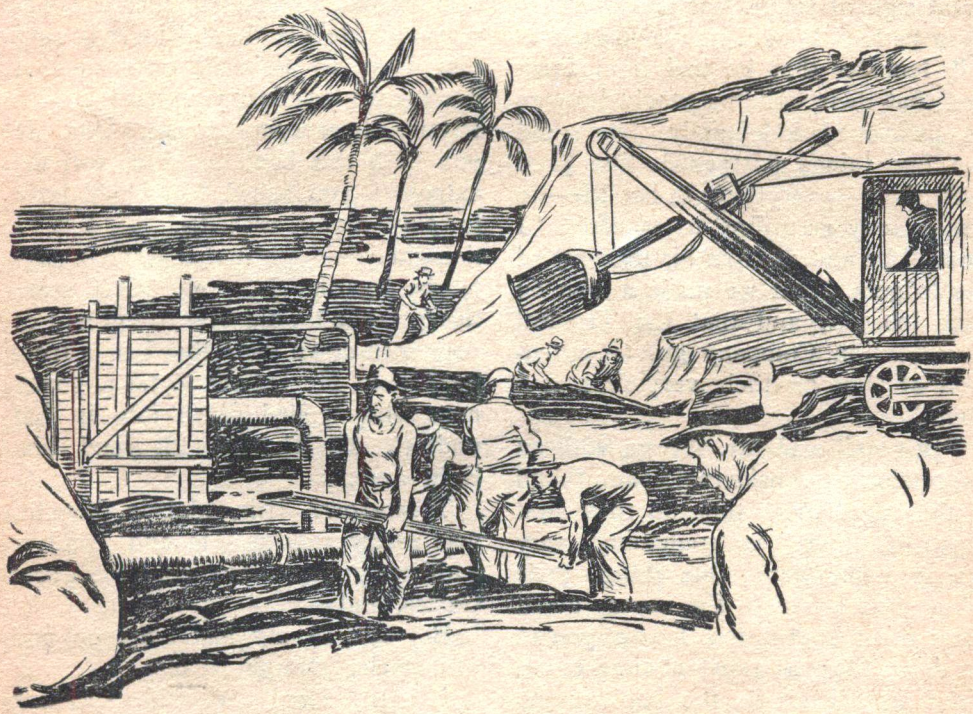
"Yes, sir," said Marvin Lee, mildly, as was his way.

"I don't know whether you are or not," Scoop Sloper said in a voice which was low and harsh and queerly vibrating. "How long have you been working for Tropical Construction?"

"Two days," Marvin Lee said honestly, as was also his way.

"Two days," echoed Scoop Sloper. "And where did you work before that?"

"A bank," said Marvin Lee, entirely aware of the strained attention of the listening workmen.



Scoop Sloper's great shoulders strained forward against the bulging fabric of his working shirt. "What bank?" he demanded.

CLEARLY into Marvin Lee's mind came the words of P. J. Avery, President of the Fifth National Bank of Miami.

"Lee," Mr. Avery had said in the dim quiet of his paneled office, "I'm going to fire you." Then, noticing Marvin's appalled expression, he lifted a fat and manicured hand. "But only," he added, "temporarily. I'm going to give you your opportunity really to make good in this institution. I don't mind telling you that I had intended to put an older man on this assignment, but for a number of reasons, it didn't work out. You know that new sportsman's hotel project they're building on the keys?"

"Yes, sir," said Marvin Lee, with a great sigh of relief. For one small instant he had thought he would have to tell Jennifer that he had been fired, and that their wedding would have to be postponed indefinitely. Jenny did not like things postponed. She liked everything—everything in her life—to run exactly according to schedule. "I know," he added, from his memory of the ledgers, "that we made a loan on that job, sir, and that the Tropical Construction Company got an extension of time on their very first payment."

"Just so," said Mr. Avery, with an expression of considerable pain. "And if they need more time on their first payment, there is something very wrong somewhere. One thing—their labor costs are high. I'm uneasy about some other angles, too. I want you to go down there as assistant timekeeper. Your experience in the bookkeeping department here will equip you to handle the job. You will be in an excellent position to see their time sheets and practically all the other paper work connected with the construction job. You have an orderly mind."

At this Marvin flushed. Not because he had an orderly mind—but there was something about the way the president said it that brought a quick flush to Marvin's face. It was almost as if he had said, "You are a jelly-livered nincompoop." Amazing the amount of honest contempt Avery could get into that accusation, "You have an orderly mind."

But Avery did not notice Marvin's expression. He had picked up the telephone and was dialing a number. A moment later he was talking to a man he called Pete.

"I'm sending you a young man, Pete," he said, incisively. "You're to send him down to the keys on the next supply boat. When will that be? Tomorrow? He'll be there. You're to send him down as assistant timekeeper. I don't care whether you need an assistant timekeeper or not, Pete. If you wish this bank to grant you the extension you asked for, you'll have to play along with us. . . . Yes, I thought you'd see it that way. It pays to be reasonable, Pete. One more thing. I don't want you to tell any of your men down there that Lee is from this bank. He is just to be a young man who applied for a job. Is that understood? Thanks, I'll send him right over."

Tomorrow? This, Marvin thought, was pretty sudden. He and Jennifer had been going to look at a lot in Coral Gables, and—

But Mr. Avery had hung up and was staring straight at him.

"Listen, Lee," he said, speaking

carefully. "When you came here I thought you had promise, ambition. Lately, I've wondered. It has almost seemed that you were quite content to spend the rest of your life on the ledgers. Perhaps on this job you'll show me that that is not so. If you do a good job for us, I'll give you your chance at the tellers' windows downstairs."

Marvin had a moment of sheer giddiness. He was seized with a sudden impulse to grab the president's telephone and to call Jennifer to tell her that they could buy that lot now, and that their wedding date could be advanced nearly a year. Jennifer had counted up the months which intervened before Marvin should march up to Mr. Avery and demand a transfer downstairs. And now he was being offered an opportunity for promotion almost a year ahead of time! But Marvin did not grab up the telephone. Merit, in a bank, was not acquired by being impulsive, by running amuck in the president's office.

So he just stood very still and asked, "What do you want me to look for, sir?"

The president drummed his fingers on the mahogany desk. "I wish I knew," he said in an odd voice. "If I followed my hunch, I'd send a much older man—maybe a detective. But it can't be as bad as that. Just look for any kind of irregularities, Lee—any kind at all. And mail me a full report by the captain of the supply boat. I think he's dependable. I *think* so, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure of a lot of things connected with that job. I was a fool to underwrite it!"

THAT had been about all. Now these things were racing through Marvin's mind as he stood before the construction superintendent, before the timekeeper whose assistant he was to be, and before the silent and watchful crowd of workmen who seemed just as interested as their boss in what Marvin had been asked.

"What bank, I asked you?" Scoop Sloper repeated impatiently. "Was it the Fifth National, in Miami?"

Marvin blinked. Then, deliberately, he lied. "No, sir," he said. "It was the Commercial Bank and Trust Company."

The gray eye was now boring like a white-hot auger into Marvin's brain. There was no sound from within that big mess hall, even with a score of men standing there. The only sound in the world seemed to be the rhythmic clanking of the pump on the great dredge moored alongside as it sucked sand and water from the bottom and discharged it in a rushing flow upon the roots of the mangroves on the nearby island. But although Marvin had only been here for twenty-five minutes, he had already become accustomed to that sound. He wished Scoop Sloper would look elsewhere. Lying did not come naturally to him. Nor, having lied, did it sit easily on his conscience. He was beginning to feel acutely uncomfortable under the steady pressure of that half gray stare.

Scoop Sloper turned his mismated eyes away from Marvin and looked at Hamilton.

"Granelli?" Scoop asked, quietly.

"It might be," Hamilton assented, in half a voice.

Abruptly the big man swung away. "Granelli," he called in a voice which had a cutting edge like that of a band saw. "Come here."

A small sigh, a slight hiss of escaping breath, ran across the floating mess hall. The barge itself stirred uneasily

in the water as if it, too, felt the growing strain aboard. Slowly the heads of all the men in the room turned toward a rabbity, dark-haired man who stood by the galley door. And his man was staring at Scoop Sloper, his eyes growing larger and darker until they looked like copper pennies against the sunburned skin of his face.

"I told you to come here," Scoop Sloper said, his voice scraping cold and even against the heated air.

Granelli opened his lips, but no words came. Suddenly he began to tremble. To Marvin it was a terrible thing, watching fear grow upon a man. He suddenly realized that never before had he seen a man really afraid. Worried, perhaps, about losing a job, or something like that. But Granelli was smitten by a wicked fear which reached out and coldly touched Marvin, standing thirty feet away.

"Do you hear me?" asked the superintendent's insistent voice. "Come here, Granelli."

At last the man Granelli found his voice. "No!" he screamed. "And you keep away from me! I told you I wanted to quit! Why didn't you let me go back to the mainland when I wanted to?"

Scoop Sloper began to walk toward that quivering figure. Not fast. Slowly, and with a deliberation that was infinitely more menacing than a run. Granelli's body moved backward, came up against the bulkhead and seemed to be trying to push it through the heavy boards. His voice lifted in pitch until it was a shrill scream, cutting its way through the heated air like a warm knife through soft butter. "Get away from me, or I'll tell the Coast Guard and I'll tell—"

Scoop Sloper, never stopping in his deliberate forward walk, sent his own heavy voice crashing ahead of him. "So you did send a letter of complaint, did you, rat?"

"No!" Granelli screamed. "I just wrote one and never— Go away, or I'll—"

AS if some invisible trigger had released a coiled spring inside him, Granelli bounced away from the wall. Three or four flying steps took him to an open door, where a grease-spattered cook gaped in the doorway. Granelli caromed against the cook, sending the white-coated figure staggering against the jamb of the door. The running man disappeared within the door. An instant later he popped out at full speed. The cook thrust out a slippered foot and tripped him. With terrible force Granelli flopped forward on his face and light broke glitteringly upon a long butcher's knife in his right hand.

Sloper's massive body moved slowly ahead, veering slightly but never changing its relentless pace. Granelli was on his feet again, and blood was dripping from a sliver-cut on his chin. Except for that lengthening splash of red, there was no color in his cheeks. Even his sunburn had faded. He loped straight at Scoop Sloper with his body bent forward, his knife hand trailing a little behind his hips.

To Marvin Lee, unaccustomed to scenes of greater violence than a street fight between blundering drunks or a stray motor accident, there was no reality whatever in those grinding instants while Granelli's long strides closed up the space which separated him from the forward-striding Sloper. Marvin's heart was beating slowly, unevenly, forcefully, like the slamming of a maul against yielding flesh. Each pulse beat hurt, so heavy were those

thumps in his wrists, throat and temple.

Three more galloping steps would do it. Already Granelli was lifting his knife, lifting it as if it were a javelin to be hurled at that ponderous figure which advanced to meet him. Two more steps. One. Marvin stopped breathing.

Scoop Sloper, with a movement unbelievably swift, sidestepped, ducked to one side. Still swinging his great body, he looped his left hand up in a sweeping arc and his fist closed around the down-jabbing wrist of Granelli, who was brought up as suddenly as if he had crashed head-first into a concrete retaining wall.

There was a crisp sound of something breaking, a sound as sharp and distinct as the snapping of a penny cap pistol. And then Granelli's hiccoughing sob of agony came more deeply across the heated air. The knife dropped to the floor. Scoop carefully kicked it toward Hamilton, who picked it up and just held it, watching.

Scoop did not let go of Granelli's arm. It was still in his great fist and Marvin's horrified gaze saw Granelli's hand wrenched to a ghastly angle with his arm. Granelli's face had gone from white to gray. With deliberate cruelty Scoop twisted that broken arm once more.

Granelli put his head back and screamed like an animal. Then, mad with pain, he swung around—twisting that awful arm still farther, but this time he did not seem to notice the agony. In a frenzy he hammered Scoop's hard face with the knuckles of his left hand. Then he pronged his fingers and began to claw great red runnels down Scoop's face.

And then, for the first time, Scoop's expression changed. His lips skinned back into a savage snarl. He pulled back and threw Granelli's hand away from him. Granelli spun like a top, flopped horribly to the floor. He tried to crawl away, dragging his misshapen arm behind him.

For a single moment Scoop Sloper stood still, staring grimly down at the crawling man. Then, in a voice which reached to every corner of that silent mess hall, he said:

"You'd try ratting on me, would you?"

HE took a single step forward and, as a football player punts the ball for a long spiral, he drove his right foot savagely into Granelli's stomach. Granelli grunted just once, and rolled limply over on his back.

Marvin Lee did not realize that he was running toward Scoop, who, grinning wickedly, had jumped with both feet full on the unprotected ribs and stomach of the prone and unprotesting man. Marvin heard his own voice screaming:

"Stop it! Stop it, you—you're killing him!"

And then his hands were on Scoop's shoulders, spinning him around, catapulting him away from Granelli, who lay as still and shapeless as a fallen scarecrow on the floor.

Marvin's muscles were strong. They always had been. He put his weight into a push, and Scoop was hurled away with amazing force. Scoop put both feet flat on the rough decking and skidded to a stop. Turning slowly, he laid the full weight of his gray-and-brown stare on Marvin, who had already turned away from him and was kneeling beside Granelli.

As if from a great distance he heard Hamilton's voice, low and warning, "You'd better not, Scoop."

And he heard Scoop's voice in answer, cold and brittle. "Why not? Around here, I'm boss."

Marvin was not even looking when Scoop swung from the knees. He heard a faint swishing sound and rolled his eyes just in time to see a hairy fist of prodigious size coming toward him with unbelievable speed. Obeying some deeper instinct than he knew, Marvin tried to roll his head away. But he knew it was too late, and it was. . . .

A great light sizzled against his closing eyes. Just one light, as blinding as a magnesium flare. And then darkness. There was no pain, only numbness, together with a sense of falling. Dimly into his brain came the incredible conviction that he had been picked up, bodily, from the even routine of his life and hurled into a nightmarish world he had never known existed, and that he was lost in a bloody fog of violence through which he might never grope his way back to security.

Where, he wondered miserably during those long split seconds while he was falling, had the tellers' windows gone now? And where was Jennifer, calm, blue-eyed Jenny, whose life was as orderly as her brown hair? Everything that was familiar seemed to be slipping away from him, slipping away to some place that was as far, as inaccessible, as the heavens.

And he was still striving to get them back, still trying to call to them through lips that never moved, when his head hit the floor.

CHAPTER II

THREAT

THE tiny cubicle was dirty. Paint was scaling off the ceiling, which was scarcely two feet above Marvin's face. Mosquito netting drooped in discouraged folds across the single window. And it was hot with an unseasonable mid-September humidity which pulled perspiration out of every pore. The breathless air vibrated foggily to the unending *clank-clank-clank* of the dredge, and on the island nearby a pile driver was banging away with a persistence that tortured Marvin's aching head.

Blinking up at the ceiling, Marvin became aware, with his first instant of returning consciousness, of a throbbing ache in his jaw, and of a lesser pain which nagged at his entire body. Carefully he raised his hand and explored the side of his swollen jaw.

A picture came into his mind of Scoop Sloper, his face a mask of fury, twisting Granelli's arm until it broke —then twisting it again out of sheer hellishness. What had Avery pushed him—Marvin Lee—into? Avery had known something was pretty bad here. And yet he had given Marvin no inkling that things were so terrible as this. Marvin made up his mind that he would take the supply boat back to Miami on his next trip.

Eagerly he lifted himself to one elbow to look out of the window. Perhaps there would be a boat out there now. Through the faded mosquito netting he could see, scattered across the satiny surface of the water, a score of the tiny mangrove islands which stretched in a raggedly curving line from the southernmost tip of the Florida peninsula past Key West down to Marquesas Shoals and the Dry Tortugas. Plenty of islands, but not a single boat.

Then he remembered what a desolate archipelago this was, without fresh water, smitten by the sun, swarming with mosquitoes, uninhab-

ited except by a few dispirited fishermen, and possessed of a tragic history of death and disaster resulting from the fall hurricanes which screamed up from the Caribbean.

He could see one corner of the dredging barge in the foreground just outside the window, its suction pipe snaking downward into the water, its discharge pipe stretching across a series of anchored pontoons until it reached the island. It vibrated spasmodically as its pump spewed an endless stream of sand and water behind a bulkhead which surrounded the entire island. Gradually, as the water drained away and left its sand behind, dry land was rising above the roots and the trunks of the dying mangroves. Already a pile driver was sinking creosoted posts upon which the sills of a rambling hotel would presently rest. Top soil would be brought from the mainland, and coconut palms, and, six months hence, if all went well, luxurious yachts and guide boats would be anchored here. Wealthy fishermen, drinking from tall, frosted glasses, would sit on the porch of the hotel, complacently looking across one of the finest expanses of fishing water in the world.

Thinking these things, and idly looking out of the window while he waited for the searing ache to go from his head, Marvin Lee started convulsively. Across the precarious bridge made by the discharge pipe as it zigzagged from pontoon to pontoon, walked the slim figure of a girl. Toward the barge she was walking, stepping along the rounded surface of the pipe with a sureness that could have been born only of long practice. Her hair was bright yellow—spun gold in that bright afternoon sun. Her shoulders were straight and proud and her lips were vividly red against the smooth, even tan of her cheeks. This he saw and no more, for she disappeared past the frame of the window and so out of Marvin Lee's astonished gaze. A girl here. And a lovely girl at that!

PAINFULLY he eased his legs off the berth and nearly fell five feet to the floor. He was in an upper berth and beneath him was a lower, empty, but showing signs of late occupancy. A dozen quick lances of pain shot through him as he lowered himself to the floor.

For a long moment the entire cabin spun like a pinwheel about him. Then, steadying himself, he staggered to the window and pressed his face against the bulging mosquito bar, trying to see where the girl had gone. Where could she go in a place like this? There was only the mangrove island, now a desolation of blindingly white sand and the skeletons of the half-covered mangroves.

Dimly—as if he had seen it twenty years ago—he remembered a small houseboat moored against the bulkhead some two hundred yards to the east of the barge. Not much to look at, he recalled, but he had noticed bright awnings at the windows and window boxes filled with petunias. He had not inspected it carefully at the time; everything, then, had been strange, for he had never before been that close to a large construction job. Now he wondered if this girl lived on that small houseboat and, as he imagined it, his heart turned over inside him, for once again he remembered the inhuman savagery in Scoop Sloper's mismated eyes as he had sunk his foot in Granelli's stomach.

Very thoughtfully he turned away from that window. On the opposite

wall was a fly-specked mirror. He was glad when he looked into it and found that, surprisingly enough, he could still recognize himself. A typical young banker, he told himself. Well, that was all right. He wanted to look like a banker. Ever since he had been graduated from the University of Florida he had intended to be one, although once in a while, particularly when Jennifer had talked too confidently about a little stucco bungalow in Coral Gables, Marvin was conscious of tiny stirrings of restlessness.

Without warning the door to his cabin was flung open and Scoop Sloper came in. He was even bigger than Marvin remembered. Marvin himself stood just under six feet, and weighed a good one hundred and eighty-five pounds. But the construction boss was half a head taller and outweighed him at least thirty pounds. Scoop came to a stop just inside the door. Standing flat-footed, his great fists planted on his hips, he inspected the young man before him. He missed no detail of Marvin's crisp black hair, of his mild blue eyes, nor of the hint of well-subdued restlessness on his wide and sensitive mouth. Slowly Scoop let his gaze travel on down the body that Marvin had kept fit by afternoons of swimming at the beach and Sundays of golfing at Coral Gables.

Then, flatly, he let Marvin have it. "Granelli," he said, "is dead."

Marvin took a deep breath. "So that makes you a murderer," he said in a voice that was steadier than he had expected.

"Not me, it doesn't," said Scoop, and his thin smile was untroubled. "Self-defense, and I've already written a message asking my friend the sheriff to come up from Key West first chance he gets. I'll send it off by the first boat." His gray eye was glittering like a polished marble. "Twice before, a thing like this has happened. A death, that is. Once a mug was walking under something and it fell on his head. I've forgotten, now, just what it was, or maybe we never did find out. The other time I had to slap a feller for rushing me, and he fell down and broke his neck. The sheriff was mighty accommodating about it, and I expect he will be this time, too, especially with all the witnesses I have to tell how Granelli tried to cut my heart out."

Three killings, Marvin thought with a rising sense of horror. That was what Scoop was telling him, and that nothing had happened as a result.

"I hope," Scoop now said, virtuously, "that nothing will happen to you. But I'd kind of watch my step between now and the time the supply boat gets here on its next trip." His tone suddenly hardened, all the smug solicitude drained out of it. "Listen, punk. Anyone who goes sticking his nose into things that are none of his damned business is sure leading with his chin. Is that plain?"

A sudden desire flooded through Marvin to haul off and smash his fist into the ugly face before him. But he was no fighting man. He was a bank clerk, and all his training had been to take the safe way, the conservative way, as any young banker should. So he held his peace, staring up into those mismated eyes and trying to keep the bright anger out of his face.

The superintendent studied Marvin Lee's expression with severe interest. "There's something about you," he murmured in a puzzled voice. He squared his heavy shoulders and his tone was that of a man who has definitely made up his mind. "You thought

you were going to be assistant timekeeper, but you aren't," he announced.

Marvin Lee braced himself against disappointment. He could picture Avery's face when he returned to the bank without having discovered any of the things Avery wanted to know. He could tell Avery that three men had been killed aboard the barge, and that he had seen one of them die. Shocking, Avery would say, but hardly the answer to the problem of labor costs. And then he would have to tell Avery that he had not been permitted to work. A fine springboard that would be for his promised promotion to the tellers' windows!

"The president of your company sent me down here," he said slowly, "to be assistant timekeeper."

"Hamilton doesn't want an assistant, or need one," the other said. "And on the job here, I'm boss." But the man's hard gray eye was unswerving from Marvin's as he added, "If it's a job you need," he said, smoothly, "and if you can take it, I can give you one."

"I can take it," Marvin said, earnestly. "I've got to take it. I'll take any job you'll give me."

The beginnings of a smile twitched at Sloper's thin lips, but it got no farther. Scoop thrust out his heavy hand, gripped Marvin's right wrist and lifted it, turning it so the young man's palm was up. One quick glance was enough. He dropped the hand.

"Not a callous on it," he said, and once again his voice became almost a snarl. "Listen, punk, if you came down here to snoop around—"

"What would I snoop around for?" Marvin Lee asked, evenly.

A thin line of perplexity showed on Scoop's brown forehead.

"You might just be dumb," he murmered. Then, on an outcoming breath, "I hope so. But maybe you're one of the wise babies—"

"What," Marvin Lee asked distinctly, "wise babies?"

The cords on Scoop's cheeks bunched out in solid ridges. For an instant it looked as if he was going to swing for Marvin Lee's chin, and Marvin's knees sagged just a fraction as he got ready to move—and move fast. But after a cold and uncomfortable silence, all Scoop said was: "Get out on the job and report to the dredger boss."

And went out, slamming the cabin door behind him.

CHAPTER III

JOB

WALKING down the gangway to the interlocking steel bulkhead which circumscribed the mangrove key, Marvin had to step aside to make way for the yellow-headed girl who was just coming aboard the barge.

She glanced up at him, at first inattentively, then with frank interest. She came to a full stop and looked him up and down. And so, because he could not pass while she stood there, he came to a stop, too. As he waited for her either to speak or to move, the sense that she was definitely unfriendly grew strongly upon him. That was a pity. Her eyes were the bluest he had ever seen and there was a scattering of freckles on her small, uptilted nose. Looking at those freckles, Marvin wondered vaguely why Jennifer always went to such absurd lengths to prevent them.

"So you," said the girl, tipping her bright head and looking fully into his eyes, "are the new man who leads with his chin."

"Yes," he said, frankly. "Difficult

to avoid sometimes. I shall be more cautious in the future."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" she demanded. "You don't know anything about construction jobs."

"How would you know that?"

"Why wouldn't I know it?" she asked.

"If you want to play games," he said, "does it have to be Twenty Questions?"

"No, we don't have to play anything," she said, and tried to move past him up the gangway. "You and Scoop can do that."

But he did not move and her blue eyes became stormy. He stood quite still watching anger tighten her vivid lips.

"You don't like me," he told her. "I haven't done you any harm, have I?"

"Yes," she said distinctly. "You've come on the job here and made things bad for Dad."

He blinked at her solemnly. "This," he said, "is silly. What have I done to make things tough for anybody?"

"Will you move out of my way?" she asked, tightly, "Or do I have to call somebody to put you out?"

From the roof of the deckhouse directly over their heads came a rasping voice, thin-edged with anger.

"You don't have to call anybody, Linda," said Scoop Sloper. "You, Lee!"

Marvin Lee spun around, stared up at the edge of the roof. Scoop Sloper's mismated eyes were thinned down to tiny slits, one gray, one brown, and there was an unmistakable flame of fury in them. The big man's body was bent slightly forward and it seemed to Marvin Lee that he was swaying, as if to jump down, both feet first, to land exactly on Marvin's shoulders. Instinctively Marvin Lee stepped back. That gave the girl room. Quickly she sidled past him and headed for the deck.

"My father," she said over her straight, proud shoulder, "is Mr. Hamilton, the timekeeper."

Marvin Lee's following glance was pulled back to Scoop. "Lee," came the superintendent's brittle voice, "didn't I tell you to get out on the job?"

"Yes, sir," Marvin said, "but that girl—"

"Listen. If you want to get on—if you want to keep your skin whole—don't make any passes at Linda, see?"

"I wasn't—" Marvin said, but the big man above had taken a single backward step and was out of sight behind the overhanging eaves of the roof.

"If you say another word," came Scoop's voice, "I'll come down there and—"

Marvin drew a great deep breath. How could he hope, he asked himself, to find out anything for Avery if he kept on antagonizing the superintendent? If he were going on like this, there would be no use waiting until the next trip of the supply boat. Might as well hail the first boat that went by and get a lift to Miami. The first boat? What first boat? Except for three punts and a heavy construction launch which was now busy at the far end of the bulkhead, there was not a boat in all that immensity of green mangroves and blue water.

"Are you going out on the job?" Scoop's voice demanded, icily. "Or not?"

Abruptly Marvin turned and marched down the gangway and did not look back at the heavy, studying figure on the roof.

TWENTY-FOUR hours before, Marvin Lee would have said offhand, yes, he was in pretty good condition. But now, laboring beside the men who were clearing the mangroves, digging trenches to divert the flow of water from the dredge, handling the heavy sections of spare pipe and moving the discharge pipe from place to place, he knew that his swimming at the beach, his golf at Coral Gables, had done little more than to keep his muscles from becoming overlaid with fat.

The dredging boss, half-Cuban, half-Negro, took one look at the clothes Marvin had thought were old, had glanced curiously at Marvin's hands and then, with a grin of delight, had assigned him to the hardest job of all.

At first he had not minded it. Had rather liked it, in fact. After three years of working over the ledgers in the dim quiet of the bank, it was good to be out-of-doors, feeling the sweat start through his skin, using his muscles in pushing and hauling and carrying. He was delighted to learn that he was stronger than most of the motley crew around him. He did not know there was a knack in lifting and carrying the pipe, which was as hard to lug as a mattress. He did not know there was a trick to the swinging of a shovel, nor that the idea was to spend your strength cautiously, efficiently, instead of throwing it all away as if there would never be an end to it.

From time to time he glanced back at the barge. Once he saw the yellow-haired girl standing there on the deck between her father and Scoop, watching him. Again, while working beside a squat, broad-shouldered Irishman with flaming red hair, he was moving the end of the discharge pipe to a new location, he saw her descend the gangway and walk easily along the top of the bulkhead toward the spot where he remembered the small houseboat had been moored. He saw that, but he did not see something else. He was not even looking at the pipe, whose gushing jet of sand-carrying water had been cut off while he and the man called Red had been moving it. So he did not see the tiny fountains of water which came down the pipe toward him, spraying up, progressively, from each joint in the line.

"Look out, guy!" Red said, standing back.

But Marvin Lee did not know what to look out for. A second later, an immense out-rushing of water spurted from the nozzle of the pipe and as he fell, rolled over and over by the force of the stream, he retained in the eyes of his mind a clear picture of the dredge foreman standing up there looking at him, grinning widely as he lifted one hand in signal to the engineer at the pump.

Marvin scrambled to his feet, spitting like a cat. His mouth was filled with sand, and so was his hair. Sand was in his dripping clothes, gritting against his skin. And in his ears was the howl of laughter from the other workmen.

He shook the sand and water from his face and glared at the dredger boss, who returned his look with insolent amusement. He was shaking all over and the entire landscape was screened with the red fog of his blazing anger. Over there on the bulkhead Linda Hamilton had come to a full stop and was looking at him.

"Steady, fella, steady," said the red-headed Irishman. "Take it easy."

It was that friendly voice that drove the red mist from Marvin's eyes, drove

the scalding anger out of his brain. Wordlessly he slapped the sand out of his clothes and turned to follow the Irishman to the next job. And when he again glanced toward the bulkhead, Linda Hamilton was gone.

Later he was too tired to be angry any more. His brain was drunk with fatigue and his entire body an agony of aching muscles. He stumbled blindly over the smooth hillocks of sand left by the discharge pipe, carrying things so heavy they all but tore his arms out of their sockets. Mosquitoes buzzed around his head in clouds, settled on his sweating skin in droves.

"Don't slap 'em," said the Irishman. "That leaves their beaks inside. Wipe 'em away."

After a while it did not seem worth while even to wipe them away. The effort cost too much; he had spent his strength too liberally early in the afternoon. His mouth dried out, his tongue began to swell.

"Don't drink," said a voice near him. "Wash your mouth. Gargle some. Then spit."

The sun was almost down to the western horizon, but it was still a living ball of fire, shooting all its burning rays straight at Lee, scalding the sweat on his skin, baking him down to his bones. He tripped on the tangled roots of the mangroves and fell down a dozen times. The last time it took him a long time to get up. He might not have made it had not somebody put a hand under his arm and lifted it. Dimly he saw the red-headed Irishman, but he was too tired even to thank him.

Years and years later he heard a steam whistle, but its meaning glanced off his drugged mind. But he heard someone say to knock off, to come this way, and he found himself staggering up the gangway to the crews' barge.

TUESDAY afternoon, that was. Now it was Friday morning, still dark as midnight, and a rough hand was shaking Marvin Lee's shoulder.

"Get up, Buck!" dinned a voice into his consciousness. They called him Buck, now, half kidding. "Hey, the first whistle's blown! Hit the deck, Buck, hit the deck!"

"Go away!" Marvin murmured, thickly, trying to brush that insistent hand away from his sunburned shoulder.

"Buck!" the voice went on. "Roll out of there before Scoop Sloper comes in to kiss you good morning!"

Scoop. Scoop Sloper. That brought everything back, a little at a time. A man with mismated eyes stamping down with both feet on an unconscious man's ribs and stomach. A yellow-headed girl with blue eyes that might have been friendly, but weren't. An afternoon, and then a day, of such work as Marvin had never before known. Never even dreamed of. Slowly Marvin Lee managed to identify the voice which was calling him back to a hell of work, a hell of violence, a hell which swarmed with mosquitoes. It belonged to the redheaded Irishman who was his cabin mate, who had worked beside him ever since Marvin had started that heartbreaking work on the construction job. One friendly face, the only really friendly face he had seen since coming aboard. And his name, Marvin remembered as he struggled up through his fatigue-drugged sleep, was Red Malloy.

"Hey, Buck!" Red was calling, still shaking Marvin's shoulder. "Come on. Rise and shine."

The clanging of the dredger pump banged against his head like blows from a sledge hammer. His tongue felt like a fur mitten. He thought he must

be coming down with something, but he did not care.

"Listen, you fighting cock," the voice went on, "roll out. I know you must be feeling awful. Anyone would after last night. But Scoop says we might get a blow this afternoon or tonight and—"

The phrase, "We might get a blow," cut clearly through his exhausted mind. A blow on the Florida Keys in September meant a tropical hurricane—or at least the edge of one.

"What do you mean, a blow?" he murmured thickly, trying to work his stiffened legs out of the berth.

"I wouldn't just know," Red said, vaguely. "Scoop was saying an advisory, or something, came over the radio a while ago."

Now Marvin could remember. The day before he had come down to this heaven-forsaken island, the Miami Weather Bureau had reported a tropical disturbance which, brewing east of Dominica, was slowly moving westward along the southern reaches of the Caribbean. But since Monday there had been too many other things to think about and worry about.

"Has that storm moved this way?" Marvin asked, opening his eyes and closing them instantly as the unshaded light from the bulb struck down into his sunburned pupils.

"I don't know if he said," Red replied.

Marvin pushed himself to a sitting position and discovered, to his astonishment, that he was in the lower berth.

"What am I doing here?" he asked, squeezing his throbbing head between his hands. "The upper berth is mine."

"Not any more," Red said, his freckled face breaking into a huge grin. "Did you forget you pulled me out of bed last night and gave me twenty bucks for my lower?"

Painfully Marvin tried to figure that out. There was a mistake somewhere. He had brought exactly eighteen dollars aboard with him. But he did not feel well enough to argue. He had never felt worse. Even yesterday morning he had not felt worse. This was discouraging. He had hoped his muscles would have hardened up a little after the first two days and a half on the job.

"BOY, boy, can you carry a load!" Red Malloy said, looking down at Marvin with respect. "Was I you, Buck, I'd sort of steer clear of Scoop Sloper and Cash Childers today."

"Why should I?" Marvin demanded, irritably. Dimly he remembered Cash Childers, who was storekeeper. But why he should steer clear of him he could not imagine.

"Oh, all right, all right," Red said, soothingly. "When they gang up on you, I'll climb a guy wire and watch. It ought to be good!"

Marvin was in no mood for mysteries, nor for their answers, if any. He wished Red Malloy would stop talking and go away. Dizzily he reached for his crumpled trousers, still damp and sandy from yesterday's labor. He tried twice before he contrived to get one foot into them. Then he waited to gather sufficient strength to stand up and to draw them about his hips. His dull gaze fell upon an unfamiliar bulge in his left trouser pocket. Groping after it, he pulled out a roll of bills as large as Scoop Sloper's fist. He blinked incredulously, then stared at the grinning Red.

"Two hundred and thirty-six potatoes, lad," said Red, proudly. "I counted it before I poured you into

your berth. I like to've died when you made eight straight passes in a row with all that dough lying on the deck. I promised my dying grandpa, rest his soul, that I'd never roll the bones with any mug who can lay 'em down like you can!"

"You've been drinking," Marvin accused him, groggily. "I never played a game of craps in my life."

Red's eyes grew wide. "Sure, I've been drinking." He grinned. "You telling me you drew a blank—you don't remember?" he demanded.

"I remember sitting down on the side of the bed when we got in from work," Lee said. "I was so tired I didn't want any supper. But you—" He stopped short and glared at Red. "You said I needed something to eat. You gave me a drink out of a black bottle."

"*A* drink!" echoed Red. "Listen, my grandpa was state champion, at all weights and with no holds barred. But I bet he'da turned a somersault in his grave last night if he'da seen you throw your lip over that bottle. A pint of that stuff would peel the paint off a battleship's side. Corn, it was, with a rattlesnake or two and maybe an alligator tossed in to give it body. And what did you do? You tossed it down pretty as you please. And you bought another pint off Cash Childers and went after it like one of those belly-billed pelicans after a sardine. Don't you even remember busting up the game when Cash Childers switched dice on you?"

"No," Marvin said, thoroughly unhappy.

"Don't you remember Hamilton, the time-keeper, singing the blues because he faded you and you lay out a seven right in front of him? Don't you remember taking him by the arm and escorting him out on deck, telling him if he couldn't take it he ought to go home to bed? Don't you remember Cash Childers trying to stop you and you fetching him a clout on the lug that woulda bent an anchor?"

"No," Marvin said. "And I've heard enough. Don't tell me any more."

"There wasn't any more," Red said. "The boys had enough. Before you got through telling Hamilton to be a good boy, they all took their feet in their hands and beat it for their bunks."

MARVIN LEE stared at him, appalled. He was not exactly a teetotaler. He'd been to cocktail parties often, but he'd never had more than one, perhaps two, discreet drinks which was as much, Jenny always said, as any rising young banker should take at one time. And now and then after an afternoon of swimming at Miami Beach, he'd had a bottle of beer with the boys. *A* bottle of beer. Just one.

But when he had taken that first drink out of Red's bottle last night he had been so tired, so thirsty, so completely done in mind and body, that he had neither asked, nor cared, what might be in it. The amber-colored liquid had burned pleasantly in his throat and the feeling, when it exploded in his stomach, had been wonderful.

Not so clearly did he remember the second drink. Vaguely he recalled hearing a voice laughing loudly, and his own surprise when, with some difficulty, he recognized that voice as his own. After that everything faded into obscurity except a vague picture here and there; a flash of himself, kneeling on the floor of the mess hall surrounded by a white circle of intent faces; of himself, standing stiff with

fury in front of a man who had somehow tried to cheat him; of himself, telling Linda Hamilton's father that if he couldn't lose cheerfully, like a good sport, he ought to stay out of the game. Nothing else.

"Come on, Buck," Red Malloy was now urging. "Let's get grub. We ought to be out on the island in twenty minutes, or—"

Marvin Lee made faint fanning motions with both hands. "Don't talk about food, Red. Please."

"At that, grits and side meat might not go so good with a hang-over like that one on you," Red said. "I'll just stagger out and mooch you a shot of Java. If you don't drop dead at the very first sip, it'll cure you."

"I don't want any coffee!" Marvin snapped. "Listen, Red. About that crap game. You say I got in a row with Linda's father?"

Red's squat figure went rigid. "It's so you call her Linda, is it?" he asked, slowly.

"No. I never have," Marvin said.

"Well, take the advice of a bird who has seen many a thing in his day. Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't call her Linda."

"Why not?"

"Scoop."

"What about Scoop?" Marvin snapped.

"Look, feller," Red said in a quiet voice. "I never saw anybody who was quite so quick to get himself all jammed up as you are. Do this, will you? Stay as far away from Linda as you can 'til you've been around here long enough to understand things."

"What things?" Red lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. He started for the door. Marvin put his hands out and stopped him.

"What is all this about Hamilton? What's wrong with him? What do I have to understand?"

Red swung his eyes cautiously toward the door. "He's a crook, that's what," he whispered. "Just like all the rest of them. And if you want to go on living, mind your own business and don't see things. Most of all, don't see Linda. If you do, Scoop will be tying both your legs around your own neck and pulling the knot tight. I'm getting your coffee, guy."

And before Marvin Lee could stop him, the friendly Irishman was gone.

MARVIN sat down on the side of his berth and tried to figure things out, but they were all mixed up in his mind and his head ached too much to be able to think, anyway.

A yellow-haired girl whose eyes were too honest to be mixed up in any sort of crookedness. Her father, who looked like a gentleman but who shuffled his feet and looked frightened out of his wits when Scoop spoke to him. "A crook, like all the rest of them." Marvin Lee was beginning to understand why Avery had sent him here.

And what was it Red had said about Scoop and Linda? It was not so much what he had actually said. There had been an upsetting inference in his words that was more troubling than any flat accusation. It matched up, too, with the fury Scoop had shown the day before yesterday when he had come upon the two of them talking on the gangway. The whole thing was too confusing. Very earnestly Marvin wished he were back in Miami.

Now he had another problem—what to do with his winnings of last night. Already he had been on the job long enough to realize that the workmen were a tough bunch. It would be un-

wise to carry so much money around with him all day. He glanced around the tiny cabin, looking for a suitable hiding place. There was no rug on the deck. Marvin Lee had no experience in hiding things, so he chose the most obvious place of all. He lifted the mattress on his bunk, intending to shove the roll under it. But as the end of the flimsy ticking came up, his pillow slid toward the bulkhead, exposing something which had been lying underneath.

Inattentively he glanced at the object. Then he gasped. He let the mattress fall and stood quite still, staring down at the incredible thing before him.

There, directly beneath the spot where his head had rested during the night, was a carving knife. And on the long, thin blade was a dried stain that even Marvin Lee could recognize instantly.

Blood!

CHAPTER IV

KNIFE

FOR agelong instants Marvin Lee stood staring down at that knife, staggered by the implications it suggested to his mind. Beneath the blade the sheet was stained by a small, thin, smear of black. So when that knife had been hidden there, Marvin told himself incredulously, the blade had still been wet. Wet with whose blood?

Marvin reached down to pick it up, to examine it more closely, but just before his fingers touched the lethal weapon he drew them back quickly. Fingerprints! He didn't want any of his prints on the blade, nor on the handle, either.

And then this thought crashed through his aching head like a bolt of lightning. Suppose his own prints were *already* on that knife— Suppose sometime last night, during those hours he couldn't remember, he handled that knife, even put it under the mattress himself. Even—but this he wouldn't believe—even used it.

The doorknob behind him rattled. Marvin raked the pillow swiftly over the knife. There wasn't time to do anything else. He did not want even Red to see it until he had a chance to decide what to do about it.

A hand grabbed Marvin's arm and spun him around in a half-circle. Marvin tottered and almost fell to the floor.

"So you're the hard guy around here, eh?"

Ordinarily Marvin would have hastened to deny, and indignantly, any implication that he considered himself hard. But now, however, with his head beating like a Chinese gong, his mind spinning dizzily trying to figure out how that bloody knife had gotten under his pillows, Marvin didn't bother to argue.

He stared at the sultry-eyed stranger whom he vaguely remembered as Cash Childers, the storekeeper. The man's eyes were red-rimmed and restless, his nose predatory, his mouth twitched by a tic which tugged jerkily, unpleasantly, at the left corner of his thin lips. Marvin began to remember—that twitching mouth on the face of the man Marvin had caught trying to substitute another pair of dice for the ones which were bringing Marvin Lee such outstanding luck.

"Go away, please," he said, irritably. "You hurt my eyes."

But Cash Childers, it appeared, had something on his mind. "I'll take back the dough you won from Scoop and me last night," Cash Childers said, his rasping voice running rough-edged

across Marvin's stretched nerves. "And I'll take our cut of your winnings."

"What cut?" Marvin asked, swinging his eyes toward the bunk to be sure the pillow covered the horrible thing that lay under it.

"Our cut," Childers said. "Scoop's and mine. It's the rule on this barge. Twenty per cent. Now, give, punk, give, before I have to get rough."

"Look," Marvin said, trying through long force of habit to be patient, reasonable. "All I want is a little peace and quiet. I don't feel well. And every time I turn my back somebody comes in to argue."

AND then Marvin's heart almost stopped beating. Cash Childers' uneasy eyes had rolled toward the berth, and the tic jerked his mouth more rapidly than before. Quickly Marvin followed the direction of his glance. And he was able to breathe again. All that had attracted Cash's gaze was the roll of money which Marvin had dropped on the crumpled sheet.

With clutching fingers, Cash Childers pounced for the money. Marvin sighed regretfully. He put out his hand and grabbed the man by the neck. In his irritation, he yanked harder than he knew. Cash Childers flew away from the berth. Marvin let go. But Cash Childers kept on flying. Off balance, far back on his heels, Cash staggered backward across the narrow room and came to a jarring stop against the opposite wall. His head thwacked solidly against it. His knees sagged.

"If you want to lie down," Marvin said, impatiently, "go away somewhere."

He reached out and caught the slumping man, whose glazed eyes had rolled up until they showed all white under the lids. Crossly, Marvin opened the door. He pushed Cash out through it and closed it quickly. There was a resounding *thump* outside, but Marvin hardly heard it. His eyes had already gone to that pillow and he was trying to remember, remember, back through all the happenings of the incredible night before. And not getting anywhere. Not anywhere at all.

Once again the door opened. Marvin spun around, his fists balled tight.

"Nix, Buck, nix," Red said, almost dropping a cup of steaming coffee. "Don't hit me with those things."

Marvin glanced over Red's shoulder. The man Childers had disappeared. Through the open door he could hear the sound of dishes clattering in the mess hall and the shuffle of footsteps. Blurred by distance was the static-riddled sound of a radio playing dance music. It came strangely to Marvin's ears so early in the morning, but his mind was too preoccupied with other things to wonder why it had been turned on.

"Never did I see such a hog for trouble, Buck," said Red gloomily, as he placed the mug in Marvin's unsteady hands. "Don't you know that feller Cash never in his life forgave anyone who took a slap at him? And now you've laid two on him, one last night and one now."

But Marvin was not even listening. He was sipping his hot coffee, which tasted like sheep dip, and was deciding whether to tell Red Malloy about the knife. It was his impulse to tell him everything. More than that, he wanted to take that bloody weapon straight to Scoop Sloper, who represented whatever there was of authority aboard the barge. Yet Scoop Sloper had yesterday killed a man, Granelli.

"Red," Marvin blurted out. "Why

did Scoop Sloper beat up Granelli—kill him?"

A closed look came into the Irishman's eyes. He glanced hastily toward the door.

"Look, Buck," he said in an urgent whisper, "if you're going around asking questions like that, find some other guy to ask, will you? That guy got his because he didn't have sense enough to know when to shut his eyes and his ears and his mouth, see?"

"No," Marvin said. "What was it he was going to tell the Coast—"

"Buck!" Red cut in, begging. "The supply boat will be here day after tomorrow. Take it back to Miami, will you, like a good lad? I'd be sorry as hell to see you killed. The funny thing is, I kind of like you. With one drink banging around inside you, you're a regular guy. Even if you hadn't tried to take the punch for Granelli, I'd still like you, and—"

He looked up, suddenly, and cocked his bright red head in an attitude of listening. The round of running footsteps came through the mosquito bar which covered the window. Someone out there in the pre-dawn blackness was racing toward the barge, pounding up the gangway.

Others seemed to have heard that sound, too, for an immense hush settled over the entire barge. And through that hush Marvin could hear his own heart, pounding so loudly he thought Red must surely hear it. The steps thumped somewhere on the deck. Listening to their frantic speed, Marvin found himself looking wide-eyed at the pillow, beneath which was hidden that bloodstained knife. And it came to him definitely, without question, that in a moment he would know whose blood had dried on that blade. He closed his eyes and waited.

"Scoop!" cried a girl's voice, hysterically. "Scoop, where are you?"

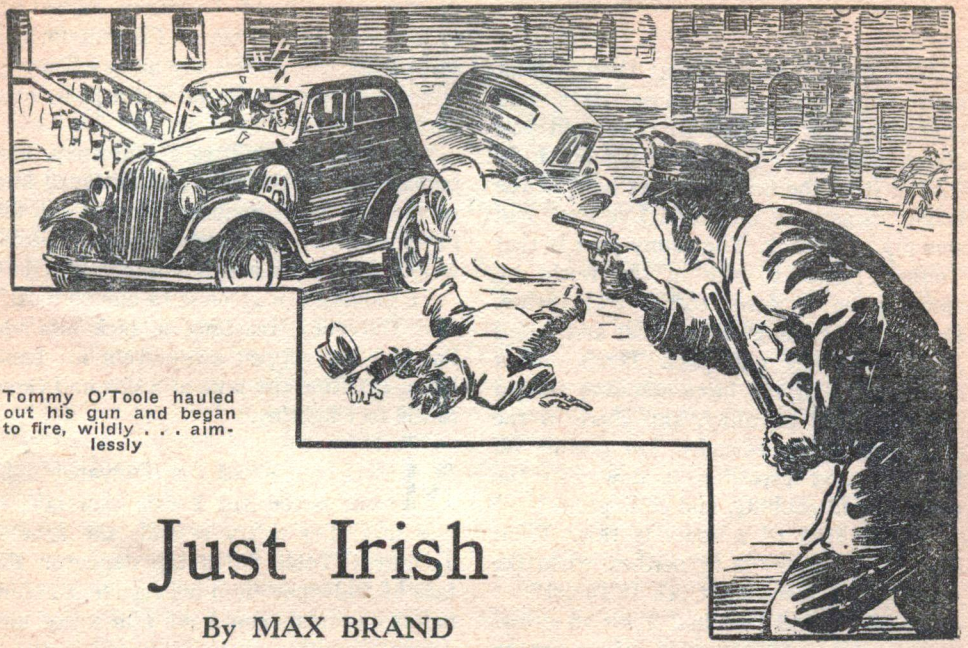
"Hey!" Red stepped quickly to the door. "That's Linda!"

Red twisted the knob and darted out into the alleyway. For a single instant Marvin stood still. Then, in sudden desperation, he whipped the pillow away from the flimsy mattress. He grabbed up the knife. He shot one guarded look at the empty doorway.

Then, with the terrible knowledge that he was probably doing the wrong thing, he wheeled, pulled the mosquito netting aside and pitched the knife out into the blackness. He heard it splash as it struck the water.

"Scoop!" came Linda's tragic voice. "Somebody has murdered Dad!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Tommy O'Toole hauled out his gun and began to fire, wildly . . . aimlessly

Just Irish

By MAX BRAND

Author of "War for Sale," "Viva Viva," etc.

THE police are all right if you get to know them but the only one of them I can afford to know is Tim Flannery. Tim is making his way up in the world, now, putting out a bow wave of prosperity in front of him and getting a little red in the jowls. Any day he'll be made a sergeant and I make a point of stopping for a word when I meet him on my way to the office. It's partly because I like Tim and partly because I think a man might as well have an anchor to windward, these days. I was having a word with Tim one morning when a big blue sedan with nothing but the price mark taken off its newness slowed up towards the curb. At the wheel was a fine-looking young fellow with his black hair whipped back to a high polish. He leaned across the pretty girl beside him and sang out:

"Hi, Tim!"

"Hi, Tommy!" said Tim.

That gave me a chance to note the pair of little ones in the back seat beside an old woman with big red rings in her ears and a swarthy face. The car drove on and left a big smile on Tim's face.

"Friends?" I asked.

"Sure. That's Tommy O'Toole," said Tim Flannery.

"Seems like I've heard of him," I said. "In the papers?"

"Why not?" asked Tim. "He's the secretary of the Red Feet and he's getting into the fight-promoting. But whatever you heard, you didn't hear the half."

"No?" said I.

"No," said he.

"Why would O'Toole want to hire a ninety-year-old squaw off a reservation for a nurse to his kids?" I asked.

"That's the point," said Tim.

"The point of what?" said I.

"Well, I'm going to tell you," said Tim, "while I wait to see if that wall-eyed rat of a Milligan shows up to pay me back that five dollars that he borrowed last Saturday. Can you remember back to the prohibition days?"

"Without shutting my eyes I can see those days, and I can taste them, too," said I.

*

All right, said Tim, you think your way back into those days and stay there for a while till I've told you about Tommy O'Toole and his big idea. I hand it to the boys that get hold of the bright ideas; the only one I've ever had was my nightstick. The funny part is that Tommy begun to rise in the world by standing on a street corner and crying. Here I was coming off my beat and found Mike Dulvaney and Jack Terris and a couple more of the force standing around the mouth of an alley, and there in the alley was a black-headed kid peeling off his coat and throwing it down on the cobbles, and sobbing, and calling out:

"What kind of a town is this? What kind of a country is it, neither, when the whole police force can't lick O'Toole?"

I saw the lad had had a bit to drink. Dulvaney gave me the wink. "Just a crazy Irish kid," he said. "There's no harm in him, Tim."

"Sure there's no harm in him," said I. "I never seen more Irish in any one picture. You'll be disturbing the peace, Tommy," I said to the kid. "I'll take you home."

"Oh jeepers," said Tommy O'Toole, "isn't that what I been waiting for? For somebody to take me! You come and try to take me, you big stuffed bologna. The whole lot of you come to take me, will you? There's not enough cops in the whole of New York to pinch poor Tommy O'Toole!"

And he began to cry again, while we all laughed at one another, except Mike Dulvaney. He began to take off things and hand them to me.

"Here's my badge and my coat and my cap and my gun," said Dulvaney.

"You can't hit the kid when he's boiled like that and doing nobody no harm in the world," said I.

"He's asking for it, ain't he?" asked Dulvaney. "I hate to smack him down but he's gotta be handled before a crowd gathers and we have to run him in."

I could see the point of that as plain as the flat of my hand. Dulvaney walked up to him and the kid says, "I'll wait for the rest of 'em. As sure as my name's Tommy O'Toole I wouldn't be hitting a poor, lone man."

"Take this, then," said Dulvaney, and popped him in the chin and flattened him so that his head bounced when it hit the pavement. For Dulvaney was our middleweight champion and a fine cut of a lad.

"I shouldn't of given it to him so hard," said Dulvaney, reaching to pick him up, but the kid slipped away from his hand like a cat from the jaws of a dog and came to his feet fighting.

MIND you, I had seen Dulvaney fight but never had I seen him take it like that. For thirty seconds the fists of Tommy O'Toole did a tap dance on the face of Dulvaney from his eyes to his chin, before our man could hit him away and down.

It was a fine fight, for their faces were soon wet and the red flew when their fists smacked home and as often as Dulvaney knocked him down Tommy bounced up again. We stood around, the rest of us, with our hands held out to stop the fight and our tongues in spite of us saying, "Go it, Mike! . . . Go it, Tommy!" until Dulvaney hit right on the button that puts out the lights for the best of us, and poor Tommy fell on his face.

I picked him up and he was a loose thing falling out of my hands. "You've killed him, Mike," I said, "and him not ten days from the Old Country."

"If I've killed one of him, there's eight more to come back to life and fight again," said Dulvaney. "And me and my face dated up with my girl for this night!" In fact there was a mark or two on him that only time would rub out.

We put Tommy O'Toole in a taxi and sure enough, when he got his eyes open a crack he wanted to fight again; but he'd sweated out some of the Irish through his skin and at last we made him hear reason. He gave us his address and we took him home.

One Annie O'Rourke was the landlady to him and when she opened the door to our ring she sang out, "They've murdered our Tommy . . . ! I'll have the uniform off your back and the law on it instead. *Is* there a law that cares for the poor, homeless and innocent? You black-hearted bullies, you."

By this we could see that Annie was a good woman, so we left Tommy in her hands and went away.

It was not many days after this before Tommy O'Toole stepped up to me on my beat and I made myself ready for trouble, but he put out his hand and smiled on me.

"I've come to thank you for seeing me home, Mr. Flannery," he said.

While I was taking his hand, up came Dulvaney and stopped with a look of alarm but the lad gave him the hand in turn and said, "Till the other evening the prettiest thing that I ever seen was a yearling filly at the Limerick fair, but a sweeter creature by far was the straight left you pulled out of your sleeve that night, Mr. Dulvaney."

"Was it?" Dulvaney said; and to me he said, "There's no more than a shadow or two on the face of him. Is it Indian rubber you're made of, Tommy? And what are you doing for yourself in New York?"

"It's only what is New York doing to me?" asked Tommy. "And how many Dulvaneys are there in the land?" he said, feeling his face with his hand.

So we all began laughing.

"How would you like to join the police force?" asked Dulvaney.

"How would I rate a fine man's position like that?" asked Tommy. "And I haven't been in the country that long."

"If I have an eye in my head," said I, "I remember you well in Jamaica."

"I was never on that island, sir," said Tommy.

"*Long* Island, you fool," said Dulvaney, "which is the hind part of Brooklyn."

"Now that I think of it," said Tommy O'Toole, "can it be that I was born there?"

"Where else would you have seen the light of day?" said I.

"Nowhere whatever," said Tommy, "if it's the same to you."

"Can you read and write? And do you know arithmetic?"

"Up to the part where the algebra gets thick in the head," said he.

"Algebra? We'll be adding a scholar to the force," said Dulvaney.

NOT long after that, when I had no uniform onto my back, I took Tommy O'Toole around to Danny O'Flynn's saloon. There was no shadow of a speakeasy about it but all open to the sun because the place had the right kind of protection. It was a good, honest saloon with no needle in the beer, and the drunks were few in it because when a man could not say, "Irish whisky" without lisping, Danny turned him out at once.

I took Danny O'Flynn aside and said, "Danny, you know the powers that be."

"I do that," said Danny, "and they know me, and my money, may they all—"

"Whisht, Danny," said I. "Don't be wishing a bad wish, man. But put an eye on my young friend Tommy O'Toole that I've known since he was getting and giving black eyes in the kindergarten. The making of an engineer is in him, his head is that full of algebra, and geometry, and that sort of stuff. But his mother lost her money—a good Brooklyn woman—and his rich uncle was cleaned out in Wall Street by those black robbers, and it's this for Tommy—the police force or the prize ring."

"Is he that good?" asked Danny. "He looks to have the spark in him."

"It's a spark that set Dulvaney on fire," said I.

"Did it so?" said Danny.

"It did so," said I. "And if you were to name his name in the right places, he has the learning and the muscles to pass the examinations and he soon would be one of us."

"There are no ears in New York except they're opened with money," said Danny, "and where would I get it back?"

"What would keep Tommy O'Toole from

being assigned to this beat—and then would you have protection or would you not?"

"Ay, ay," said Danny. "And homemade protection is the best kind, though that's not true of beer."

So before the year was gray-headed, there was Tommy O'Toole in his uniform and all; and taking his beer once a day in the family room of Danny's saloon.

A couple of weeks later, no more he struck a patch of real luck. I mean, there were two mobs in that precinct. Jacopo Jacone ran one of them and Battista Moro ran the other. Battista had the beer racket, and Jacopo the laundries and cleaner and dyers, and all that, so they got along pretty friendly till Moro wanted the whole works. Then a war started.

Mostly the best way is to let a pair of gangs fight it out, as I see it. It saves the district attorney's office, it saves the police, and it saves the public money. It's a sort of a game and you have to know the way it's played but when newspapers get hold of a thing they never let go; and reporters have no sense of humor. The only games they recognize are tennis and baseball, you might say. Anyway, the papers howled till the Police Commissioner began to lose sleep and the word went out that action was wanted.

I guess we were all worried about the new orders, in that precinct, except Tommy O'Toole, that was too young to know trouble. So it came his way. He was strolling down the street with nothing on his mind but the fine weather and the growth of his bank account, when here comes Battista Moro taking the air in his automobile and two of his best men along, which were Tony Lombardo and Leon Manzuoli. And now look at this for coincidence! Around the next corner comes an automobile with Jacone in it, along with a couple of *his* right-hand men, Lefty Joe Hennessey and Bastiano Floriani. When they saw one another, they opened up with machine guns. But Floriani was killed at the wheel of Jacopo's car and it ran bang into Moro's machine. It was like tying wildcats together, and the boys started in clawing each other to death.

Jacone's bunch went down, two dead and Hennessey next to dead, and Moro is the only man of his outfit able to sit up. He backs his car away and is about to clear out when Tommy O'Toole, who has been taking his time to see what's happening, hauls out his gun and fires. He can't hit anything. I've seen him on the practice range hitting nothing but the side of the target; but his first shot smashes the windshield of Moro's car and fills Moro's face with glass and blinds him.

You see what happens?

The newspapers carried it in three colums on the front pages with pictures of the dead men, and the living hero. Three men dead, three wounded and captured by Officer Thomas O'Toole!

EVERYBODY seemed to take it for granted that Tommy had done all the shooting, that is, everybody that was not in the know. Tommy didn't lie about it. He wanted to tell the truth, but that only convinced the reporters that he was a modest hero, and they got wilder and wilder with their typewriters. As a matter of fact it was such a funny break that even Moro wasn't sore about it, and he sent out word to his boys to leave the kid alone. That was decent of Battista.

So Tommy became a newspaper hero and wasn't put on the spot. I never heard of such luck. The force was lined up, one day, and the chief made a speech, and pinned a medal on Tommy's chest, and talked as though he were trying to be elected mayor. But that was all right. We kept our faces straight while we passed the wink around, and the one that winked loudest was Tommy himself. He used to laugh about his heroism, and so we never held it against him; he was about the most popular kid on the force and never stuck out his chest at all.

But he got ambitious, just the same. He'd come so far up in the world that he was beginning to squint his eyes at the top of the ladder, and the top of the ladder

in that precinct was John Coppersmith O'Riley. He had millions they said, but he'd made his coin in the precinct and he kept right on living in the old house, never putting on any dog except in dressing up his girl, Mary. He had the money and she had the looks, and she was an only child. O'Riley himself was a tiger, but Mary had those deep blue Irish eyes and the softest voice that ever took a man's heart over the jumps.

Everybody had tried to get the eye of Mary, and everybody had failed, because it seemed as though she couldn't see anything but the wrinkled mahogany of her father's face. However, when Tommy O'Toole came through the door there was a difference. He looked like something and he was a public hero and a good kid, besides. She was dizzy in no time about Tommy, but old O'Riley said:

"I don't give a damn about money. I've got plenty to keep you and Mary. But I won't let her marry anybody that hasn't lived long enough and worked hard enough and used enough brains to get a hundred thousand dollar bank account."

Tommy came and saw me and told me about it. I admitted that it was tough. "And you but a step from the O'Riley millions!" said I.

"Damn the millions," said Tommy. "It's Mary that I'm thinking about."

"Are you far gone about her?" I asked.

"The whole of Limerick County comes over me out of her eyes," said he.

"A hundred thausand," said I, thinking it out, "is a lot of money. Why wouldn't you steal away with the girl, and the old man would soon make peace with you both?"

"Since I came to New York," says he, "I've done such things as my mother would blush for the seeing of them. And I'll have Mary," he says, "as her father wants me to have her, or I won't have her at all. He's a kind man, for one that doesn't drink, and I'm fond of him."

"How will you make a hundred thousand?" I asked.

Tommy said, "There's no beat in this precinct with that kind of money in it. I'm going to get a leave of absence."

He got a leave of absence for a month and at the end of that time he came back on crutches with a plaster on one side of his head. There had been a hunting accident, people learned.

It was hunting, all right, but it wasn't an accident. It was hunting a way to get a thousand ton cargo of fine old Scotch from Rum Row to the Long Island shore, and Tommy found a way in, but not before he'd been shot through the leg and had another slug bounce off his tough head.

He was pretty badly used up but his smile was the broadest that I ever saw. He had a good deal over a hundred grand for his month's work.

"I wouldn't do it again, Tim," he said to me, "but the beauty of it is that I won't *have* to do it again."

HE resigned from the force, naturally, and he was married to little Mary O'Riley as soon as he could walk down the aisle of the church without crutches. It was a big wedding. Old O'Riley turned loose his money and himself and there was enough liquor poured to wet down all the lawns in Van Cortlandt Park. O'Riley himself got plastered, and that was not so much fun, because he had a bad heart and had been off the stuff for years. He got ginned up and he stayed ginned up; and you'll see the results of it pretty soon.

Well, there's Tommy O'Toole that started a fight at the mouth of an alley, now right up to the top of the ladder, married in a silk hat and a cathedral! That's America, for you; that's what a democracy means.

He was right up there at the top of everything, looking around to see where he should put his foot next in the blue of the sky, when vicissitudes came and climbed all over him.

Now listen to what happened to Tommy!

About three days after the marriage, Tommy came to see me, in a complete stew.

"What's the matter, Tommy? Is the price of steam yachts gone up?"

"Wait a minute," says Tommy. "Give me a drink. No, I'll pour it myself. Here's how."

He brimmed the glass and poured it down; he handled his liquor like a real Irishman.

"Now I can talk," said Tommy.

"You can till the smoke of that drink rises to your eyes," I told him. "Go on and say it fast."

"I can't say it fast," said Tommy O'Toole. "If I say it all in a lump it'll choke me."

"Is it man, woman, or money that's bothering you?" I asked.

"Why was love ever put in the world to burn the heart out of a man?" said he.

"Have you met a new girl?" I asked.

"Damn the new!" said he.

"What have you bumped into?" said I.

"Schweinstein," said he.

"What stein?" I asked.

"Schweinstein," he repeated.

"Is it the name of a Rhine wine?" said I.

"It's Mary's name," said he. "She's not Mary, either. She's Martha. Martha Schweinstein. That means pig-stone. Martha pig-stone. Martha Schweinstein."

"You can count me out, Tommy," said I. "What are you talking about?"

"She's not his daughter at all!" said he. "O'Riley's old woman adopted her years ago. Got her from a German widower that wanted a new wife that didn't want a step-daughter. Schweinstein was his name. Pig-stone! That's a peach of a name. Oh, jeepers, what a beautiful name!"

I was shocked a little, but I said, "Don't drink any more of that stuff or it'll burn your tongue off."

"My tongue is burned off already saying that name," says he.

"It's not her name any more," I remarked. "Her name is not Martha Schweinstein nor Mary O'Riley, either. It's Mary O'Toole."

"Never mind what her real name is," said he, pouring a third jolt and spilling some of it on the floor.

I looked down at the carpet, waiting to see the color fade, and went on, "Where did you learn all of this? From O'Riley?"

"O'Riley's boiled," said Tommy O'Toole. "He's so boiled that he can't even sing Irish songs any more. He just sits and thinks them and drinks them. O'Riley didn't tell me anything, and Mary didn't tell me anything. She never does say anything, except when I'm tight."

"Does that bother her a lot?" I asked.

"It bothers Martha Schweinstein a hell of a lot," said Tommy. "She doesn't have to smell my breath, either. She can read liquor in my mind a block away. She had a long training in the good old days before the doctors stopped O'Riley from being himself for a while."

TOMMY took another drink. "It's a funny thing, Tim," he said. "Marriage is like a mirror. The front side shows you yourself and everything bright and happy. The back side don't show you a thing. Not a damn thing."

"I've been married fifteen years Tommy," said I. "It just takes time."

"To get married?" said he.

"No, to get used to it," said I. "Who told you about the Schweinstein business?"

"Why," said Tommy, "a big four-legged Swede of a Dutch barber showed up the other day and asked me, was his face familiar?"

Tommy sighed. "I looked back down all the gutters and the speakeasies that I had ever known in my life, but I couldn't spot that fat mug. I said so.

"'I am her brother!' says he.

"'Who is her?' said I.

"'Her—Martha—Mary, I mean,' says he.

"'Whose Mary?' said I.

"'Your Mary—my Mary,' says he. I stood up and grabbed the piano stool.

"'If you're collecting piano stools,' said I, 'you can have this in the face, you wall-eyed piece of cold boiled ham, you!'

"He wasn't upset. No, he just laughed a little. I never saw a finer face to sock with a beer bottle. But there was something

about the blue of his eyes that set me thinking and I called in Mary. I was pretty mad but I controlled myself fine. I just said, 'Do you own any shares in this cabbage soup?' And then she said that it was her brother. That bum acted as though it filled his hand out with aces and he stood up and sort of triumphed over me and laughed a good deal. I never saw such a mug. I asked Mary what she meant by hiding such a knife up her sleeve and she said that she never held back anything when it was asked about. How would I know to ask her about brothers and sisters when she was the only child of O'Riley?

"The mug says he will let me down easy and nobody will have to know that I'd married a Schweinstein if I come across with five grand. I took a good look at him. It was kind of a happy moment to blackmail *me*."

"Did you sock him, you Irish mick?" said I.

"Did I sock him, Tim?" says the kid, looking down thoughtfully at his knuckles. "I took three short, quick steps forward and did a broad jump into his face. I knocked him flat, and put him down twice more in the hall, and then kicked him off the doorstep and listened to him squash on the pavement."

"Names don't bother as much as all that," said I.

The kid got quiet all over; and he looked ahead of him at nothing and seemed to see a lot between him and the wall. It made me feel kind of funny seeing that dynamo shut down for the first time and sit there still and all alone with himself. It was like having all the clocks in the world stop ticking at the same time.

"Now lookit," said I. "You love Martha, all right."

"Yeah. I love her," said Tommy to himself and nobody else.

"It's gunna be all right," I told him.

"Tim, you been a friend to me," said he.

"Yeah, and what have you been to me?" I asked. "If I had to pay back all the money you—"

"Will you quit it?" he asked. I quit it. When Tommy does a favor, he doesn't seem to want it to be remembered. He's that way. After a while he said:

"You ever live with a lie?"

"Everybody has gotta put a good face on bad things now and then," I told him.

"I mean, to *live* with a lie. Most lies you put on and take off like your hat. But when you gotta live inside of a lie like it was inside your skin . . ."

It surprised me. I saw all at once that Tommy had a conscience and a lot of things I'd never suspected. I saw that talking would do no good. I gave him a couple of more drinks and then watched him weave out of the room. At the door he stopped and looked back at me and laughed.

"It'll be pretty good when I get home," says he. "She don't like drinking. How do I look?"

"You look boiled, because you *are* boiled," said I.

"That's right. I wanta be boiled," said Tommy.

"You're just Irish," said I.

He began to laugh and he was still laughing when he got out of the house.

"The Irish gotta have wars," said I to myself.

IT WAS about midnight when my wife woke me up and said the telephone was ringing.

"You're batty," says I. "Jacone's dead and Moro's in the can. The telephone can't be ringing."

"Take the cotton wool out of your brain and listen for yourself, will you?" says she.

The bell was ringing, all right. I hate a telephone bell that rings after dark in a lonely house. I walked down the hall thinking of ghosts and took the receiver off the hook.

"Is this Tim?" says a girl's voice.

"Yes," says I, soft and careful. "Who might this be?"

"This is Mary O'Riley O'Toole," says she. "I wish that you'd come right over." The soft, still voice of her went to my heart.

"I'll come jumping," said I. I got into my clothes in two steps.

"What's the matter?" says my wife.

"Tommy has slugged his wife or something," says I. "I dunno what."

"She couldn't keep him interested," says my wife. "Every angel face is a dummy. Poor Tommy!" Nobody is mean the way women can be.

I hoofed it over to Tommy's place and Mrs. Tommy let me in. There were no bumps on her face. She was in a blue dressing gown that matched her eyes. Back in the apartment, I hear snoring, deep and hearty. "What's the matter?" says I.

She looks up at me, soft and still. "Tommy's drunk," she says, at last.

"That's all right," says I. "It's not the first time, is it?"

"No, but it's the last time," says she. "Perhaps there may be one more time; but that is all." I listened to her voice. I couldn't believe the words any more than I can reach the high notes in *The Star Spangled Banner.*

"I want you to arrest him," says she.

I laughed but not very much. "What would I arrest him for?" I asked her.

"For breaking the law," says she.

"What law?" says I.

"He's drunk," says she. I took a think. After all, it was breaking the law to drink in those days. But—

"Look, Mary," said I. "You're hysterical."

"Perhaps I am," says she, "but I'll be calmer when he's in jail."

"D'you know what you're saying?" said I.

"I think I do," said Mary O'Toole.

"Has he been acting up? Has he been tough?" said I. "Manhandled you, Mary?"

She looked surprised. "No, he didn't try to manhandle me," says she. "Will you arrest him?"

"Listen to me, Martha," said I. "You're talking of a boy that cares about you in a big way."

"I think he does," she answered, as calm as stone, "and that's why I'm going to trouble him in a big way."

"Why, it's a joke," said I. "Nobody ever heard of a wife wanting her husband arrested."

"If I can't get a cop to do it in this precinct," says she, "I'll go get one another place."

I WAS socked between the eyes. I saw that she meant what she said. I began to remember something about still waters running deep and all at once Tommy seemed just a poor little Irish kid all alone in the big world. What could I do? Reason with her?

Well, you can't argue with a person that never lifts his voice. And she never lifted hers. I went and got Tommy waked up which wasn't too easy. He was cooked, all right. By the time I got his shoes on his feet and hat on his head, she met me in the hall, all dressed up. "Are you coming along?" said I.

"Yes," said she, "because I might have to swear to the complaint."

I figured on taking Tommy over to my place till he was sober but that didn't work. and Mary O'Toole rode all the way with me to the station house. Tommy was sober enough to realize what was happening then, and he got pretty violent. But some of the boys managed to get him into a cell. You could hear him blocks away and mostly he was talking about Mary in a way to make your ears burn. But *she* didn't blush. She just stood and listened, very quiet and thoughtful, till I came and took her back home.

I tried to talk on that return trip but I couldn't. There was no way of opening her up and she sat back behind a polite little smile of attention that was harder to break through than tool-proof steel.

Of course Tommy was out in the morning. He came to see me to tell me that what he thought about me was more than he could put into words but he found plenty of words, too. He gave me all the Irish off his tongue and kept drinking my liquor at the same time. The booze softened him, finally, and he said:

"I had to talk to somebody. I can't talk

to Mary. Nobody can talk to her. I tell you, Tim, she's gunna drive me crazy. She looks like water but she's pure white mule."

"Don't get so excited," I said. "Don't be so Irish, Tommy, and you'll get along with her all right. She's a pretty thing."

"Schweinstein!" says he, and then leaves me.

He barged off on a five or six day party and traveled so fast that I could hardly keep track of him. I was on the phone five times a day to keep Tommy out of the can and I began to get worried. Booze is all right and a little party doesn't hurt anybody, now and then, but parties ought not to last more than two days. More than that hurts the eyes.

Well, before Tommy got back to earth a whole lot had happened.

Life's funny like that—have you noticed? Things can roll along as calm as you please for months, even years at a stretch. And then in just a couple of days something can come along, take your life up by the roots, pull it and twist it and tear it to bits.

Speaking of parties, old O'Riley had been boiled ever since the day of the marriage but nobody cared much because he had to die some day and he might as well die happy. But now he steps down town one day and marries his cook, which was as Irish as him, and after he draws up his new will he takes another drink and drops dead, leaving Mary unmentioned and every bean to the widow.

It happened the second day of Tommy's party and I rang up Mary. She didn't sound a bit upset. She talked not about her father but about Tommy and wanted to know where he was.

"He has to go into the country," says she. "He hasn't enough money to entertain New York. And please tell Tommy that I must see him at once. I have someone waiting for him."

Her voice was low and solemn.

"What sort of a one?" I asked.

"Someone who's just come off a boat," said she.

"Important?" I asked.

"She is. To him," said Martha. "You can tell him that for me."

WHEN she rang off, I'm sorry to say that I forgot all about telling Tommy of the person who had just come off a boat and was waiting for him. I was too worried by her talk of getting Tommy away from town and out into the country. Why, Tommy O'Toole was made for our precinct. It fitted him like a glove.

The funeral was the next day. We tried to catch Tommy for it but he'd disappeared in New Jersey. You never can find nothing in New Jersey. It was a kind of a scandal, Tommy not being on deck for the funeral and only Mary there, sitting in black as quiet as a stone.

Well, the funeral was over and still there were three days before Tommy came back. He telephoned to me, and his voice was a surprise because there was nothing on his tongue. He told me to come and come running, so over I went and found him walking around in the empty rooms of his apartment.

When I say empty, I mean that there wasn't even a shade left on a window; there was only a scrap of paper that Tommy waved in one hand while he walked. He read it aloud to me.

DEAREST TOMMY,

I have moved out to Briar Ridge, number eighteen Tompkins Lane. I know that you'll love it here and besides I have a wonderful surprise for you.

Hurry home, darling. Your,

MARY.

Tommy couldn't get over the finish of that letter. He kept repeating it over and over: "'Hurry home, darling!' Schweinstein!" he would add. "'Hurry home, darling!'"

It was a kind of a funny position and I stood around feeling a little empty handed and watching Tommy. He was all bull terrier. I figured nothing but the Irish could take what he'd taken for six whole days and still be able to walk. But he was

sober, now, though a little ashy in the face. He was so mad that all the booze burned out of him.

"I just wanted you over to see it," says he to me. "I wanted you to know, that's all. Now I'm gunna go and get her! I'm gunna hurry home."

"Whacha gunna do, Tommy?" said I.

"Me? I'm gunna hurry home, darling. That's all I'm gunna do."

I said, "Tommy, the gurl is terrible fond of you though she takes a queer way of showing it."

"Sure she's fond of me and I of her, and there's the devil of it," said he.

"What you mean?" I asked. He wasn't making any sense at all.

"Two 'no's' make a 'yes'," said Tommy, "but two lies don't make any part of the truth."

"What are you trying to talk about?" said I.

"Something *she'll* understand," said he. He laughed. It scared me the way he laughed.

I thought how fierce and terrible he looked for a kid so young. But he wasn't a kid any more—and *that* was really the devil of it.

"You look here," said I. "I've got my car downstairs, and I know the road to Briar Ridge like the mustache on my face. I'm gunna drive you out."

He hesitated, looking down at the floor. But then he said, "That's all right, too. You come along, Tim. I want you here to see it because it's gunna be worth seeing."

I was afraid to give him any advice until we were almost out at Briar Ridge and by that time I hoped that the wind would have blown some of the whisky and the Irish out of him; but nothing could cool him off. He was still burning when I said:

"Whatever you do, you wouldn't put a hand on her, would you, Tommy?"

He looked at me and his black eyes turned green in his head. "There's gotta be one master in every house," says he. "In my house, I'm gunna be the man *and* the master. I'm gunna start mastering today. I'm hurrying home, darling."

WHAT could you do? I was scared and there was a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach when we turned off the slick and shine of the boulevard into Tomkins Lane and wound away into the green and the quiet until we came to a little white house with a red roof sticking up among trees.

There was Mary O'Toole's cat sitting on top of the gate post, and off in a little arbor beside the house was Mary sitting in sun and shadow, sewing. She was so doggone sweet to look at that I wondered how Tommy could help forgiving her on the spot. But Tommy was too burned up.

He stepped out of the car and reached the gate, and as the cat stood up and purred and waited to be petted, he fetched a whack at it that would have knocked it twenty feet if his hand hadn't hit the post instead.

The cat went up the side of the house with a screech and stood on top of the chimney with its tail as big as a baseball bat.

And Tommy started on towards Mary, just giving his hat one tug down over his eyes. The blood was leaking from his torn hand. I got sicker and sicker because I saw that I would have to interfere and I knew that I was too old for that kind of a job. But Mary, she lifted up her head and waited for her husband with the softest, kindest smile you ever saw.

Somehow, I had a picture in my brain of how that golden little head would be jerked sidewise and the eyes turn glassy when Tommy rapped her with his fist. I kind of fell out of the car and started after him. I saw I would be too late.

I was through the gate when the front door of the house opened, and there in the doorway stood a big barrrel-shaped woman with a swarthy skin, and a black shawl over her head. Tommy did not go past her. He just stood there.

She held out her hands to Tommy O'Toole and cried out, "Oh, Tomaso! *Dio buono, Dio santo! Oh, 'Maso mio—caro Tomaso!*"

What does Tommy do? Why, the hat

is lifted right off his head by his hair raising and all at once *he* throws out his arms, and cries, "Mama!" and then they clinch.

I was pretty weak, but I got back to the car, and felt my way into it, and started away; and when I looked back, I could see the pair of Eyetalians still huggings each other, and kind of weaving back and forth. And the last thing that I saw was the quiet little smile on the face of Martha Schweinstein. She was not watching the scene; she had started her sewing again.

There was trust in that smile—and a deep confidence, not in herself and not in him but in what the two of them, together, added up to. Something grabbed me tight by the throat and shook all the breath out of me.

*

"Which is why I got a stand-in with Tommy, still," said Tim Flannery. "If he gets tough I ask him what his real name is and it gets him kind of confused. So I don't pay for baseball games and prizefights any more. But I don't see him much. Nobody does. He's only out on Friday nights."

"If he was just over from Italy," said I, "how did he speak English so well at the start?"

"Oh, he'd been in San Francisco for ten years with his father," said Flannery, "till it seemed to him that the Irish had the inside track in the land and he decided to make a little change after his old man died."

"You never found out his real name?" I asked.

"Sure. I got him a little warm with Irish whisky one night and asked him why he was so terrible burned up when he found out the real name of his wife and he says quietly:

" 'Suppose you think you're hitched to a nice little name like O'Riley and all at once find your blood all clogged up with a Martha Schweinstein when you know that your own real name is Tomaso Angelino Lucchesino. Isn't that sort of like drawing to a pair of deuces?' "

"But little Martha still runs the roost, I guess," said I. "That's why Tommy is on the upgrade, now?"

"The roost is run from the back seat of that car, brother," said Flannery, "and don't you forget it. The reason that Tommy O'Toole is climbing right up is because he's just the right kind of Irish."

"Wait a minute!" said I. "You told me that he was an—"

"No matter what I told you," said Flannery. "And no matter what you call a diamond, you can tell the real thing by the way it shines."

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Mile A Minute

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "All Noisy on the Spanish Front," "Red-Headed Dancing Girl," etc.

Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand?
Come, let me clutch thee—I have thee not, yet I see thee still!

BAIRD'S heart went *slump!*

The station master, coming out of the dispatch office, had a stranger in tow. Their boots clumped across the platform; they passed under the big white arc lamp, waving off bugs. They were coming up the cinder embankment towards his engine. Their boots fell in step; went *crunch, crunch, crunch* on the cinders. Baird pulled back his head from the cab window, tensed back in shadow, hoping they wouldn't notice him. His chest felt constricted and his fingertips, as they always did at meeting a stranger, had numbed. He could hear their voices in low-pitched conversation. Talking about him? Nonsense, they were only looking at the engine, going right by the cab—

"Señor Baird!"

He screwed about with a quick start. The station master had his elbow on the brass handrail below, one foot on the cab step as if preparing to mount. The face, a polychrome amalgam of Spanish, pirate and Carib Indian, looked expressionlessly up at Baird.

Baird said bluffly, "Yes?"

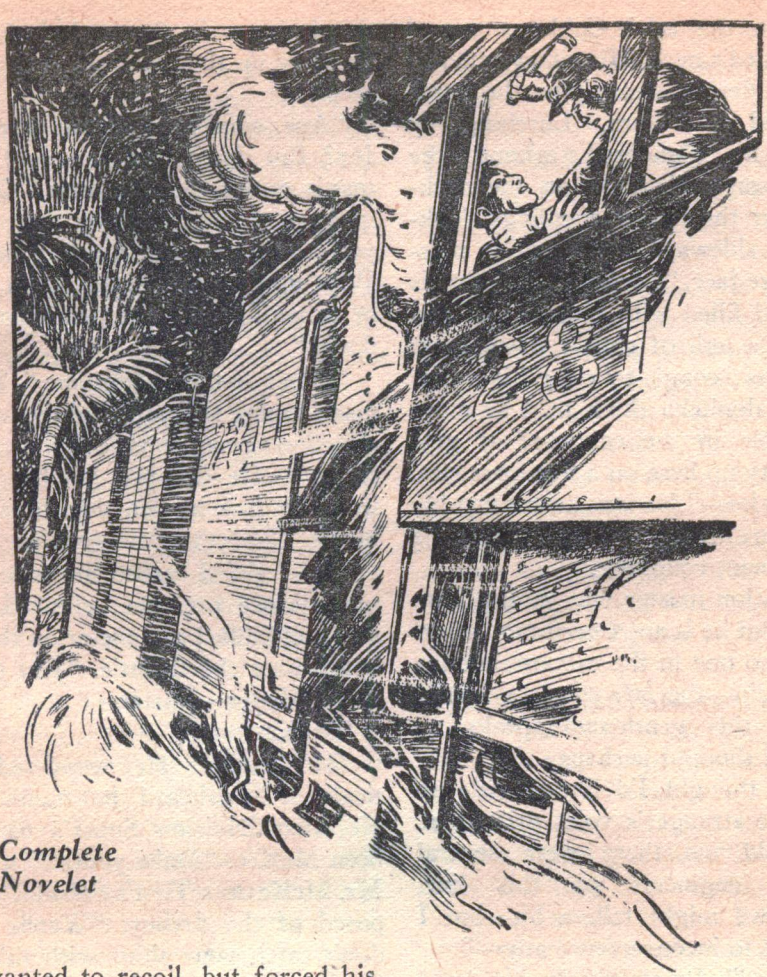
"There is a gentleman here, Señor Baird. Introduced by the Administrator of the Fruit Company. This is Mistair Msn—" Baird didn't catch the slurred name. "He is going to Sierra Posada."

Baird hitched on the narrow seat and looked down from the window, instinctively keeping his face shadowed. The stranger stood back a little, partly in darkness, his knees splashed by spots of scarlet light from the vent-holes in the locomotive's firebox, waist shadowy, but shoulders and head luminously silvered in a sluice of clear white moonlight that beat down through a breach in the palm-tops lofted over that side of the track.

Baird had an impression of khaki drill and laced field boots, erect height and trim shoulders, a lean firm-jawed face under a peaked wide-brimmed hat that had a loose chin-cord. New to the tropics, but the look of a man who had been around. At his boots slouched a small, worn traveling bag. Baird's mind was going like a threaded Victrola record, "What's he want here, what's he want here?" He checked that impatiently. Couldn't a white man ever turn up without his heart chugging like a water pump?

Baird said in a bored tone, "Pleaseta-meetcha."

"Thanks." The voice was flat, conveying no remarkable expression. The man stepped up the cinder bank. With a start Baird saw the web pistol belt, the holstered .45 that sat the man's shank with a casualness that made it familiar there. He was telling himself that every newcomer in this country carried a gun, when he had another inward shock. The man's eyes. Direct eyes. Cold blue. Not glinting or even inquiring, but leveled up at Baird's face with an impersonal quality of observation that made him feel as if he were being photographed.



Complete Novelet

He wanted to recoil, but forced his elbows to remain on the sill, and bent his attention to wrenching on a pair of gauntlets. He had to say something; he asked: "Down from the States?"

"Made port here this afternoon. Down from New York."

Baird said, "Yeh?" and withdrew his shoulders from the window, fumbled around in frantic unhaste, and found and put on his goggles. His mind was racing. "Down from New York . . . he's down from New York!" Then he slowed his thoughts deliberately with, "Well, what the devil, there's hundreds come down from New York!" and told himself he was a fool. He made a business of inspecting a water gauge beyond the air-brake lever, turning his back on the window, and keeping it there. Good Lord, after twelve years . . .

"Señor Baird!"

It was that damned station master again. Why the devil didn't they go away? Baird answered without looking around, "Well?"

"The gentleman, here, he has a pass for this train, Señor Baird. He has expressed a desire to ride with you in the Santa Lucia's cab."

Ride in the cab? Coldness passed across Baird's neck. His elbow reflexed against a fizzing steam pipe; he hardly noticed the burn. Lurching up heavily, he blundered around the driver's seat and stood on the deck-plates over the tender couplings, looking down sideways at the station master's bronze face. "Look here . . ." but his throat had filled with phlegm; he had to snatch a pull of cotton waste from the toolbox; cough to clear his voice. "I mean, don'tcha think he'd be more comfortable in the caboose? It gets plenty dirty up here on a five-hour run, an' maybe he—" He was aware that his words were rising arpeggio, and he stopped them, coughing.

The station master was saying, surprised: "But he is an *Americano, señor.* There is no one in the caboose but the train captain—the *jefe* speaks no English, and this gentleman speaks no Spanish. I thought perhaps . . ."

"I just thought I'd like to ride up front," the stranger's voice drifted in. "They told me there were several American engineers on this line. Thought we might talk a bit—but I don't want to inconvenience any—"

"No, no!" Baird shook his head quickly. This tack wouldn't do. He'd taken riders before; if he gave this bird the idea he didn't want him up here . . . "No inconvenience at all! I like company. Glad to have a chance to talk with a white man for a change. Come in the cab any time you want. Sabado!" He flung around, leaned from the left handrail. "Sabado, where are you? Dammit, every time I want that fireboy—! Sabado, come here!"

HE WAS shouting too loudly; loudly and unnecessarily. A lank Hondurian Negro, whose bare torso and chocolate head had seemed part of the darkness in the tender's lee, came limberly up the handrail, eyes obsequious.

"Ape, what're ya stallin' down there for? Put down that hammer! Gentleman's gonna ride up here! Clear th' garbage off that seat over there—I told you to keep your lunch offa there! Wipe up that grease, an' find a cushion or something for the gentleman to sit down."

"Don't bother about me." The tall man swung aboard lightly with an effortlessness of muscle that rivaled the stoker's. He dropped his bag on the iron cab-deck at one side, brushed his hands. "I won't get in your way."

"No." Baird turned his back on the man's close presence; climbed to his seat and fiddled at a meter on the dashboard over the throttle. "Just sit over there, Mister—Mister—"

"McKesson."

"McKesson." He wondered frantically if he'd heard that name before. No, that Division Super's name had been McKee. "Make yourself to home, Mr. McKesson. That's Sabado," he disposed of the fireboy. "Watch out he don't catch your shins with th' scoop. 'Bout ready to go, now. Don't grab hold one of those steam pipes. Gonna stay long down here?" (Lord, couldn't he keep his blab still?) "Well," (as if he wasn't interested in an answer to his question) "well, Central America is all right when you get used to it. Me, I'm down here for my health. Okay," he put his head out of the window hastily, grateful to escape the other's steady eyes which had aimed at him through the soot-gloom across the cab. "Here we go. . . ."

The train captain's lantern, dipping and writing white circles in the moonlight far down the shadowy line of boxcars. *"Adios!"* from the station master.

Baird caught and worked the bell rope with his left hand, tugging the throttle bar with his right. Gently. Notch by notch. Feeling the pull of the drivers. Easing her out with the one genius he had. They had said of Baird that when he was sober he could start a two-five-ton on tracks made of polished ice, and get her up a double-header grade without a grain of sand for the flanges or the exhaust skipping a beat. Baird's heart might skip, not the engine's.

The flooring fluttered gently over the siding switches; the switch-lights drifting by like clustered jewels. The drivers picked up speed. At thirty on the dim-lit speed dial, the stack, glimpsed through the narrow forward window, was breathing rhythmic gusts of pale orange, and the old Baldwin was running like a sewing machine. Forty, and she took on an easy sway. The terminal sidings were gone; the sugar warehouses, copra sheds, Taca Airport field and outlying shanties of the town were astern. The track was a roadway of quicksilver, straight and far-stretched as taut ribbon in the moon-bright, ten miles without a curve across the coastal plane, dwindling far ahead between banks of cocoanut jungle at the foot of mountains blue with night. Baird hit the straightaway at fifty, a shining wind of moonlight keening in his face. All green ahead . . .

"Say, you're a real hogger!"

Baird almost sprang up off the seat. Had to fuss with his goggles. Give his features time to loosen up before he turned them to the source of that comment, a danger he'd almost forgotten in that moment of relaxation while his attention had been centered on the throttle.

"What's that?" he shouted above noise. "What's that you say?"

The man across the cab called back, "You took this boiler out of town like she was streamlined. I say, you're a real hogger."

HOGGER! Nausea flowed under tightness on Baird's scalp. Then this guy was— He gulped, "You a railroad man?"

The man settled back on the vibrating seat, making his shoulders comfortable, stretching out one booted leg, tugging the weighty holster around on his belt to rest the gun in his lap. "I been around 'em some."

Clamminess oozed on Baird's forehead. He knew the other's eyes were on his face; his own were fixed as if fascinated on that gun. The man saw where his gaze had focused. He patted the holster apologetically, then let his hand rest on it.

"Just brought it in case," he called over. "Dumb to wear it, I suppose. They told me there'd been some bandits up near Sierra Posada."

Jerking his attention back to the throttle, Baird got out, "A few guerrillas. But they don't bother the Fruit Company much. Sierra Posada . . . wha—what'd you say you were going there for, Mr. McKesson?"

"Business," the answer came flatly. Baird could feel those eyes watching his profile, and his spirit shrank within him like something curling up tightly in a shell. McKesson was going on: "Speaking of business, you sure know yours! Where'd you learn to pull a train like this?"

"I—" Baird swallowed; rummaged his memory desperately. "Louisville-Nashville. Hadda quit. Too much strain. Came down here."

"You don't," the flat voice observed, "sound like a Southerner."

Baird panted, "I was born in the North," and could have cried out in re-

lief when Sabado's rubbery black shoulders pushed past him.

The fireboy blinked at a steam gauge, retreated to the tender's bunker and began a great clang and clamor, heaving coal. There was the *shuff* and *woosh* of the scoop as it dug and threw, the Negro's labored grunting, the *whang* of the butterfly doors. Bareheeled, the black boy stood on the hot floorplates, working the foot lever to spring the doors, oblivious to scattering cinders and glowing sparks of coal. As the doors burst open a cinnamon flush suffused the cab's interior. Tatters of gold flame flicked around the Negro's impervious shins. There was a gush of hot smells—steaming grease, cinders, coal dust, human sweat, carbon gas, incineration. Briefly immersed in outpours of violent light, Sabado was seen as some acolyte tending the grates of Avernus.

Baird had a chance to lower his capbrim over his goggles, slow his breathing and blow for a stray family of mules visible down the track a mile ahead. *Whoo — whoooo — whooooooeeee—!* He saw the little animals scampering, but his anxiety was centered inward. Were those eyes across the cab still observing him? Sabado had closed the firedoors, melted back into darkness. There was only the running percussion of drive-wheels, then—

"Man like you," the voice across the dimness was conversational, "ought to be hauling the Twentieth on the Central."

Baird almost whinneyed. "Yeh?"

"I once knew an engineman on the Central," the flat voice went on. Baird knew the man over there had leaned toward him. "Don't suppose you ever heard of him, but he was pretty well known around. Name of Roberts. Adam Roberts."

Those unswerving eyes were steadied at his face, and cold muscles pinched under Baird's scalp, and the windpipe seemed to close in his neck. He shut his eyes, and his gloved fingers gripped and froze on the throttle. Adam Roberts!

II

HE COULD see that face as clearly as if he were looking through his paralyzed lids and it had formed in the hot dusk in front of him. Square it was, and blunt-jawed, with square ears and a hard square nose; hair that curled out from under the capbrim like a fringe of steel shavings on the square-hewn forehead. A face cut from a block of sandstone, weathered shiny by the gales from years at an open cab window. Eyes that disdained goggles even on a night of blizzard. Eyeballs small-pupiled, penetrant, in anger like points of electricity.

Adam Roberts! He could see it as if it were yesterday, the countenance lofted above him and looking down, himself in lurching dimness on a cab deck below. "You're drunk!" the square mouth was shouting. Snow whipped through a tilting window and spun in brisk white petals around the square red ears. "You been sneaking pulls from a bottle ever since we left Syracuse, and I'll have to report you, Larry, so help me."

"Report me?" In memory his own voice was clear, shrilly distinct above the thresh and clang of rushing tons of iron, the whoop of icy wind. *"You—report me?"*

"I warned you to lay off drinkin' on my run. Minute you come aboard, I told you, I'd be skipper and you'd be fireboy. You know the rules."

"Well, by—*by—!*" He had flung down his scoop and swayed there, glar-

ing. He could stretch his neck and face-up into those flinty eyes any old time. "You report *me!* So *that's* the kinduva guy—! A man can't take a little nip on a night like this without you playin' Boy Scout . . . Gonna report!"

"You can't do this, Larry. You was busted from engineman to fireboy because you wouldn't stay off the stuff. You'd be runnin' a hog yet if you'd quit the gin. Now you're at it again. You ain't kept up my steam for the last half hour. I'm drivin' this train, and I got my own reputation to—"

"So that's how it is. You're hogger and I'm just a lousy tallow pot now. I'm beginnin' to see. They told me at th' boardin' house you was probably the one who snitched on me for—"

"Larry, you know that's not true!"

"Yeah? Yeah? You didn't see me get the works because you wanted to make a bigger play in front of Ann, maybe? Sure. I see it now! You figger if I'm kicked down to fireboy you'll make time with Ann Reilly—"

"Larry, you're drunk!"

"We'li see who makes the grade with Annie, you—"

"Keep her name outa this!"

"I'm still th' best damn' engineman on this road even if you did get me busted so's you could get your dirty paws on Ann Reilly—"

"Shut up!" In the square sandy face the eyes were striking blue sparks now. "Get on that scoop, you drunken fool! I'm runnin' this hog, and you're firing, and as long as that's the way it is, you'll keep up steam same as any other fireboy! Get back where you belong!" The square face turned abruptly then, jammed out of the blizzard-swept window, voice roaring, *"Cautionary board!"*

It was the fireboy's job to swing from the opposite window and check the signal; but that night he saw no yellow beacon in the swirl ahead, saw only a mist of fury that surged across his eyeballs and flung him at the driver's seat, fist unleashing a blow that cracked like a gunshot against that sandy cheekbone and left a red gash. "Tell *me* to get back where I belong—!"

It is a mistake to hit a man who has been your best friend. But to strike an engineman on duty at the throttle—to hit Adam Roberts—!

The eyes flashed around once. "You scum! Hit a man while he's driving a run of sleepers! I'll turn you in at division point for this, and you'll not only be through, but when we touch the ground I'll beat the daylights outa you!"

THEN it had happened, and for twelve hounded years Baird hadn't quite been able to remember how. How he piled in beating fury on that broad square back. How the man struck sideways with an elbow that tore the flesh from his ribs and sent him sprawling backwards into the coal bunker. How, in maddened rage, he rebounded screaming. How the knife got into his hand . . .

A clasp-knife he had picked up in a pawnshop the week before because it had his initials on the handle.

The spring-blade clicked.

He buried the steel in that broad square back just above the waist. He saw the sandy face jerk sideways, teeth clenched between spread lips. He saw the left arm cock up at the elbow, the fingers of that hand spread fanwise. And he saw the head sink down in the window's snow-whirl; heard the agonized, "Aaaaaah!"

Instantly he could hear himself screaming, "I didn't mean it, Adam!

I swear I didn't mean it!" He was fighting to yank out the knife, but his fingers had lost all power to grip, and the handle was wet, slippery. The body on the driver's seat lopped and swayed, and there was a flare of scarlet light through the white-framed window, and a sudden banging of torpedoes. He froze aghast at a second rush of scarlet across his eyes, and then—

He could remember the impact, the violence of sound, tons of iron smashing through a hill of kindling wood, spinning fragments of metal, an explosion under his shoes, a sensation of flying, landing *shock!* in a bank of white.

The drift saved him, brought him to instant consciousness. He pawed up out of snow and stared in terror at Number 11, gigantic on her side amidst the wreckage of a caboose and strewn gondola cars, a panting iron mammoth sprawled in death agony, her injured plates sweating, bellowing clouds of red steam. Curving back down the track, a line of Pullmans tilted in the snow. In the night a mounting pandemonium of shrieks, catcalls, wails, sounds of bubbling water and glass smashing, somewhere an injured animal screaming and screaming . . .

He put his hands to his ears and shouted, "Stop it! Stop it!" at the screaming; and a crazy figure formed in the white flurry before him, hands grasping him by the collar of his jumper. The man shook him, yelled at him. "Murdered us, you hear? That's what he done! Run right through the signals! That engineer murdered us!"

Murder! Engineer! He saw that the figure clutching him was a freight conductor; but he saw more than that. He saw a wrecking crew on the way, and he saw what would happen when they found that body in the cab with a knife pinned in its spine. Engineer murdered. Hundreds killed. Fireman's initials . . .

"Roberts!" the cry burst from him as he struck the babbling freight conductor away, turned and sprang into a jungle of shattered timbers and twisted iron, head down into a fog of scalding steam. He must get to Roberts! He must get to Roberts before the others reached him and found that initialed knife!

Somehow he did it. Fought his way through the wreckage, crawled up a hill of wet coal, worked into the hissing smother and faced a sudden blinding glare. Somehow he wormed his way into the cab and around the firebox to the body jammed on the driver's seat. Then Adam Roberts wouldn't budge. Adam was pinned down by something more than a knife. Adam's hand gripped the throttle and refused to let go. It was because of that stubborn hand that he could never clearly remember about the knife.

He couldn't remember about the knife because he had to fight Adam tooth and nail to tear him loose from the throttle. Sometimes it seemed to him as if he *did* get the knife. Wrenched it free and flung it out into the snow. Or did he fling it into the firebox? Or drop it while he struggled in torment? Did it go with Adam into—

The firebox! He was crazy by that time, of course. Crazy from pain, the steam. You can't hold a man responsible for something he does in a torture of live steam, can you? The butterfly doors had jammed open. The white-hot blazing hole, the roaring grates, the molten glare had blinded his senses. Adam was dead. It wouldn't matter to Adam. What mattered was that the police must never find— He had pushed the body . . .

"ANYTHING the matter?" a hard flat voice penetrated the roaring in Baird's brain. He felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder; turned with a mewing sound. He saw a stooped khaki figure swaying over him, squinting down. They were in the cab of the Santa Lucia; sixty miles an hour through moonshine; booming past jungle toward a ridge of purple cliffs . . .

"Anything wrong, Mr. Baird? I asked you if you ever knew a man named Roberts, an' for the past three minutes— Are you sick?"

"Fuh-fever," Baird trembled out. "Kind of gets you for a second. Spells. I been in the tropics twel—fifteen years. Can't hear very well sometimes—from the quinine . . ."

"You went kind of white . . ." the man called down.

"No—yes—it's nothing." He could breathe now that the hand was gone from his shoulder. He was aware that the man had swung back to his seat. He stiffened his features with an effort and kept his goggles on the forward window, watching the racing rays of the headlight slice the night on a curve. "Nothing at all," he shouted sideways. "And you was askin' me . . .? Roberts? No! No, I never knew nobody by that name!"

"Maybe there was another you might know, then," the flat voice called across. "Same line. Once a crack engineer. Name of Sheard. Larry Sheard . . ."

A band of tension that had gripped Baird's chest tightened with one savage squeeze that collapsed his heart and lungs together and forced the words from his mouth in a gushing blurt. "No! No, I didn't! I never knew anybody named Larry Sheard!"

"It's kind of like Baird," the flattened voice reached his ears. "I just wondered if maybe you'd heard it. There's a number of Americans down here. I'm goin' to Sierra Posada to try and find this Larry Sheard."

IT HAD come, then! He had known that sooner or later they'd catch up with him. Every waking minute of twelve years in exile he had been hounded by a certainty of pursuit, shying from any unfamiliar face, sickening in alarm at any step behind him. Night after night he'd sprawled twisting and sleepless through the haunted black hours, wondering if tomorrow . . .

It was here! He had known they'd come, yet all the time, ostrich-like, he'd congratulated himself on his escape. Pretended he'd made a getaway. That long-ago night in the hospital, his arms in bandages, it had been easy enough to keep his eyes closed and mumble incoherencies to all questioning. Dimly he could recall the nurses, the reporters, the railroad men, the police; a doctor saying, "He's only semiconscious; he ought to be left alone until morning." Escape then had been only a matter of feigning unconsciousness and later dropping from a window. Somehow he'd reached New York, a ship. New Orleans. Mexico. Central America. But he'd known . . .

Even when terror had stayed him from ever buying a newspaper, sent him slinking with averted face past any headline for fear of seeing his handiwork, he'd known. The headlines had been in his mind:

WRECKING CREW FINDS BLOODY KNIFE — INITIALS ON HANDLE— POLICE KNOW ENGINEER MURDERED — FIREMAN RESPONSIBLE FOR DEATH OF MANY—

—headlines as clearly printed on the under side of his eyelids as was the in-

delible face of Adam Roberts. He had known that knife would send them, and he had laughed it off, drunk it off, told himself that after twelve years he was safe. *Now it had come!*

Baird felt as if his lungs were bursting. Eyes across the cab were on his face. He twisted about on his seat like a man in the grasp of some invisible jiujitsu; he thrust his head from the window and heard himself shout, *"Verde!"* with some part of him still pretending to be somebody else. Color-blinded by panic, he saw only a blur where the signal tower stood, but Sabado echoed his cry with a shrill, *"Verde!"* and the board was green, and the lime-white roof of a station was coming into view.

Somehow he was slowing speed. Somehow telegraph poles were passing lazily, wheels crackling over siding switches, a water tower looming. There were thatch-roofed huts, a sign: *Nuevo Leon.* Sabado worked the bell. They came *dong-dong-dong* alongside a platform in dusty moonlight. He had a glimpse of stunted brown men leaning on Winchester rifles; sombreros and Stetsons crowding forward; Indians waving machetes; shouts and weak-glowing hand lanterns; the station master waiting, sheaf of blanks in one fist, banana in the other.

Baird's hand, when he took it from the brake lever, was shaking uncontrollably. He thought: "He'll take me now. He's probably pointing that gun at me right now. He telegraphed ahead for all these soldiers. . . ."

But the rider on the opposite seat had only shifted his position to lean his shoulders from the left side window and look out. The Santa Lucia was panting like a mastodon after a thirty-mile run, sweat steaming from her iron vents in tinted plumes. Sabado was down somewhere, tapping the journal boxes. Under Baird's window the station master was skinning a banana, then looking up at him with stuffed cheeks, gesturing the bitten banana-stub, shouting.

Something about a bandit raid in the mountains. Trouble that might become a revolution. Soldiers on guard here. Then, in rapid Spanish:

"You have on board an *Americano,* a Señor McKesson?"

Baird switched his goggle-masked eyes in new fright, but the man leaning from the opposite window had apparently not heard this, and Baird recalled in relief that his companion understood no Spanish.

"There is a message," the station master was gesticulating. "It was telephoned but a moment ago from the Fruit Company office on the coast. The Administrator says he has no information concerning the man the *señor* is seeking. He is sorry he cannot help him. You will communicate these words to Señor McKesson?"

DUMBLY Baird nodded, conscious of expansion in his throbbing heart muscles, a lessening of the constriction in his lungs. Through a blur he saw the station master consulting his watch; caught a wave from a flagman; craned out to see the train captain's distant signal. He bellowed, *"Al coche!"* at the shadowy Sabado; yanked the bell cord; nudged the throttle. As the drivers turned ponderously and the platform marked *Nuevo Leon* drifted astern, Baird was breathing like a swimmer taking oxygen after a long deep dive.

He was thinking, "The man doesn't know me! The man doesn't know me!" in an upsurge of relief that giddied his head like a jolt of alcohol. He could

have shouted when Nuevo Leon was gone. Sabado stood at his elbow, squinting at gauges: he could have pounded the black boy on the back. Wind struck his face like an aromatic wine; numbness left his fingers. He could feel the drivers settling into their steady gallop; at forty-five on a long smooth curve, he could summon enough courage to turn his head for a quick look across the cab.

Stretched in negligent pose, McKesson was lighting a cigarette. His eyes glanced over the match-fire, sensing Baird's scrutiny. "Interesting jungle around here," he called. "We hit mountains from now on, eh?"

Baird nodded, quickly shifting his attention to the throttle. He answered across his shoulder, "Yes, an' that station master back there—all that talk of his—was tellin' me there'd been some bandit raids."

"What time," McKesson lifted his voice above the clamor of Sabado's stoking, "what time we due in Sierra Posada?"

"Three hours," Baird gave back. "Little after midnight." He waited to give his question a casual tone. There was the hollow thunder of a trestle; then: "This man you're lookin' for—what'd you say his name—?"

"He might be goin' down here under another name."

Again Baird's forehead went cold. "Friend of yours?"

"Never saw him," the flat voice returned. "Got some description, but not much. Real name: Leonard Sheard. He'd look a lot younger, say, than you,"—Baird could feel those eyes like cold lights on his face—"an' heavier build. About forty-six now, an' when last seen wore a reddish mustache and brown hair parted on one side. Ever run across anyone that description?"

Baird pretended to think, pushing back his cap from his forehead to let the wind ruffle his white hair. Huskily he shouted, "Never seen such a guy, but there's lots of Americans drift around here. Come an' go."

His tongue had thickened and his throat was coated with dust. He yanked the whistle cord to stall for time—*whoooo—whoooo—whooeeee—!* The old hog leaned on a downgrade curve, near cliffs throwing back the echo of pounding wheels. Cocoanut jungle, close-packed along the right of way, streamed by in rushing green walls, fronds switching the cab windows. Baird let the whistle die, shouted harshly, "You expect to find this guy in Sierra Posada?"

McKesson flipped a hand. "Got to find him. Superintendent says go down there an' find this Sheard an' don't come back till you do. Hell of a time locatin' him this far; orders are fetch him back. Reward up for him, see?"

Baird saw! Reward! Sweat rushed down his cheekbones like melted grease; he was making little strangly sounds in his throat which McKesson couldn't hear. McKesson was lighting another cigarette, blowing smoke.

"Ten grand," he called over at Baird. "There ain't a railroad detective made who wouldn't stick on a trail for that. Seems this Sheard pulled a fadeaway; beat it from a hospital twelve years ago—after a hell of a wreck. They want him back." McKesson leaned idly, hands clasped behind head, hatbrim tilted down his nose, cigarette drooped.

He yawned. "I'll get him all right. There's a party in Sierra Posada wrote us they was almost certain they knew the guy. I'll have more to go on soon as I reach Sierra Posada."

The cab jounced, swayed, dinned. Sabado was clanging the firedoors. A

hot brilliance fevered the swinging gloom. Sabado was chanting as he stoked—*"Yo no tengo mama—Yo no tengo papa—Pobrecito me . . ."* plaintively, and the flare was incandescent gold on his black Congo face.

The flare was red on Baird's goggles. "I've got to kill him," Baird was thinking. "The man doesn't know, and I've got to kill him before he finds out." His goggles glowed crimson, catching refracted fire from the butterfly doors.

Suddenly he knew how McKesson would never reach Sierra Posada.

III

IT was singular how, in that scorching flame-burst from the firedoors, he saw the whole plan at once, as if for a long time it had been stored in his mind against this very contingency. Instrument, operation, alibi—the device of removing Sabado, and the excuse already established; the way-stop in the jungle, perfectly situated; the hammer, Sabado's hammer, in the toolbox; the strategem of the broad-brimmed hat, traveling bag, gun; the story those articles would tell for him, and the story he'd tell himself; the disposal of the body—all disclosed in that moment's fiery revelation.

There it was, ready to use—as neatly as if someone, in his back-to-the-wall extremity, had suddenly put a weapon in his hand. It filled Baird's mouth with a taste of brass and set his heart to pounding like the drivewheels walloping downgrade. This railroad policeman would never collect that reward; never reach Sierra Posada to check someone's chance suspicion. Baird saw his way out now, and his whole being crouched and steeled, like a tiger discovering a loose paling in a trap. Desperation had re-armed him. He could even dare a look across the cab, and his blood throbbed afresh when he saw McKesson nodding, half asleep.

Dimly seen, the man's relaxed frame joggled and swung with the cab's rocky motion. His arms were loosely folded, chin touching chest and hatbrim over eyes; slumped drowsily, and the gun slid crosswise in his lap. Even so, he was a hard, lean, compact looking man; Baird had to pull a steadying breath and summon all his resolution. He could make no slip in this, and he'd have to work fast. Facing forward, he saw a kilometer post picked out of darkness by the racing sweep of the headlight—*8 Kilo*—not far to that little way-station ahead, and no time to lose.

Because those eyes might be covertly watching instead of asleep, Baird began with all the preliminary ceremony of an act. Timing, pace—he knew the movements of this plan as if he had rehearsed it a thousand times. He even found a second to marvel at his deliberation. He called, "Sabado!"

The fireboy's shadow came forward out of shadow. *"Señor!"*

"Go," Baird shouted in his ear, "to the caboose. This damned fever—I got a chill comin' on. Go back to th' caboose an' fetch the quinine that's in my locker—I forgot to bring it with me. *Quinine*, savvy?"

"All the way back to the caboose?" The Negro rolled his eyes.

"Tell the train captain I ordered you!" ("Yes," Sabado would say afterwoods, "he sent me back for quinine because he was sick. He had been sick at the start. The *pasajero* in the cab had remarked how sick he looked . . .") Baird shouted, "And be quick about it."

Sabado would find no quinine, because the quinine was then in Baird's

pocket, and he would not be quick about it because it was forty cars back to the caboose and in that fiery revelation Baird had seen how forty cars, there and back, would take forty minutes at least.

"Hurry!" he urged. "I need that quinine bad."

"But the fire, *señor*—"

"Never mind. *I'll* tend the fire!"

It was, Baird reflected, like taking candy from a baby. He watched Sabado scramble aft and over the tank; waited until the black boy's flattened body had disappeared on the deck of the third boxcar down the line. Then, ignoring his companion in the cab, he watched the track. Every inch of these rails he knew, every foot of cinder-bed, every creosote tie. Twelve years hauling this midnight freight had mapped each landmark on his brain with the etching-acid of monotony; he knew the kilometer post where he must start slowing speed, just where to apply gentle pressure on the brakes, just how to slow to a stop, pull away and go highballing before the train captain back in the caboose woke up and wanted to know what it was all about.

Tomorrow he would be telling the authorities: "McKesson decided to get off. He'd had a phone message at Nuevo Leon—I relayed it to him—sayin' the Administrator couldn't give no information about some man he wanted to meet. So he figgered it was no use goin' on to Sierra Posada, I guess. He asked me if there was a train back to the coast, and I told him about the two A.M. banana local. It was a long wait in that way-station, I told him, but he said he didn't mind. . . ."

SOMETHING like a chuckle oiled Baird's throat. They'd spend a long time looking for McKesson around this mountain wilderness. A mighty long time. And time was what he needed; time to clear out before these Spig authorities got suspicious; time to catch a banana boat going deep south. A lesser man than he would have muffed it on that score, simply shot this bird while he slept and dumped the body off. Baird wanted time; and it would take a lot of that in the tropics to find a body that had disappeared.

His eyes caught first glimpse of the way-station, a lonely thatch-roofed platform far down the track. Blue mountains and moony jungle loomed around. Already his hand was on the throttle, lessening the speed. Brakes sighed and caught hold, and they were wheezing toward the stop.

McKesson nodded awake. "Where are we?"

His eyes looked up at Baird; saw the hammer in Baird's tense-knuckled fist; glowed white in quick alarm. Baird brought the hammer down smashing on the man's unprotected forehead, whack!

There was no outcry. The lean, hard body in khaki slouched down as if its spine had been cut, arms and legs sprawling limp as death. Baird struck him again, wiped the hammer on McKesson's sleeve, tossed the hammer into the toolbox, leaned out and saw the station-hut distant by only a hundred yards. As he had known it would be at this hour, the lonely platform was deserted. He was amazed by his own calmness as he snatched off his victim's spattered hat, stripped him of gun-belt and holster, stooped to grab up the little brown traveling bag.

As the platform came alongside, he threw. He saw the bag burst against a wooden bench, spilling a jumble of undershirts, socks, shaving tools. The hat sailed nicely into underbrush; the

gun skidded off into shadow. By morning some vagrant Indian would have found and run off with the gun. "Bandits," Baird had it planned, word for word. "They musta got him all right. I warned him about gettin' off there in the jungle alone. . . ."

He dealt McKesson's body a contemptuous glance and then was at the throttle with a leap, tugging the bar, jamming her full speed ahead with a jolt that sent a volley of explosive yanks down the line of couplings. 40—45—50—52 on the speed dial. The cab bounced and rocked, and the landscape went by, streaky. Baird watched the steam indicator, twisting a knob to open the flues. A rhythmic roaring answered from the firebox, and the exhaust boomed. Flat ribbons of smoke streamed from the stack, tore into gauzy shreds that whistled past the tilting windows.

There was the lean and plunge of an S-curve, the thundering whoop of a straightaway, and then Baird was stooped at the firebox, scoop in hand. They were hitting sixty now; Sabado would be hanging to a brake-wheel somewhere, fearful to let go; there was plenty of time. He began to shovel savagely, methodically, feeding the furnace mouth with coal. Flues open, the firebox was ravenous. He spread it thin in even-scattering throws, waiting for each black scoopful to melt, grinning at the fire's hungry shout, marking with satisfaction the mounting blast of the grids. The cab heated like an oven. Sweat stung his eyes. He turned to the bunkers for a final scoop; wheeled around in fire-roar.

The shovel fell as if struck from his fingers.

McKesson was standing upright in the cab. Clinging to the window frame, knees wobbling, fighting to balance against the pitch and roll—McKesson with his hand pressed bloodily to his temple, his face livid with bright red stripes, teeth clenched, eyes wide and fixing Baird with the stare of a painted voodo skull.

"Hit me, will you?" he screamed at Baird. "Smack me with a hammer, will you? You crazy maniac, I'll—" His voice was lost in the helling slam-bang of a curve, and he sprang.

BAIRD screamed, "He's alive!" then the man was on him like fury powered by dynamite, smashing him back into the coal bunker, beating him down with fists that seemed to drive spikes through his head at each blow. Clawing, kicking wildly, Baird strove to fight off that red-scribbled face, to escape the man's implacable ferocity. Terror broke his atrophy. In a ferment of black dust, wind, whipping lights, bright pain, he managed to grab and hold those flogging arms. A lurch bucked them upright in a shower of loose coal. Pinned together, they wrestled in the narrow companion between tender and cab; wrenching, stumbling, slamming from side to side, each striving to break the other's grip, at the same time fighting for equilibrium on the tipping floorplates, aware that a misstep would plunge them outboard for a neck-breaking spill on a flying roadbed.

The violence of their struggle seemed to rock the train. McKesson's fury was that of a wounded catamount; Baird fought like a boar in a cage. With bone, muscle and tusk he strove to destroy the taller man. His own advantage was in weight and frenzy, but McKesson seemed made of rawhide and steel. He snapped Baird's armlock, and flung Baird into the cab, impaling him on the driver's seat and

battering his face with short choppy blows. Baird kicked the man against the boiler plates and held him with a knee against a steaming water pipe. Smell of burning sweetened the air. Fists sledged Baird off. Again that blood-ribboned skull was at him. They were punching, clawing, whirling together in the hot confinement of the cab, sprawled like wild animals on the iron deck under the firedoors.

Heat smote their heaving bodies.

The cab rolled, bucked, filled with wind and fumes and the grunts and groans of men battling to the death. In the swirl of lights and wild shadows, the flying smoke-scuds, the din and rod-clang and wheel-thunder—suffocated by rage and terror and the agony of steel hands gripping his throat—Baird felt himself to be in the seizure of a horrible dream. All the fears and apprehensions, those hounds which had followed him for twelve nerve-breaking years, were on him now. McKesson was no human antagonist, but a Retribution. Baird fought the man's grip as he would have fought the straps of an electric chair. He gouged, dug, found his own grip and squeezed, goring his enemy's throat with carnivorous thumbs. He got his knee in McKesson's stomach, pushed. He fastened bulldog teeth in the man's lean shoulder.

But until he remembered that McKesson must be weakening from those hammer-blows on the skull, Baird thought himself lost. He raged in desperation, terror, forgetting the doctor-like calculations of his plan. Then with animal instinct he suddenly sensed his adversary's waning strength. Revived murder-frenzy flowed through him, tightening his grip, clouding his vision smoky red. He felt, as he had when he'd driven that knife in Roberts' back-flesh, a drunken exaltation of hate. He was glad, now, that he'd killed Adam Roberts. He'd kill this railroad bull Roberts' pals had sent after him, too.

Strength redoubled, he choked McKesson until the man's face swelled, yanked him to a stand. He kicked out and sent him crashing against the hot firedoors. The man was a red scarecrow there, scarcely able to keep his feet in the swaying gloom. A red scarecrow emptied of its straw, slack-shouldered, wobble-headed, eyes dulled, scalp bared for a finishing blow.

A trestle boomed hollowly under the swinging cab-deck; the night was a streak of moonshine and scudding smoke; Baird found the heavy shovel once more in his fists. He paused, measuring his man for the knockout, grinning a little, bracing his feet, as a slaughterer might measure a cow posed before him in an abattoir. Muscles tightly bunched, he lifted the shovel.

"You won't get up this time!" he snarled.

But the wheels rolled into a curve, pitching McKesson sidewise. Futile as "Strike one" the shovel slashed air. Baird squalled at this cheating, lunged forward, scoop upraised. McKesson was trying to huddle crabwise around the driver's seat, one elbow reared as a helpless shield to fend the smash. Baird couldn't help screaming, "So they found the knife in Roberts, did they? Well, the fire's hot enough this time and they won't find you!"

The scoop rang like a gong, whaling down on that elbow-covered head. He saw McKesson's body twist like a corkscrew; saw it bend and plunge across the seat, boots tangling, arms outflung. He shouted and struck again. And again . . .

IV

HE knew he shouldn't be doing this, pounding and pounding that broken figure with the shovel. Every blow sent red pain through his own aching head, but a raging mist seemed to have robbed him of all self-control. Everything around him had gone out of focus; he couldn't seem to stop what he was doing. When at last he dropped the shovel, he was sick. Weak, dazed, drained of energy, as if after a long bout of fever, and somehow queerly frightened. What was it? He could feel the engine under him, around him, yet there was no sensation of velocity or motion, and at the same time he was being rushed across a landscape as unfamiliar as the mountains of the moon. Fury seemed to have had the effect of a narcotic, left him drugged. Some menace was close to him, and he couldn't quite remember what it was.

He looked down at the shovel; it was covered with blood.

Hastily he scrubbed the scoop with cotton waste, polishing as he might have polished a dishpan, flinging the waste into the firebox. White glare on his eyeballs reminded him. There was a shapeless crimson mass on the driver's seat—for a moment in his confusion he thought it was Adam Roberts—then, in startled recognition, he realized his peril and knew what he had to do. He had to get that body out of the way before Sabado came back, that was it! The fireboy's name flashed through his mind; and instantly the drive-wheels took up the clamor, shouting, *Sabado, Sabado, Sabado, Sabado,* until he could have screamed at the urgency for haste.

It was abominable, his lethargy now the moment for fast action was on him. Everything about him had picked up speed—the train, the flying minutes, time going by like the wind while his own movements felt as slow as if his blood had turned to molasses. One of those blows from McKesson must have partially paralyzed him. He picked up the shovel and it felt like solid lead in his hands. When he tried to stoke the firebox, he banged the scoop against the cowling and spilled three shovelloads of coal on the floor. Cursing, he set to feeding the firebox scoop after scoop, stoking that roaring maw in a terrible industry that seemed to consume not only tons of coal but years. The hog hit a mile-long straightaway down a moon-silvered valley, and they were swinging like a ship in a storm, a long wild rip through the night while he stoked like a madman to keep up with forced draughts.

Then he didn't know how McKesson's body came to be in his arms, but he was braced there on the bounding deckplates between cab and tender, hefting the dead man's weight, grinning at the blazing firedoor which was brilliant as the Caribbean sun. He knelt with his burden in the hell-light, eyes almost blinded by the glare.

"Now, curse you!" He shoved the body feet first, drove in the head with the flat of his palm, slammed the butterfly doors. McKesson was gone, and there were no blue eyes spying at him from across the cab.

He shook himself like a dog coming out of a pond, next found himself lounging in the cab window, the throttle at its last notch under his hand. Never had he driven Number 11 as he drove this moth-eaten hog. He was highballing her now, gulping up the mileage as the firebox would be gulping its fuel, draughts open. He laughed at the red flare of the stack, thinking of the sparks going up that flue. De-

liberately he sent the fire up the stack, full gun on the throttle, green boards all the way.

But it wouldn't do to burn her out and lose steam; he must keep her fired until Sabado—that fool—came back. Better stoke her again before the fireboy showed up; if he should return and open those butterfly doors before all traces were consumed—

Baird darted to the coal bunker in sudden apprehension. No sight of Sabado down the swinging line of car-decks, but you couldn't tell—he might be between somewhere. Another feeding of coal wouldn't hurt. It took resolution to tramp on that foot-lever, but this was no time to be finicky, he reminded himself, swinging the doors.

He staggered back, gasping. A terrible aroma, a pungence he had scented once before, struck at him in the outblast of light and clung to him like a greasy film. His lips retched, and his hair stood up. Plainly visible in that molten hole, black carbon but a definite outline, unmistakably no mass of clinkers, was the outstretched figure of a man.

HE stoked. With the breath torn out of him, sweat spilling like candle-wax down his panting jaws, he stoked until the white blast was volcanic, the body in the firebox shrouded in blinding sheets of flame. Then, back at the throttle, he held the hog to a screeching pace that threatened to rip her off the track—60—65—70—on the jumping speed dial. The stack's breath brightened from crimson to vivid chrome, a fiery comet suspended above the locomotive's prow. Wind squalled. Cinders bit like hornets. Miles flew under the drive-wheels in one interminable night-splitting roar.

Fifteen miles, eleven minutes, he raced the old Baldwin at a speed that must have had the journal boxes smoking from tender to caboose. Eleven minutes! A quarter ton of coal must have gone up the stack by this time; certainly there could be no trace of—

Again, he had to look. The excruciating torture of uncertainty! He stood it as long as he could, then found himself again bending over the firedoors, dragged there as if by some magnetism beyond all resistance. He was a fool. That fire could have burned up the devil himself. He opened the doors. . . .

Hunched in that outpouring blast, his shoulders froze as if he'd opened a refrigerator; his heart turned to a core of ice. It was there! In that livid furnace inferno, stretched across the blinding grate irons in funeral rigidity, face up, arms stiff at sides, stark in black outlines as a shadow on a mortuary slab.

Fire-roar drowned his howl. He snatched the shovel and crouched there, poking, prodding. His wrists were roasting, his goggles cracked. Intolerable heat drove him panting into the coal bunkers, and he shoveled like Vulcan on the lip of a volcano. It couldn't last another minute. He garnished it with coal that melted as it swished through the doors, and his cuffs were smoking when he got his blistered hands back to the throttle. No danger now. That fire would have smelted a statue of Bessemer steel!

Yet somehow his anxiety persisted. He must look once more, just once more to be certain. They'd found Roberts, hadn't they? Still, he hadn't tried to cremate Roberts . . . merely attempted to burn any evidence of a knife-wound. Steam had doused that wrecked firebox that night. Tonight . . . ? But he would look once more, only once more. He looked.

From then on nothing was clear save terror. From throttle to firebox he scrambled, sprang, sprawled; a dozen times he buried that body in molten coal; a dozen times he opened those horrid doors to find it there. An outstretched shade suspended in waves of white flame. An outline ossified in the vortex of a blast furnace. A shadow in the heart of the sun.

At the last it seemed no more than a thing of incandescence, a silhouette of light, a mirage of heat and gas-glow. He tried to destroy it with shovel and stoking iron, tried to blow it out with the draughts. He worked the grates, stabbed at clinkers, blasted out the flue, labored like a demon at a forge—and phoenix-like, it remained on its bed of ashes, glowing, hotter than the fire.

He knew then that he was imagining this. It was a trick on his mind, a deception on an overtaxed brain.

He shouted, "Pull yourself together, man!" and climbed back to the throttle, assuring himself the last human cinder in that firebox had long since burned to hell. Sabado could come back now. A thousand Sabados. He dragged a long breath of cool relief, and—*there was that smell!*

In icy panic he whirled around. Sabado was there! The Negro was grinning and humming a little tune, balanced before the firebox with loaded scoop, his eyes aimed thoughtfully at the foot-lever under the firedoors. His eyes squinted, and his nostrils stretched inquisitively.

"Sabado! Sabado, don't open those firedoors!" Wind whisked the scream to nothingness before it got away. Sabado tramped on the lever; the butterfly doors slapped open; in a bath of light that stained the whole scene as with blood, the Negro fell back shrieking. Baird could hear his own shriek, drawn out like a train whistle, and then there was another voice screaming. It pierced the pandemonium of rod-clang and thundering iron, the wind-whoop and the din of galloping wheels, rose shrill above the Negro's wailing and the whistling obligato in his own throat.

"Murderer!" the voice was screaming—to his horror he saw it came from the firebox— "He's a murderer! His name isn't Baird, it's Sheard. He stabbed an engineer on the Central—wrecked a midnight express—jammed the body in the firebox like he tried to do away with me!"

Hands were gripping, steel-fingered, on Baird's throat, twisting his neck like a monkey wrench on a sewer pipe. He was rolling on the floorplates, smothering. Weight on his chest pinned him flat. Someone was banging his head up and down on an anvil, and eyes like two blazing coals were pressed against his goggles, burning pokers searing their way to his brain.

"Burnt up your best friend, did you? That's right, Sabado, hold the swine! Pin his legs!" McKesson's voice was screaming. "He's a murderer—"

PAINFULLY Baird opened swollen eyes. McKesson he saw first; then Sabado; then the train captain, aiming a trembly Winchester.

McKesson was winding a handkerchief about his fist, swearing smoothly. When he looked down and saw Baird's dull upturned stare, he shoved him against the cab-seat with an unsympathetic boot. "Rat!"

Sound curdled in Baird's throat. "Lord—he's—alive!"

"You're right, I'm alive!" The tall man's eyes glinted coldly under a sheaf of blood-caked hair. "No thanks to you, scum! Lucky I knew something

about engines. . . . When you cracked me across the cab with that scoop, if I hadn't grabbed for that air-brake lever I'd be dead an' ashes by now. Stopped the train like she'd hit a forty-foot wall. Wonder she didn't roll over into Mexico, instead of just jumping along on the ties . . ."

"I'm sick," Baird whispered.

"Yeah, when this hog stopped dead you smacked that skull of yours against a boiler pipe. Too bad it only knocked you out. You was pinning me against a firedoor when I woke up, burning the devil outa my arm. Lying on top of me, knocked cold—and babbling about how you killed Adam Roberts. You was goin' to feed me to the firebox, too—you thought you was doin' it. They'll be interested up north about that knife business, Sheard."

Baird whispered, "No, no! It was the fever! I'm sick. . . ."

"Pretty sly sickness, sending the fireboy off after quinine when you got plenty in your pocket. Kinda strong for a sick man, too. But here's somethin' to make you sicker, Sheard. Here's why I come down to this country huntin' for you. Listen to this."

McKesson drew from his torn breast-pocket a letter. The letter was from certain railroad officials to a Miss Ann Reilly. The letter—McKesson read slowly, dryly—concluded:

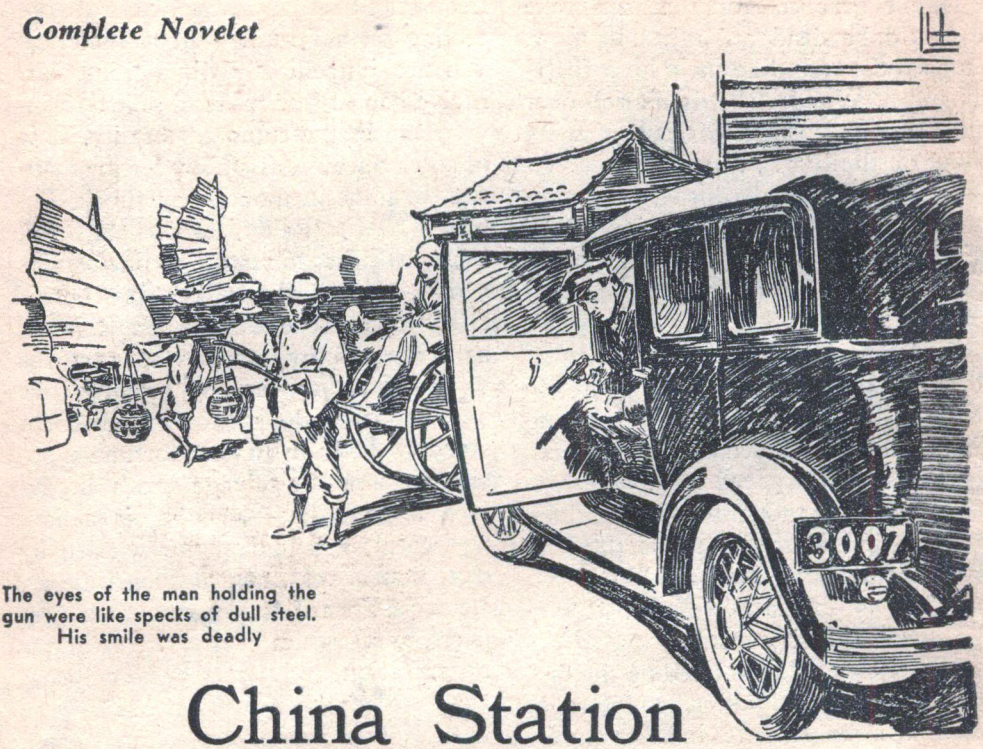
" 'And in lieu of your twelve years of loyal effort in attempt to locate Leonard Sheard who, while suffering shock as the result of the serious accident to Number 11, wandered from hospital in what must have been a dazed condition, we are furthering our own efforts to learn the whereabouts of this employee. An offer of ten thousand dollars' reward for information concerning him has not been without results. Report has come through to our agents of a man answering Leonard Sheard's description seen operating on a line in Central America. We are immediately dispatching Mr. McKesson of our railroad police to investigate in the rumored locality. It is possible Sheard has suffered some manner of amnesia induced by shock. Believe us, Miss Reilly, the company will spare no effort to restore to our service a man of Sheard's caliber. His heroic attempt to rescue Engineman Roberts, as witnessed by many who saw the wreck—his heroism in braving live steam to enter the cab, only to discover Roberts' body in that unfortunate position where our salvage crews discovered it next day—such heroic action, we repeat, will not go unrewarded by our company. If, and at such time as, Leonard Sheard is found, we are prepared to offer him life service with our organization, and monetary recompense for his distinguished valor. . . ."

McKesson folded the letter, cleared his throat. "They didn't find the knife." His eyes glinted down, then reflexed hurriedly from the expression on Baird's face. "Miss Reilly," he went on huskily, "is waiting back there in the Administrator's office on the coast. She's a swell girl, Sheard; I got to like her on the boat coming down. I don't think you'll want to see her, Sheard. If you like, I'll get the train captain here to lend you his Winchester and one shell. We've tapped the telegraph for soldiers, so it wouldn't do any good, your shooting one of us. I can tell Miss Reilly about the bandits."

Baird nodded. He was suddenly quiet, his face expressionless.

Presently the three men—McKesson, the train captain and Sabado—waiting behind the tender, heard the shot.

Complete Novelet



The eyes of the man holding the gun were like specks of dull steel. His smile was deadly

China Station

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Spin Down, Spin In," "Screwball," etc.

I

TERRY MALONE, mellowed with the warm wisdom which alcohol imparts, paused at the south end of the Yang Lun Bridge near the Bund, and inhaled expansively on an American cigarette. He was tight. Not in the staggering stage—he was just tight; he was feeling that he was, after all these years, another philosopher, hardly as poetic as the venerable Li Poo who had long ago joined his ancestors, but still a philosopher.

"Take that morning sun," he said aloud to no one in particular. "It's one thing to be somewheres east of Suez where the dawn comes up like thunder out of China cross the bay. See?"

A round-faced coolie, his skin like faded parchment, stopped at the curbing to listen, his eyes wide, his ricsha halted with its grips on the ground.

"But where," Terry asked the coolie with profound sobriety, "where, I repeat, does the sun come up like thunder from when you're in China itself?"

The coolie, intrigued by the soliloquy and also considering the fact that perhaps he had a fare, smiled politely and bowed. "You little clazy, sah," he said. "No?"

"Doubtless," replied Terry Malone. "But you, my fine friend, are quibbling. In typical Oriental fashion, you evade the issue with a fine phrase."

"You little dlunk," said the coolie, grinning politely.

"I am always drunk," said Terry Malone, "and always more than a little. You, heathen, are a fool. You can't tell me where the sun comes up like thunder from when you're in China and not on the road to Mandalay. Can it come up from Guam? It can, but hardly like thunder from an ocean-pimple like that island. Can it come up from Hawaii? It can, but with very little thunder, Hawaii being so far away . . ."

The coolie stopped smiling. "Thunder? Maybe there." He waved his hand expansively toward the east. "Rising sun there with thunder. Japan." And he looked toward Terry for approval.

"Ah well," Terry Malone sighed sadly as he climbed up into the ricsha, "such is the state of the world. Even a starving coolie becomes a prophet of havoc in this day. All right, Sing Hot Song, suppose you make chop-chop for the International Settlement. Office of the Shanghai *Citizen*. And don't spare the horses. . . ."

It was morning, early, gray and damp. At such an hour, more than at any other time, Shanghai was a city of ripe smells and furtive noises which came and faded with startling subterfuge. Seated in the ricsha, Terry Malone folded his hands gloomily in his lap and allowed his chin to droop reflectively to his chest. The steady muted pat-pat of his ricsha boy's naked feet upon the wet pavements of the Bund lulled Terry into a conscious stupor. On the waterfront he could hear the rat-

tling bamboo sails of the sampans, the occasional high-pitched squeals of two Chinese boatmen raining Chinese curses upon each other's honorable heads; and once he was startled by a deep virile whistle which boomed its way clear across the East China Sea to the mouth of the Yangtze-kiang River.

He glanced up and looked out to sea and made out the great white bulk of a liner coming in from the Pacific. She looked trim and taut and rather pretty with the morning sun upon her white paint. She would be—he knew—the *President Jackson* of the Mercantile Lines, inbound from Honolulu and San Francisco; inbound—he thought with a touch of wistfulness—from home.

HOME was a long way off. It was farther away than the miles between China and American shores. It was five years away from where he sat, five long years filled with nostalgia, remorse, and whisky. It was easy now to say he'd been a fool. And maybe he had been, at that. But it had all been so deadly serious five years before. He'd only been twenty-one then, trying desperately to make good in a newspaper berth on the New York *Mail,* so that he and Kathie Lane could be married. And then the libel suit. Terry had carelessly failed to check a source on a story one night and the *Mail* was nicked for fifteen thousand dollars because of a libelous story which he had written. . . . Of course he was canned. And he was blackballed too. Libel sticks with a scribe in the Fourth Estate. But he could have taken all that with his chin up. He could have left newspaper work and done something else. He still could have licked the world as long as he had Kathie.

But he didn't have her long.

When the *Mail* gave Terry Malone the gate, Kathie Lane had opened and closed it for him and stayed on the other side of the fence. It was so bad she'd even called him names. Silly kid stuff. But it was real kid stuff to him because he'd been a kid then. He wanted to get away and he did. He kept moving. How had he got to Shanghai of all places . . . ?

"For Pete's sake," Terry would have told you, "*I* dunno. I just woke up one morning and they said it was Shanghai and I got off here and that was that. Do I have to know how I got here? It's bad enough being here, just being here."

Then you'd have asked him why he didn't go back, now that he knew better about the affairs of the world and the ways of women. And Terry couldn't have answered that one. Because he'd always wanted to go back. But he was used to Shanghai, used to its people, used to his job on the *Citizen.* After all, he sometimes argued with himself, man is essentially a creature of habit—and why should he be the exception?

The smell of fish tickled his nose and Terry sat up in the ricsha and shook his head. That was the thing about Chinese fish. They had an odor all their own.

You could see his face now that he raised his head. It was fully lighted by the warming sun, a rather thin face with a short straight nose, sharply pointed on the end. His blue eyes were filled with the gay, pixilated light which all Irish eyes own. There was a neat blob of chin and small flat ears around which his dark hair had tinted itself silvery. The snapbrim hat was tipped rakishly on one side of his head in brash New Yorkese style. It was amazing how little liquor showed on him. He looked soberer than a judge.

The little runner finally turned off the Bund and headed down into Banco Street. They passed a line of ricshas at the curbing. From his precarious perch, Terry watched the world go by, workmen in coarse blue coats and rolled-up trousers, carrying flour sacks on their backs; a couple of young yellow-faced children each trying to sell a pair of goggle-eyed fish which they clutched in their hands; weary-faced vendors with close-cropped black hair balancing their shoulder poles dexterously; a woman selling wild olive branches; a disreputable beggar, his feet covered with raw sores; long-gowned men and women; and always the flapping blue coat of his own ricsha runner and the bumpy cobblestones of the narrow street.

There were two signs at the west end of Banco Street. One read: *SHANGHAI CITIZEN*. The other read: *AMERICAN BAR*. One meant work; the other, pleasure. The runner reached his destination and set down the grips. Terry climbed down, gave the boy a piece of silver, and then crossed the street in a vague way, and entered the American Bar.

IT was pretty early in the day for hard liquor, but Shanghai was the kind of town that drove you to drink. They were all there, the regular crowd: Jorgensen of the Swedish office, old Mac Turner of the American Embassy, Doc Lewis of the Amalgamated Oil Company—and Wang Soy.

Terry elbowed his way through the crowd to the bar when he saw Wang Soy. He reached the little Chinaman and dug him viciously in the ribs. He said severely, "Listen, heathen, it's all right for aliens to lose their souls, but nice China boys should stay sober."

"Nuts," Wang Soy said brightly. "What will you request, Terry, and make it with briskness."

"Make it snappy, you mean," Terry said. "I'll have the regular scotch and soda." He watched his friend and smiled. Wang Soy was a thoroughly Americanized Chinaman. But the westernization only hid a heart which was as Chinese as Confucius had been. The country, the people, the plagues and the plights, all of them pulsed in Wang Soy's blood.

Wang Soy also worked for the *Citizen*. He was about thirty years old, a funny little man no taller than five feet two with dark brows, a round little moonface, and tiny feet and hands. He imitated Terry's dress openly. His hat was as rakish as Terry's own. His suit was smartly belt-backed, like Terry's. He smoked American cigarettes with Terry's dexterity.

Terry could remember when Wang Soy had first joined the *Citizen's* staff three years before. A perfect gentleman then, speaking polite, stilted English and practicing rigid formality. Three years of the *Citizen* as a reporter had cured the formality, the politeness, and the stilted English.

Terry drank his scotch and soda and said, "You been across the street yet?"

"I get there on time daily," Wang Soy replied with a wry smile. "Which is more than can be said for one friend of mine, thank you. Oh, by the way, there was a gentleman called for you this A.M., Terry. By telephone message he said you should see him very important. Sounded like strong individual with fiery voice. Very important, he said."

"How do you like that!" Terry groaned loudly. "A very important call and you don't let me in on the secret. You know my number. Why didn't you call me and tell me?"

"Oh," Wang Soy exclaimed, looking pained. "So sorry, Terry. That possibility did not occur to me. I knew how much you retain your forty winkers—"

"Forty winks," said Terry. "Sure, I like to sleep but—who was it?"

"Hugh Mitchell was the name," said Wang Soy. "He said he was at the Royal Dragon Hotel and that he had a tip for you and that you would understand. To tell the truth, Terry, he sounded like he had insects in his trousers."

"Ants in his pants," Terry said.

"Oh yes. Ants. I am forgetting always. Ants, not insects. These puzzling expressions!" Wang Soy considered the phrase mutely and then nodded as though he had it. He looked like a big horned owl behind his huge dark-rimmed spectacles, but his round face was blankly innocuous and Terry had to smile at it. "Further word," Wang Soy suddenly remembered, "Chief says to step on it. He must see you because he is perturbed and has story for you to cover."

Terry finished his drink. "Thanks, pal," he said. "I'll see you later at the office. Keep your nose clean."

Wang Soy reached for a handkerchief, then stopped and looked ashamed. "Another expression. How I forget! Very well then, Terry. See you later. Avoid the nickels of wood."

The Shanghai *Citizen* had a net paid circulation of forty thousand copies daily. It wasn't any New York Times but it wasn't any Punxatawney, (Pa.) *Gazette* either. It was a good sheet as sheets go and it had plenty of coverage. It was staffed by forty men, from the editor (a figurehead who went to jail in cases of libel) through the Chief (who really ran the paper) on down to the fourteen year old Chinese copy boy whose old man had been decapitated at Peiping for being a Red. The building which housed the paper was modern. The city room was on the second floor, a sagacious move made after the Japanese fighting in Banco Street in 1931. At that time a machine gun had made a mess of the city room which had been on the ground floor. It was moved upstairs so that the paper could come out even if war sat on the front doorstep, which was close to possible.

THE Chief, a grizzled old war bird, an American soldier of fortune with a face like a worn saddle, a pair of gimlet eyes which were slightly mad, a pair of arms like poles, had a private office. He would have preferred to be on the city room floor with his staff, but in China it was deemed more respectful if the head man had privacy. After all, he was a big shot, and the dubious privacy lent him face.

Terry found him in the doghouse a few minutes later. The clock on the wall read 9 A.M. And the Chief looked hurt.

"Don't you ever think of me?" he asked quietly, wearily. "Terry, my lad, some day it will give me great pleasure to beat the tar out of you. City editors die young on account of men like you. Here I've got a story I can't trust to anyone else and you spend the night at every bar en route."

Terry shrugged. He said, "No story, my friend, is big enough to meet the importance of a well balanced scotch and soda."

The Chief started to reply, then looked very tired and did not. He reached wearily over and pulled his assignment sheet in front of him on the desk. "In case you are not aware of the fact," he said, "the International Arbitration League sent a committee into the interior two weeks ago to study

the mess on the Manchukuoan border. Maybe you are not aware that the Japanese and Chinese have been slaughtering each other with fine regularity up there on the border, each saying the other is breaking across the boundary line. Maybe you are not aware that both China and Japan agreed to let the International Arbitration League settle the dispute bloodlessly and sanely. The point, Terry, is this: A committee of three, namely Ronald Bracken, the American emissary; Sir Gerald Bulwer, the English emissary; and Sven Hejin, the Swedish emissary, went up the river to look the situation over. Their findings, one way or the other, will have to be accepted by either China or Japan, no matter which one is in the wrong."

"I know all this guff," Terry said, yawning. "What of it?"

"What of it?" the Chief roared. Then he took a breath, controlled himself, and went on in an even, steely voice as though he were holding himself in. "Terry, if you don't look intelligent by the time I finish talking, I'll strangle you with my own two hands." His voice dropped tautly. "Get this. I've had a tip. The Arbitration Committee is on its way down the Yang-tze River toward Shanghai. They'll reach here by eleven o'clock. It's all supposed to be secret so's they won't run into a wad of scribes and semi-official snoopers. They had to stop at Okasa this morning, upriver, to pick up an honor guard of American sailors. That's how I got the tip. Now listen, Terry. They've made a decision that's going to put a stop to this Sino-Japanese fracas. I want to know that decision, get me? You can do it if it can be done. I want the works, Terry. Who's been declared responsible for the past outbreaks and what the decision is. If we can get it, this sheet can scoop every other rag in the world —and in this day of wire services, that's something!"

"A raise if I get it?" Terry asked, smoking a cigarette.

"I'll give you a bonus of a hundred bucks."

"Okay," Terry said, sitting up. "Now get this, you pickle-faced slavedriver. I'll have your story for you before the committee even reaches Shanghai. And how do you like that?"

"You're tighter than you look," said the Chief with sarcasm.

Terry laughed. "Yeah? Here's something you don't know and it's under your hat. The aide to Ronald Bracken, the American emissary, happens to be a guy named Hugh Mitchell in the diplomatic service. It also so happens that Mitchell and I went to college together and played football together and did everything together, see? And it so happens that he's promised to tip me off the moment he knows the lay of the land."

"Good gravy!" the Chief roared, zooming up out of his chair. "Where is he? Have you heard from him? Find him!"

"I said it was under your hat," Terry snapped. "You don't have to yell it for the whole staff and half the spies around town. As a matter of fact, Hugh Mitchell is at the Royal Dragon. He's already called here for me and asked me to come over. It's plain he has the tip and I've got the story and a bonus, and you've got your international scoop."

The Chief paled, then flushed, then fell back into his chair and groaned a couple of times before he panted hoarsely, "Then will you kindly tell me what you are sitting here talking to me for, instead of being on your way to the Royal Dragon Hotel?"

Terry smiled happily. "I dunno," he said blithely. "I think it's because you

remind me of a guy I once saw keel over dead for no reason at all. I just hang around and hope. I wouldn't want to miss that, you know."

"Ha-ha-ha," said the Chief gloomily. "Very funny. And now will you kindly, will you please, get on your high horse and see this tipster at the Royal Dragon?"

"Sure," said Terry, "a pleasure."

"The tip I had," said the Chief in a low voice, "says that China gets the upper hand by the decision. If that's so, there'll be blazing Hades popping in Japan. You get the dope."

Terry nodded absently, and went out.

II

THE Royal Dragon was the most pretentious hotel in Shanghai. It had all the glamor of the Raffles of Singapore, and charged even more outrageous prices. The lobby was a thing of beauty, its Chinese carvings and ceramics indirectly lighted around the walls, while groves of spotted palm trees gave each of the luxurious lounges a sense of shaded coolness and softness.

Terry got there in twenty minutes and found he was out of breath when he went in. He slowed to a walk and thought to himself that he was crazy hurrying like that. That was the trouble with being a newspaperman. You always had to hurry. In this case, the news would keep until eleven when the Arbitration Committee arrived in the city. And besides, if he got the news any earlier than that, the *Citizen* would have to break it as an extra.

He was going by a lounge on his way to the clerk's desk where he noticed a good deal of confusion and telephone calls, when he saw the girl and stopped.

She was a knockout. She looked foreign, but she was a knockout in any language. Terry pushed his hat back on his head a little and stared at her. "Ah me," he sighed, and shook his head. She was seated on one of the satin-covered sofas, smoking a long cigarette and looking rather wary, as though she were waiting for someone. She was tall, he saw, and very willowy and supple. Her hair was black, her eyes dark, her skin exquisite. She had a fine-chiseled nose and a full mouth; and her hands were white and graceful, with long tapering fingers.

Terry fixed his tie, patted his coat, and stepped over to the sofa. He tipped his hat politely and then said, "Poddon me, lady, but aren't you the duchess?"

The girl turned slowly and examined him with eyes which were as coldly professional as a surgeon's at an appendectomy. 'My name," she said in brittle tones, "is Tanya Alba. You have made a mistake."

"Tanya Alba! Of course!" Terry cried. "You remember me, eh? Didn't I meet you at Atlantic City the year that Lindbergh—"

"You have made a mistake," Tanya Alba replied, cutting him off icily. "Now please leave me."

"It must have been two other guys," Terry said ruefully.

"If you do not stop annoying me," the dark girl said firmly, "I will call the hotel detective."

"And you looked *so* kind and *so* sweet," Terry said. "Who would have suspected that the heart of a tigress lurked beneath that dimpled chin. Tanya Alba—Tanya Alba—I place you now! You're Russian. You're a fugitive from Der Fuehrer. You got out of Berlin in a hurry when the Nazis figured you for a spy. Stop me if I'm wrong. You go about with a ginzo named

Alexis Dirkanov who calls himself a count and is suspected of being a Soviet agent. . . . Me? I'm Terry Malone, the Shanghai *Citizen's* claim to fame. I'd like to buy you six or seven drinks—no?"

Tanya Alba rose to her feet very quickly. She seemed to flow up with all the grace in the world. She faced Terry with blazing eyes. "American pig!" she cried, and she slapped him across the face with her open hand. The marks of her fingers left red welts on his face as he recoiled, surprised. Then, looking as if she had done nothing more spectacular than button her gloves, she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Terry standing with a half-resentful grin on his face, and one hand pressed to his cheek.

"Life," Terry said, loudly, "is full of surprises. Ah well . . ."

At the desk, a frowsy little clerk was looking pallidly frantic and trying to assume a mien of absolute nonchalance.

"Hi, Twickett, old rum," Terry said, strolling up. "I'm looking for a lad named Mitchell. Give him a buzz, will you?"

Twickett turned paler and gasped rather shrilly. Covering his panic, he gulped once and leaned forward across the desk. "Are—Mr. Malone—are you a friend of Mr. Mitchell's?"

"Like that," Terry said, crossing his middle finger over his index finger. "We flunked college together. What room?"

Twickett drew a deep breath and gulped again. "Mr. Mitchell *had* Room 415," he replied in choked tones. "But—"

"Had?" Terry said, scowling. "What do you mean, *had?* Has he left the hotel?"

Twickett drew a third deep breath. "I regret to inform you, Mr. Malone," he said in a small voice, "that Mr. Mitchell has just committed suicide by taking poison."

TERRY stared hard for a second while the news sank in. When it finally hit bottom, he turned and raced for the staircase. He went up the steps, taking as many at a time as his legs would allow. By the time he got to the fourth landing, he was panting like a bellows. He shoved his way through the small, whispering group that had gathered around the door of 415, and went in.

Twickett had been something less than accurate. Hugh Mitchell wasn't dead—yet. He was stretched out on the floor where he had fallen, and the somber, English hotel medico was stooping over him and trying to get him to swallow the white of an egg.

Hugh Mitchell's face was mottled and slowly taking on a ghastly purplish color. The muscles around his graying lips twitched, and in his haggard eyes Terry could read nothing but agony—and despair. Terry knelt down beside him.

"Hugh, old man," he said in a voice that would have surprised the Chief or little Wang Soy.

Hugh Mitchell's mouth sagged open; his tongue moved slowly. But the breath that came out through his lungs wasn't strong enough to form the words he was struggling to say.

Terry looked up at the doctor. "Can't you do something, doc?" he asked. "Can't you do anything?"

"Not anything at all," the doctor said, and put the egg glass down.

"You'll be all right, Hugh," Terry said, mechanically, knowing that Mitchell wasn't believing him, and yet feeling a compulsion to say something. His eyes left Mitchell's face and trav-

eled over the room, resentfully. What were they standing around for—waiting for the very last breath? Who were they? What right—

Terry's eyes narrowed. A little forward of the others was Count Dirkanov, the Russian adventurer and reputed spy. That girl downstairs—she *had* been waiting for Dirkanov. Just as—the thought struck him oddly—just as Dirkanov was waiting for Hugh Mitchell to die. Terry didn't quite know how he knew this—but it was so.

Behind Dirkanov was a Japanese gentleman—tall, thin, gaunt, with just a suggestion of the sinister about him. There were others—stewards, some tourists. But those two stood out, like brightly limned figures emphasized with hard color in a gray-toned painting.

Terry turned back to Hugh. Even in these few seconds, he'd slipped further away. The pain was etched deeper on his face but—Terry looked again, to be sure. He was right. There was a strange, insistent, almost communicative light in Hugh Mitchell's eyes. They were struggling with the task that his tongue had not been able to accomplish.

He was trying to tell Terry something—it was important—and there was so little time left. Terry stared at him blankly, and noticed something he hadn't seen before. Dull red bruises on either side of his cheeks, other bruises on both wrists.

It didn't take a very skillful mind to read the story of those marks. Hugh hadn't taken poison. No. He'd been held, somehow; his mouth had been forced open by the pressure of thumb and fingers digging against his cheeks; the poison had been given to him that way.

Terry swore through lips that scarcely opened. Dirkanov? The Japanese? Was that what Hugh was trying to tell him with his eyes—was he trying to point out one of those two men as his murderer? But Hugh wasn't looking at either of them. His eyes kept going up, coming down to the normal position, and then turning upward again. Terry shot a swift look at the ceiling, and Hugh's head moved negatively from side to side.

"Hugh," Terry said, "what is it? What are you trying—"

Hugh's fingers, resting on Terry's arm, pressed it quickly and with as much force as there was left in them. Terry shut up.

THE doctor stooped and felt Mitchell's pulse. "A few seconds only, old man," he whispered close to Terry's ear. "Strychnine is very quick, you know."

Hugh Mitchell gasped and coughed alarmingly. His eyes, glazed with the approach of death, held a terrible appeal. He held out two fingers, then let his hand relax. He held out one finger, dropped his hand. Then held out five. And all the time, he kept looking upward, and the sweat of the effort he was making formed quickly and ran down over his face.

Terry understood, suddenly. "Hugh! If you—"

Before he finished the sentence, Hugh Mitchell inhaled one long, rasping breath, and never exhaled it. The doctor had to press hard against Hugh's chest to force the air out. Mitchell's eyes, still turned to the ceiling, stayed open. But they were blank now, expressionless. They looked—frozen.

"This man," the doctor said, softly, "is dead."

Terry got up as the hotel detective—a fat little tub of man, all belly and chins—came in and began asking ques-

tions. Terry was thinking hard: Two—one—five. Two hundred and fifteen. And two fifteen was the old helmet play.

They'd used that a lot in the old days when he and Hugh had been the backfield of Southern University. Hugh at quarter and Terry at right half, and the other two backs not mattering much one way or the other. The helmet play. Always good for at least one touchdown per game it was. Terry would grab his headgear in his arms and dive through center, a swift blur of red jersey, bare head and hands nursing something that was made of brown leather and looked like the ball—while Hugh carried the real pigskin and swept out around the end. Yeah, the old helmet trick. But how did it help him now?

It was while the tub-round hotel detective was asking a lot of questions that had no meaning except to emphasize the fact that Hugh Mitchell was dead, that Terry noticed Hugh's gray fedora on the dresser. He listened patiently, not really expecting to find out anything important, twisting his snap-brim hat absently in his hands, putting it down on the bureau to mop his forehead with a white handkerchief, moving restlessly around the room.

The detective turned to Dirkanov. "'Twas you that found him?"

Dirkanov nodded.

"Mind telling us how it was?"

"I had an appointment with Mr. Mitchell at nine," Dirkanov said in a low voice that was lightly spiked with accent. "I did not bother having myself announced, but came directly to his room. When Mitchell didn't answer my knock, I came in—and found him lying there. I called for help immediately."

One of the stewards verified that.

Pretty flimsy, that, Terry told himself. He'd heard plenty of gossip about the Russian. A Soviet agent, perhaps. An adventurer surely. Wealthy and a member of several of the smart clubs. He was a giant of a man, six feet tall, and weighing at least two hundred pounds. He wore clothes that fit him perfectly, and yet somehow couldn't cover his basic brutishness. His hair was black; his eyes were blank slits; his mouth strong, full-lipped, cruel. That cane he swung idly now, Terry guessed, would be a sword cane.

The detective turned to the Japanese. "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

The Japanese replied in cool, quiet tones. "My name is Fuji Yokahama. I occupy the suite adjoining Mr. Mitchell's. I happened to hear the commotion and I came in to see if there was anything I could do."

"Did you know the corpse, sir?"

"I was not acquainted with Mr. Mitchell," said Mr. Yokahama. "A tragic thing, of course. Much to be regretted when man sets aside the will of God to take his own life." He paused. "I am Christian, you see. If there is anything I can do, I will remain. Otherwise, I would rather be removed from the presence of this sad death."

Terry eyed the man sharply. He had had the impression that Mr. Yokahama had deliberately emphasized the fact of suicide, when suicide hadn't definitely been established and Terry knew there had been no suicide at all.

Unlike his countrymen, this Japanese was very tall and very thin and very gaunt. His face was long and somber, his dark eyes very sinister. He wore a glistening monocle in his right eye; and he was dressed in striped trousers and a frock coat and wore a black derby which he had removed and was holding in his hands. Terry didn't know what

it was, but he felt an emanation from the Japanese, as if—of all the men in the world—this was one to be most feared. And there was a look to the set lines of Mr. Yokahama's gloomy face which warned Terry that ice water flowed in veins where blood should have been and that the heart beneath that frock coat had petrified years before.

"AND you, sir?" the hotel dick asked him.

Terry looked surprised. He had almost forgotten that he would be questioned too. "Me?" he said. "Terry Malone is the handle, Inspector. I'm a reporter from the Shanghai *Citizen*. Your desk clerk, Twickett, tipped me off to this story and I came right over."

"Oh," said the dick shortly. "Well, gentlemen, I'll have to ask you to leave your names and addresses with the hotel in case the police want any information. Until then, I guess you're at liberty to go. Nasty bit o' business at best. Don't seem to be any doubt the poor feller's done himself in, eh, doc?"

The medico shrugged. "It's suicide to me."

"Ah well," said the hotel dick. "I guess that's it then. And look here, young fellow," he added to Terry. "Try and take it easy on this here story of yours. It can't be the Royal Dragon's fault if some rum gent goes and blows his brains out."

"He didn't blow his brains out," Terry said.

"Point's the same," said the dick. "Don't give the hotel any more bad publicity than you can help, eh?"

"I'll do my best," Terry said.

"Then you can go, gents," the dick remarked. "We'll leave the whole thing to the bobbies. They'll be here any minute now anyhow."

The gathering broke up. The stewards vanished back to their ordinary tasks. Count Alexis Dirkanov clicked his heels together smartly, nodded to the detective, wheeled and left. Mr. Yokahama, his beady eyes fixed up on Terry Malone's face, bowed politely and spread a yellowed hand toward the door. "After you, sir."

"Thanks," Terry said. He scooped up a hat nonchalantly and strolled out the door. But the hat he left behind him was his own, and the one he let slide back rakishly on his head was Hugh Mitchell's.

III

TERRY MALONE reached the Bund before he stopped to look around. He had the distinct impression of eyes upon his back every foot of the way from the Royal Dragon Hotel. It was an uncanny sensation but very real nevertheless. He passed four bars on the way to the Bund. He had left the third one behind before he realized that for the first time in five years, he didn't want a scotch and soda.

He wanted instead, a killer. He wanted the man who had killed Hugh Mitchell. Count Dirkanov? Fuji Yokahama? Tanya Alba?

Terry winced. Surely a girl could not have done a job like that. It took a beast to force poison into a man's throat and let him writhe in agony on the floor—and a strong one at that. Still, even if he didn't like the idea, Terry realized that Tanya Alba was hand in glove with Count Dirkanov, and undoubtedly on some mission of Russian espionage in Shanghai.

The Bund was filled with noises and

smells and people. Still Terry had that impression of pursuit. He turned casually and lolled against the sea wall and took a good look around. He didn't see anyone he knew. He didn't see anything like a gumshoe.

Beyond the Bund by the brick rise of the waterfront, Terry could see a ship which had docked but recently. The taxis were lined up at the pier like water bugs and the ricsha runners waved their scrawny arms and screeched for fares. There were moving bodies and the scent of stale sweat and dead fish from the street vendors, augmented by the rank odor of the powerful Yang-Tze which pushed down from the interior all the brown and yellow mud of its river bottom until the filth spread itself way out into the bar and even blotted the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean beyond the China Sea.

Unable to lose the gnawing feeling of watchful eyes, Terry nevertheless had reached the limit of play-acting. He had to look at the message which Hugh Mitchell had left for him. So far the old pigskin helmet play had worked successfully. But the touchdown could only come when he knew the killer and *why* Mitchell had been killed. He was filled with a strange sense of grief, remote and bitter, yet very real. Terry felt Hugh's death very much; he had known so little emotion in so many years.

The wild, tipsy light was gone from his Irish eyes now as he casually removed the gray hat and played his fingers into its crown, plucking under the leather hatband inside. His fingers —sensitive at that moment to any clue —found paper. He pulled what he had found out, and slipped the hat back on his head.

He had in his hand, he saw, a folded envelope, heavily sealed, and a folded letter without an envelope. He glanced first at the sealed envelope. It was addressed to Admiral John Hobson, aboard the H.M.S. *Cougar,* a British battleship, which was standing off in Shanghai harbor. Terry felt as though he were holding a bomb. He knew what that meant. The *Cougar,* a first-class capital ship, had been dispatched to Shanghai by His Majesty's Government to afford the members of the International Arbitration League a vessel for the return trip to London where the findings of the committee would be revealed in a council of the group of member nations. And what he held in his hand at the moment was a duplicate of the report which the three committee members would give at the meeting in London three weeks later!

Quickly, Terry slipped the envelope into his inside pocket. He opened the second paper, the letter, and he read it. It was in Hugh Mitchell's handwriting. It was addressed, oddly enough, to him! It went:

Dear Terry:

Forgive me if this note is cryptic but necessity causes it. I have taken the liberty of scribbling this off to you to make certain things go off as planned no matter what happens to me. Frankly, I am afraid that I am marked for death. All along I have seen it coming, this conflict of the peoples, and here it is at last.

To explain more fully. While on our return trip from the interior, we received word that there was a plot afoot to assassinate the members of the committee and destroy their report. We took precautions. I was entrusted with a duplicate of the report and I went ashore up-river and motored into Shanghai. Since arriving this morning, I find the place a hotbed of intrigue. There is Dirkanov of the Russian office, a military agent, of course. He has been trying to see me and he sounds desperate. I have no idea how he can be connected with this Sino-Japanese mix-up. I *know* he cannot be working for Japan since they already have an agent in the

field. Russia is not implicated—or is she? I believe he may be working in the employ of the Chinese government. Be careful of him. There is nothing he will stop at to gain his ends. At the moment, he has in his pay a young Russian actress, Tanya Alba, who —I believe—is the Mata Hari in the case when men get stubborn and refuse to reveal secrets. Avoid her too. I am trusting you with a parcel which *must* reach Hobson on the H. M. S. *Cougar*. You are the only man in the world to whom I could trust such a secret. For the envelope contains the committee's report and must get to London, no matter what happens to me . .

At that point, the writing ended. As Terry went to turn the page of Hugh Mitchell's letter and read the rest of the message, he felt a slight pressure against his back and a quiet voice said coldly:

"No, Mr. Malone. You will stop there."

TERRY did not read further. He glanced down slowly to see what caused the pressure. It was a .38 calibre automatic pistol, big and shiny, held in a yellow hand. The muzzle was close against his ribs. The safety catch was off, he saw. The hammer was cocked. The pressure of a finger separated him from eternity, and when Terry looked up to see who was holding the gun, his heart fell into his stomach like lead and he felt numb and cold.

The man beside him was Fuji Yokahama. The Japanese's eyes were like specks of dull steel. The smile, frozen onto the thin mouth, was deadly. The monocle looked like an evil eye. Fuji Yokahama said, "Do you follow me, Mr. Malone?"

"No," Terry said. "What's on your mind?"

Mr. Yokahama's smile spread slightly but the gun did not move from Terry's ribs. "There is a car at the curb ten feet from you, Mr. Malone. I shall ask you to climb into it. I must warn you if you do not, I will be compelled to shoot you where you stand."

"You put that heater away," Terry said, "and I'll get in. Otherwise, go to blazes."

"I have been there many times," Mr. Yokahama replied coldly, his face like a piece of granite. "I have always managed to get back. It is not a pleasant place, Mr. Malone, as I have found. It is filled with men who did not do as I asked them. I have killed more recalcitrants than my appearance would suggest. I think you already know that I am number one military agent for the Japanese Foreign Office at Tokyo. There is no necessity of your dying if you do as I say. I ask you to get into the car."

Terry dropped the bluff instantly. Mr. Yokahama had shown himself, shaken his rattles as it were, and warned Terry to play ball; just as a rattler will ask to be avoided. And Terry knew that if he didn't step into that car, it would be just as if he did not avoid the rattler's ground.

And the snake would strike.

The car was a black sedan of Japanese make and the curtains on the rear windows were pulled all the way down so that the crate resembled a hearse. Terry suppressed a shudder and calmly walked across the pavement to the car. He glanced once at the tiny little Japanese chauffeur who sat at the wheel. He saw that the chauffeur also had a gun in his hand and had had it trained on him all the time he'd been talking to Mr. Yokahama.

It was a thorough bit of business, Terry had to admit. He opened the door and climbed in. Mr. Yokahama bent his long austere frame into the car and slammed the door. He leaned

forward and said to the chauffeur: "Nija, drive toward Tsin-Tsang Road very slowly."

The gears clicked, the motor spoke, and the car moved off, bumping along the bricks of the Bund and shaking Terry and the Japanese agent together in the back seat.

The pistol in Mr. Yokahama's hand remained on a line with Terry's chest, its hammer still cocked.

"DO you have to leave the hammer like that?" Terry asked. "This is a bumpy road."

"I am not a nervous man," said Mr. Yokahama evenly. His eyes remained like slits. Terry had the impression that they were lidless and that they never blinked. "Before I state my wishes, Mr. Malone, I believe I should explain one thing. This is Shanghai, not Japan. I have no authority in this city and I must work undercover on my own. This private unauthoritative work frequently calls for murder where—in Nippon—I could have a man arrested and silenced. I warn you of this. I will not hesitate to shoot you should you attempt any sudden, excited movement. Do you carry a gun?"

"No," Terry said.

"You are rather clever," said Mr. Yokahama. "I'm quite sure you tricked Alexis Dirkanov and those others. But Alexis is really not the most astute of men. In all due modesty, I have often bested him. You see, Mr. Malone, dying men do not make signals at reporters they have never seen before. The moment I saw the hand sign, I knew you were close to each other in some way. And when you left the room with a hat which was obviously too large for you—really, Mr. Malone, I had hoped you would not insult my intelligence by such a crude device as hat switching."

"Listen," Terry said. "I never saw you before today and I never heard of you, and until you told me who you were, you could have been a pajama salesman to me. If you must know, Hugh Mitchell was my friend."

"He was," Mr. Yokahama said, "my friend, too. Sometimes however our aims were different. You are bitter at the moment. You wish to avenge yourself upon his murderer—oh yes, he was murdered, no doubt of that. I ask you not to suspect me, Mr. Malone. When I kill men, I kill them cleanly, with a bullet. Not with poison."

"What do you want?" Terry asked.

"I want," said Mr. Yokahama, "both of the papers which you took from Hugh Mitchell's hat."

Terry said, "No. Neither one of them was addressed to you."

"Ah, you are naïve," said Mr. Yokahama with a regretful sigh. "I said I wanted them, Mr. Malone. I am only being polite. It would be quite as easy for me to pluck them from your pocket after I have shot you, as to have you hand them over."

Terry said nothing. He felt a knot of high excitement in his stomach and he couldn't catch his breath fast enough. There was something very final about Mr. Yokahama. Everything he seemed to say and do had a ring of completeness about it—and capability.

"Well, Mr. Malone," Mr. Yokahama said at last, "are you going to give me the papers?"

"No," Terry said. "But if you say so, I'll give you something of far more importance to me than them."

"What?" Mr. Yokahama asked, frowning curiously.

"This," said Terry in a low voice.

HE had to admit to himself later that he did it neatly. He shot out his left hand and closed his fingers on Mr. Yokahama's gun wrist in a grip of iron which made the Japanese wince and then grunt as the pain bit through him.

The car moved smoothly on, giving no sign of the struggle within.

But Mr. Yokahama didn't drop the gun. He fired it instead. The bullet missed Terry, went out of the car through the roof. But the flames from the muzzle seared Terry's eyebrows and the crack of the explosion set his ears to ringing so loudly that he could hardly hear Mr. Yokahama cry to the chauffeur to stop the car.

Terry leaned forward quickly and sunk his four front upper teeth into Mr. Yokahama's flesh.

The Japanese agent set his lips firmly together, but a little moan leaked through them as Terry's teeth drew blood, and the .38 pistol dropped to the floor of the car with a thud as the fingers shot open to ease Terry's grip.

The chauffeur, meanwhile, was grinding the big sedan to a stop. Terry knew that the second they halted, the chauffeur would be on his back with the other gun and would probably let him have the whole magazine. Mr. Yokahama was trying to twist Terry's left arm over in a jiu-jitsu hold. There wasn't anything to do but let him have one.

Terry uncorked a terrific right cross into Mr. Yokahama's left eye and caught it flush. The blow hurt Terry's hand and it knocked Mr. Yokahama's head into the cushions deep. It made Mr. Yokahama grunt, "Ooof!" and collapse limply, both hands clinging to the bruised orb. Then, sweating hard and with fire in his eye, Terry swung another right. But not at Mr. Yokahama. That gentleman didn't need it.

The second right was a long hook. It caught the Japanese chauffeur low on the jaw and slapped him against the windshield with force which raised an egg on his skull. But he was a tough little boy. He didn't go out. He sat there dazed, trying to pull himself together.

Terry picked up the pistol which Mr. Yokahama had dropped. He fired a wild shot through the roof of the car just to keep the boys in their places. Then he opened the door and dove headlong from the car to the street.

He heard Mr. Yokahama snap: "Drive, you fool, drive!"

The rear wheels spun, shrieking against the cobbles. The smell of burnt rubber hung in the air under Terry's nose. He was on his knees, head hanging low and gun hand up in case he had to fire, when the car dashed away. He watched it until it had careened around a corner and disappeared. The sound of its roaring engine faded slowly away.

When the street was silent, Terry got to his feet and slipped the gun into his pocket. His knees stung and there was dirt on his trouser legs. He brushed himself off and became aware, suddenly, of the presence of four awed ricsha runners, half the leprous vendors of the city, and two British tourists, one of whom ran over crying: "Are you all right, old boy?"

"Of course," Terry said. He felt pretty good to have been so lucky. "Of course, I'm all right. You mustn't mind me. I always get out of a car that way."

He walked off and left them there. Down the street, he climbed into a rickety ricsha and told the boy to make chop-chop for the offices of the Shang-

hai *Citizen*. Shanghai looked great. Shankhai had a rosy glow all over it.

Terry smiled grimly as he sat up in the ricsha. He reached into his pocket to pull out the letters and read them.

The smile dropped into the street. Terry had underestimated Mr. Yokahama.

The letters were gone. . . .

IV

WANG SOY met Terry at the city room door of the *Citizen*. The little Chinaman was very excited and his horn-rimmed glasses kept jumping all over his face as he chattered. "Terry," he cried, "great din is broken loose! The Chief is all but prone on the floor. He has bats in the steeple! He is a raving lunacy!"

Terry bit his lips and fell in beside his friend. "What's the matter now?"

"Great havoc," said Wang Soy. "The Arbitration Committee has reached Shanghai and something is direly wrong!"

"What?"

"The Chief will tell you," said Wang Soy. "I cannot spoil it for him. He wants to tell you."

They went into the Chief's private doghouse. The Chief was sitting glumly at his desk, chewing on a dead cigar. When he saw Terry he nearly jumped out of his skin. "You!" he roared. "Where have *you* been? Where's my inside tip? Where's my story?"

"Keep your bones in place," Terry snapped. "There's no tip. But I have a lovely murder for you. Only you can't print it. My tipster was bumped off."

"Bumped off?" cried the Chief. He sat back with a groan. "We do get the nicest breaks on this sheet—"

"Cut it out," Terry said evenly. "You and your blasted sheet! How about Hugh Mitchell?"

"I didn't know the guy," said the Chief, "even if you did. What happened to him?"

"Oh, he committed suicide," said Terry bitterly. "Just bumped himself off for no reason at all."

"Never mind the act," the Chief snapped, glowering. "What really happened to him?"

"He was murdered, I told you," Terry said in low tones. "Murdered in pretty cold blood. The Arbitration Committee had entrusted him with a copy of their findings to make sure that the report would reach Admiral Hobson. They had a tipoff that they might be assassinated. Somebody was going to try and pull another Sarajevo and try to plunge a wad of nations into a quick series of reprisals, maybe even war, to cover things up. Do you get it, Chief? Somebody doesn't want that report to be made known. Either Japan or China—the report will go against one of them. That somebody knew Hugh Mitchell was in town, knew he had a report and went up there, got the report away from him, and then killed him to shut his mouth."

Wang Soy said, "Terry, please, do not forget Russia! If report is in favor of Japan, that will make Rising Sun very aggressive on Siberian border. Maybe the Soviet would not like it if the report favored Japan, because Japan might then travel to the city—"

"Go to town, you mean."

"Yes. Go to town on the Siberian border and invade Russia."

Terry snapped his fingers. "You've got something there, Wang! Maybe that's what puzzled Hugh. He wondered what Dirkanov and that *grande dame* were up to. Maybe—"

"Hold your horses," said the Chief. "I've got a little ditty that you haven't heard about, Terry. The tipoff your friend Mitchell had wasn't far off. The Arbitration Committee has reached Shanghai. They docked at the basin about half an hour ago, earlier than expected. They came down on the *River Queen.*"

"The *River Queen!*" Terry said. "But I saw that tub down at the Bund. Were they on that crate?"

"They were on her all right," said the Chief. "But—wait a second. Here's the extra. We threw it together in a terrific hurry. I'd made it up to take your yarn when you came in. But when you didn't show up and this other thing broke, we just slapped it in. Have a look and don't grit your teeth."

Terry grabbed the *Citizen* extra and scanned the headlines quickly. They went:

ARBITRATION COMMITTEE VANISHES!

TRIO REACHES SHANGHAI WITH REPORT OF SINO-JAPAN FINDINGS

International Diplomats Disappear on Waterfront

"Never mind the rest of that guff," the Chief said, chewing savagely on his dead stogie. "Here's the lowdown. The committee got off that boat safe and sound. But there were some dandy big limousines drawn up at the pier with official numbers on them, and a couple of flags and what not. The committee took it for granted that their respective embassies had sent the cars for them. Several men apparently herded them politely along. But it turns out now that the embassies didn't expect the committee until eleven and there were no cars sent at all. Somebody has pulled a fast one, Terry. And two will get you ten that it's the same ginzo who polished off Hugh Mitchell! And one will get you twenty that that committee is going to be knocked off cold! And how about it?"

TERRY threw the paper onto the desk savagely. He looked very white and his hands were trembling. "I'll tell you how about it!" he snapped, his eyes dancing with fury. "Either one of two guys is behind this whole business. Either a Japanese military agent name of Yokahama, or a Soviet gent who calls himself Count Dirkanov! And by Harry, I'm going out and find both of them and get the truth out of them if I have to make 'em spit teeth!"

"Don't bite off more than you can chew," the Chief said. "You're no Roumanian Army all by yourself, you know!"

"Maybe not," said Terry. He pulled out the .38 and weighed it in his hands. "But Old Bess here is a small-sized imitation and a damn good persuader. I'll see you later."

Wang Soy followed Terry down to the street. "Are you going to find Dirkanov?" the Chinaman said. "I had an interview with him not more than half an hour ago, Terry. Tall, strong individual with fiery eye and fecundity of mouth, no?"

"Yes!" said Terry. "Where was he?"

"International Bar," said Wang Soy. "He was with a lady, a very beautiful white Christian lady."

"Good!" Terry said. "I'll see you later, Wang."

"Yes," Wang said pleasantly. "Later, Terry. . . ."

Terry started to walk hurriedly southward toward the Bund. He hadn't gone more than twenty-five feet when he stopped abruptly. He saw the black

car at the curbing, its motor turning over idly. And he caught sight of the striped trousers, the frock coat, the black derby, the shining monocle, and the gaunt face of Fuji Yokahama.

For a moment, as Mr. Yokahama ran swiftly up to him, Terry just gawped, fixed in utter stupefaction. He almost forgot to yank out the .38 pistol which he had wrested from the Japanese agent. Almost, but not quite.

When Mr. Yokahama reached him, Terry had the black muzzle of the gun on a line with the Japanese's stomach. The safety was off and the hammer was cocked. "Careful, Mr. Yokahama," Terry snapped. "No more rides for little Joe today. Stick up your hands, Nippon, and breathe deep. Unlike you, I don't have iron nerves. I'm a very nervous man. And this hammer is cocked, savvy?"

"Ah . . ." Mr. Yokahama breathed through his teeth, stopping short. "This is a most impossible mistake, Mr. Malone."

"It'll be a most eternal one," said Terry grimly, "if you make any funny passes."

"But you do not understand," said Mr. Yokahama evenly. "I have made a terrible error. We are not enemies. We have a common bond. I only learned it when I read the letters which I was compelled to purloin from you. Why else have I returned to see you? Even a fool would not thrust his head into a lion's jaws."

"A fool might not," said Terry. "But a fox would."

The faint shadow of a smile touched Mr. Yokahama's thin lips. "Very well, Mr. Malone. You will not trust me, I see. Not even if I pledged you my word?"

"What is the word of a military agent?" Terry asked.

"Or a gentleman?"

"All right then," Terry said, "let's parley right here. I want those letters back or else."

MR. YOKAHAMA removed his monocle from his left eye. Terry almost gasped when he saw the purple mouse he had laid on that eye with his fist. The black eye looked painful. Mr. Yokahama carefully reached into his pocket and pulled out the two letters. He handed them back to Terry who took them eagerly.

"Read them," said Mr. Yokahama. "You will understand then."

Terry finished the letter which Hugh Mitchell had written directly to him. The second page said:

> It is possible, Terry, that some one is attempting a second Sarajevo in Shanghai. This will be of no avail if the report reaches Hobson. If you need a friend, put all your trust in Fuji Yokahama who will undoubtedly contact you. He is a Japanese military agent of the first water and will be of invaluable assistance, should you need help.

Terry glanced up. The second page looked as though Hugh had written it. But there *was* the possibility that it might be a forgery. Suppose Mr. Yokahama were trying—

"No," said Mr. Yokahama crisply. "It is not a forgery." It was as though he had read Terry's thoughts. "Not that I wouldn't stoop to forgery if necessary. But you will see that the findings of the committee back me up."

Terry pulled open the second letter. The envelope had already been unsealed. He hastily scanned the official-looking report which was addressed to Admiral Hobson of the British Navy. He gasped in surprise. "Why," he muttered, "this report is in favor of Japan. It accuses the Chinese of in-

vading Manchukuo to gain back land by conquest!"

"That is true," said Mr. Yokahama. "China has violated the Sino-Japanese pact. When Nippon established Manchukuo with its own exemplary head, a pact was drawn and signed in which Japan guaranteed to respect all further rights of China beyond the Great Wall, and China guaranteed not to attempt invasion of Manchukuo nor the regaining of any lost territories. Neither the Chinese communists nor the Northern China Army have respected the pact. And the Aribitration Committee's findings prove that true."

Terry put the letters away. "Then," he said slowly, "it's Dirkanov! Who else could have killed Hugh? It's Dirkanov working for the Soviet—trying to stop this report from reaching London, trying to plunge Shanghai into a war scare. Dirkanov, afraid that the favorable report to Japan will make Japan look to Siberia for new worlds to conquer. That's why Dirkanov was assigned to a China station by the Soviet. How did Dirkanov know that Hugh Mitchell had returned from the interior? How could he have known when it was a secret? And yet he said he had an appointment with Hugh at nine o'clock!"

Mr. Yokahama shrugged. "I was waiting for Mitchell's return myself. The only reason I knew he was back was that I heard him in the next room when he tried to call for help after he had been poisoned and was in agony. But even then, when I got there, Alexis Dirkanov was already in the room."

"I'm not forgetting you," Terry said, openly suspicious. "You still could be behind all this. The letter about you might be a forgery. You might have your own motives for not wanting the report made public. But I've got to throw in with you and take the chance. I need your help. But if I see one thing out of order concerning you, Mr. Yokahama, I'll slip a slug into your carcass with no regrets at all. That's a warning. Let's go!"

"Let's go?" Mr. Yokahama said, scowling and making his gaunt face more somber than it normally was. "But where?"

"To Dirkanov's place!" Terry snapped. "There's the hornet's nest. Wang Soy said Dirkanov was at the International Bar. That's a help. We're going to his place while he's out and we'll search the hive from cellar to attic. I've got a hunch we'll find the lost committee right there!"

Mr. Yokahama raised his brows. "They have foxes in America, too, then?" He smiled slightly. "Very well, Mr. Malone. Let us go."

V

THE home of Count Alexis Dirkanov was a great stone house with great marble dragons carved on its front, and two huge stone lions guarding the entrance on West Fuy Street. Yokahama's driver stopped the car boldly in front of the house, and Mr. Yokahama and Terry got out. They passed quickly by the lions and walked through the beautiful Chinese court in which a pretty garden was blooming. Terry still had the .38 pistol in his hand, held taut against his side on a level line for anything. "If you've got a gun," he told Yokahama, "you'd better have it handy."

"Handy, yes," Mr. Yokahama said. "But not in the open. You must move with caution, not break into a house with an open gun. There is law in Shanghai, you know, and your theory

may be incorrect. Consider that."

"Yeah," Terry muttered. "You're right." He slipped his own pistol into an easy-to-reach pocket and they mounted the stone steps to the front door and rang the bell.

It was an eternity before any one answered. But Terry did not ring twice. Presently, they heard the shuffle of footsteps within. The door opened warily. A man looked out. "Yes sir?"

"Count Dirkanov, please," Mr. Yokahama said.

Terry was staring hard at the servant. The man was Chinese. He was not dressed like a servant at all. He was dressed in ordinary street clothes, a blue coat with a flapping tail, and blue stiff trousers. A common Shanghai street garb for a Chinaman.

"Count Dirkanov not in," the Chinaman said.

"But Miss Alba is," Terry said quickly. "Besides we have an appointment with the Count. He asked us to wait for him in the event that we arrived here first."

"Just a minute," said the Chinaman.

The door closed and they warmed their heels again for a full minute before the Chinese came back and said, "Count Dirkanov thought maybe strangers called. He will see you now. Enter."

They went in. Mr. Yokahama kept his hand in his pocket upon his gun. Terry did likewise. They followed the Chinaman through the luxuriously appointed halls to the main living room, a room of gorgeous rugs and art work and glistening pottery. Count Alexis Dirkanov and the fragile Tanya Alba sat together in the center of the room with a samovar between them. They did not rise when Terry and Mr. Yokahama entered.

Dirkanov was holding a long Russian cigarette between fingers that seemed abnormally tense. Even in the shadows of the discreet and gloomy lighting, his face looked drawn and pale. Terry glanced at Tanya Alba. and saw that a sort of uneasy constraint had left its mark on her, as well. Her spine was absolutely rigid, and all the flowing grace had gone out of her body.

Blue smoke from Dirkanov's cigarette curled slowly upward and lay heavily about his head.

There was a little awkward pause. Terry's senses were assailed by the tension that crowded that room like a physical, explosive force. He had the feeling that if someone were to toss the proper sort of match into it, the whole thing would burst apart in flame and smoke. Only Terry could not guess what that figurative match might be, and he wasn't sure whether the explosion that it would cause would serve his purpose—or destroy him. This called for wary going. He turned his head toward Mr. Yokahama. The slant-eyed, Japanese face did not move a muscle, the eyes didn't change, and the mouth remained immobile; but somehow, almost weirdly, Terry knew that Mr. Yokahama felt the same way about that room and the two terror-frozen people in it that he did.

Death was in front of all of them; at their sides and at their backs. He could not explain it, he could only feel it, and know that it was there.

That motionless second seemed to last like the endless years of a dragged-out dream. Then Tanya Alba rose, slowly. She shot Dirkanov a warning look, but did it clumsily. Terry was surprised; he had expected her to be more adroit about that sort of thing.

"How do you do, Mr. Malone?"

Tanya Alba said, very slowly, while the tapering fingers of her hand played nervous games with the gold sash of her black dress. "May I give you tea?"

Terry waved a hand at the Japanese agent. "This is my friend, Mr. Fuji Yokahama," he said.

Tanya Alba nodded slightly. Dirkanov rose halfway from his chair and bowed, clumsily. "We have met before, I believe," he said.

"Yes," Mr. Yokahama agreed, and the sound was pure hiss.

"We didn't come for tea," Terry began. "We came to—"

The glass that Dirkanov had been holding dropped to the floor. It landed on the thick-napped Chinese carpet with a dull thud. It didn't break. That bothered Terry more than anything else. The sound of a good smashing of glass, he felt, would have been a comforting commotion. But everything in this room was deadened. Sound could not be above a whisper. Glass would not break. It was all muffled, and terrible, distorted.

Tanya Alba said, as if she were an actress reading a difficult part and saying lines that came unnaturally to her and needing a fury of concentration, "I was so sorry that the Count and I could not join you and that amusing little Chinese friend of yours for cocktails this afternoon. . . ."

TERRY frowned. Her unexpected cordiality baffled him. And then he began to remember. The Count had not been included in his half jesting invitation. Nor had he mentioned any Chinese friend. Tanya Alba hadn't even given that invitation an instant's thought. She had valued it correctly for what it was—the opening move in a brash and clumsy attempt at flirtation—and had dismissed it angrily with a resounding slap. Why hark back to it now? And why ring in changes on a stupid, and for Terry, embarrassing theme?

His answer was automatic. "Sure. I'm sorry, too. Maybe another time. Later—" Then he turned to the man. "Count Dirkanov, I want to check up on one or two things. Like, for instance, how you happened to have that appointment with Hugh Mitchell this afternoon? How did you know he was in town?"

Dirkanov rubbed a dazed hand across his eyes. "I—I am sorry, Mr. Malone, I really cannot discuss that with you now. Another time, perhaps. I—I do not feel myself today—" He gestured helplessly. He wet his lips before going on. "Will you dine with us tonight at eight at the International Bar? We can talk it over then—"

Mr. Yokahama pressed forward Mr. Yokahama did not want to leave. But Mr. Yokahama was wrong about that. Terry kicked him on the shins as hard as he could without being noticed.

"That would be best. Come along, Mr. Yokahama. Until tonight then, Count. *Au 'voir,* Miss Alba." His eyes rested for a moment on her face, insistently. She looked away quickly.

"I will—I will look for—you," Dirkanov faltered, his mouth working feverishly and nervously. "Good day, gentlemen."

The tension in the room had now enfiladed the house. It tightened the back of Terry's neck as the Chinaman returned to usher them out. Mr. Yokahama, puzzled, followed Terry and the Chinaman. Mr. Yokahama's eyes opened very wide.

When they reached the outside door, Terry, without warning, yanked out his gun. The Chinaman was opening

the door when Terry slammed him hard on the back of the head with the pistol barrel. The thud made little sound. Terry grabbed the man before he fell and gently let him down. Then he hastily opened the door all the way and closed it loudly so that it could be heard through the house.

"What—" Mr. Yokahama started to whisper.

"Quiet," Terry said. "Gun out. That room back there. There's something wrong. The Alba girl called my attention to it pretty neatly. You see, she told a pointless lie—but a lie that only I would understand. No one listening would get it. So that was how she told me there *was* someone listening. See?"

Terry timed himself by his wrist watch. They stayed in the hall for a full minute. Then he started back. He felt as though he were creeping for that living room like some jungle cat stalking its prey. The .38 was steady in his hand, hammer cocked, safety off. He glanced at Mr. Yokahama and saw that the Japanese had a .45 Colt in tow. The trek from the hall back to the living room took ages, ages filled with grim expectation and the fear that a footfall might give them away.

WHEN they neared the alcove entrance of the room, they heard voices. Dirkanov was pleading for something, his low bass tremulous with fear. The voices which replied to him were openly Chinese.

Terry reached the alcove and paused. Mr. Yokahama came up right behind him. "Ready?" Terry said. And when Mr. Yokahama nodded and fixed his monocle steadily in place, Terry added, "Then let's take them clean."

He stepped into the alcove with Mr. Yokahama, both of them with the pistols ready to go. A second passed.

"Stick up your hands!" Terry snapped before he saw anyone. "And stick 'em up pronto!"

Confusion exploded in the living room. Terry saw that Tanya Alba and Count Dirkanov were still sitting in the same chairs where they had been previously. But there were four Chinamen in flapping blue coats in the room now too, and two of them carried revolvers while the other two held long-bladed knives. They were trying to set up a machine gun—or had been until Terry burst into view.

And then Terry saw the fifth Chinaman, the man who was directing the others, the ringleader, a big revolver in his hand, a grim set look upon his innocuous face.

It was *Wang Soy!*

Terry gasped, could hardly believe his eyes. Wang Soy, his amusing little friend whom he had known for so long as a diligent, pleasant worker on the Shanghai *Citizen!*

But he did not have time to consider that then. He heard Mr. Yokahama shout something shrilly. He heard Mr. Yokahama's .45 pistol bang out a bullet in a roar which rang around the room and seemed to split his ears and filled his nose with the acrid bite of smokeless gunpowder.

One of the Chinamen crumpled into a limp heap, but the knife which he had thrown curved wickedly over Terry's head and imbedded itself in the wall behind with a thud which quivered the wood.

One of the Chinamen with a gun started to fire it wildly. Wang Soy shrieked something at the man. Terry fired quickly and hit the man low in the body. The bullet knocked him against the wall and he slid down to the floor.

The other Chinaman with the knife started for a second room which led into the living room through a doorless opening curtained by drapes. Terry went after him. He caught up with him when the man was fighting the portières through which he'd tried to dive head first. Terry avoided the arm with the flashing blade and hit the man on the back of his neck with the barrel of the .38 pistol. It was a terrible rabbit punch. It nearly snapped the man's vertebrae. He fell forward on his face and dropped his blade as he went out.

Behind Terry, two guns cracked. He felt his hat wrenched from his head as the bullet plucked it off. He wheeled, gun ready. The fourth Chinaman had fired at him. But the fourth Chinaman was now lying on the floor with one of Mr. Yokahama's .45 slugs through his skull, and Tanya Alba was crying hysterically, and Dirkanov still sat in his chair, transfixed with horror and fear.

THERE was only one man left. Wang Soy, who had not fired a shot from his revolver, backed into a corner of the living-room and slipped his gun into his pocket. His face was inscrutable. His eyes watched Terry's as if to ask what Terry was going to do.

"The committee!" Terry snapped. "Where is the committee?"

"In the cellar!" Dirkanov cried. "They are in the hidden room down there. I'll get them! I know where they are! Thank heaven you came back, *tovarich.* They were going to slaughter us all!"

"Yokahama," Terry snapped. "You go with Dirkanov and get those men out of here and into your car. Send them to the British Embassy and don't spare the horses!"

"Very good," replied Mr. Yokahama. "Come, Alexis." He and Dirkanov disappeared from the room.

TERRY faced Wang Soy. "You—" He could not think of a name to call him, and what, anyway, was the use of calling names? "You were the only man I felt I could trust in this whole putrid country, and you— Why, Wang Soy? Why?"

"I am sorry, Terry Malone," the little Chinese said. "But you should have remembered my words that I spoke often to you. I tried that way to warn you."

"Your words, Wang Soy?"

"Yes. I have told you many times that someday this sleeping giant of a land would stir slowly and rise once more, and that China would become the greatest empire in the world. I told you that when that day came all the foreigners would go. I told you that I would live to see that day — that I would work for it with all my heart— that I would, even, let men think me a fool for it." He smiled, a little. "You see, Terry Malone, I speak good English, too. But you never paid any attention to me. You thought I was just a funny little clown. . . ." He shrugged. "I am a patriot. That first, and then I am your friend. I could have shot you in the back while you stood there, just now."

"No," Terry said. "Hugh Mitchell was my friend, and you knew that. And you killed him. You went after him when he telephoned me. He was already dying when you told me about his message. You had put the poison into his mouth already. You did not give me his message until you knew he would say nothing—could say nothing—"

"A man can do so much," Wang

Soy said. "You were my friend, yes. But China was my father-mother."

"You tried to steer me wrong when you told me that Dirkanov was at the International Bar when he was here, held captive by your men, waiting for you to finish him off. What was your game anyhow?"

"I can tell you that," Tanya Alba cried. "He was going to kill Alexis and me. And he was going to kill the Arbitration Committee and leave our bodies here. He was going to use that machine gun for the work. It is a Japanese machine-gun. Don't you see, Mr. Malone? Wang Soy tortured Hugh Mitchell and learned that the report of the committee was against China. He planned to involve both Russia and Japan in the slaughter of the committee, put Russia and Japan at each other's throats with the rest of the world against them! He was making it logical for Japanese to have killed the committee on Russian ground. And he was going to kill Japanese, too, and leave them lying here so that Japan could say we Russians had done it and the Japs had tried to prevent it and were killed. And all the time, China would be free to perfect her own plans while Japan and Russia fought each other!"

MR. YOKAHAMA entered the room again, still carrying his gun. "The car is ready, Mr. Malone," he said. "Dirkanov and the committeemen are waiting in it. You are to take Miss Alba along into town. I will remain here and wait for the consular police."

"All right," Terry said. "I'll see you at the door, Miss Alba." She rose, nodded, and swept out. Terry turned to Wang Soy. "But I'm taking *you* along with me," he added.

Wang Soy's face was a blank mask. "If you would loan me a moment, Terry—"

"No," Terry said. "Step on it."

"I think," Mr. Yokahama said with his eyes on Wang Soy's face, "that he could be spared a moment of solitary meditation. I think it would be wise, Mr. Malone."

"But—"

"No objections, please." Mr. Yokahama nodded toward the doorway. "We will wait right beyond the door."

"Okay," Terry said. "Okay." He turned and started to go. Wang Soy called to him. Terry stopped.

"When you think of me again, Terry," he said, "remember me as the patriot, because I love my homeland as dearly as you love yours, and I know you would have done this same thing if it would have helped your United States. A patriot and a friend, Terry. Not—not a traitor—not as the man who killed your friend. . . ."

Terry walked out of the room without a word. He paused in the hall and tried to get a breath. Mr. Yokahama stood beside him, smiling coldly.

"You are still a westerner," said the Japanese agent. "You do not understand the East. Your friend in there has lost face. Especially he has lost face with you. It would be disgrace and humiliation, if you were to take him into Shanghai a prisoner, a common murderer. Whatever he has done, his motives have been high."

A single shot cracked out in the room beyond.

Terry gasped, blanched, and started back. "What the—"

"No." Mr. Yokahama detained him. "I will go." He disappeared into the living-room, then emerged quickly. "I was saying, his motives were high. He did not stand to gain personal glory or

in any way benefit himself through this embroglio. He was helping his homeland, China. We all have our countries and believe in them. I think it only correct and fitting and proper that he should have been allowed an honorable death. I would have asked for such a death myself, and expected it."

Terry wet his lips. "You mean he's—"

"Your friend," said Mr. Yokahama, "has returned to his ancestors."

The house was very still. Terry put his gun away and walked slowly out the door. He met Tanya Alba on the steps.

"I heard the shot," she said. "I supposed—he has killed himself, hasn't he?"

"Yes," Terry said bleakly.

"I am sorry," she said.

He replied, "You know, you couldn't help loving that little Chink. Friends come hard enough these days. And I've lost two of my best today." His voice sounded hollow, numbed.

"Yes," Tanya Alba said quietly, taking his arm as they went down the steps and through the court to the waiting car. "Yes, you have lost two friends today, but at least"—she pressed his arm reassuringly—"at least you have gained one. . . ."

Terry glanced at her. "Thanks," he said. Her eyes were soft and sympathetic and lovely. He thought then that they were the loveliest eyes in the world. He said to himself that he would tell her so—maybe—sometime. . . .

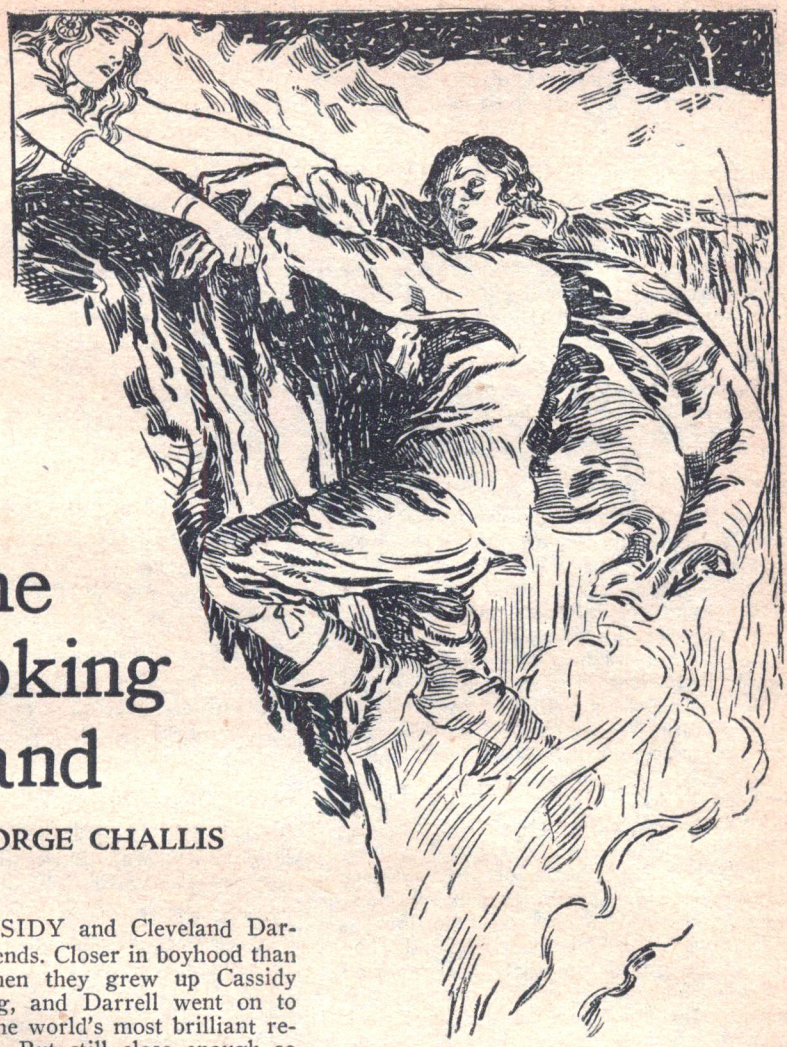
The Wasteless Land

AS synonymous with the New Germany as "Heil Hitler!" is the word *Ersatz*, which, strictly speaking, means "replacement" or "substitution." But food is pretty hard to replace; no German scientist has yet found a substitute for beefsteak—or for cows either—and so the word *ersatz* has acquired the additional meaning of "Don't waste anything!" The tinfoil that you cast from your cigarette package into a Berlin gutter, the bone from that chop you had for dinner—in fact practically anything that you are through with—will be gathered and converted, or perhaps fed to a hog, all in keeping with the program to make Germany a self-sufficient state.

German youth has been organized into an efficient corps of scavengers and, under its hawklike surveillance, it is pretty hard for a stray pin or a bottle cap to escape. Such odd bits of metal refuse are especially precious because Germany wants metal for arms. The pin, by a marvelous mutation, may become part of a bomber's propeller, and the bottle cap may one day, in a lethal shape, spat between a man's ribs. *Ersatz!*

It will take a future archæologist (preferably an alert young fellow with glasses who will emerge from a test-tube on June 19th, 3037) to interpret this particular contradiction in our civilization.

Eric Sharpe.



The Smoking Land

By GEORGE CHALLIS

SMOKY CASSIDY and Cleveland Darrell were friends. Closer in boyhood than as men, for when they grew up Cassidy took to ranching, and Darrell went on to become one of the world's most brilliant research scientists. But still close enough so that when Darrell, engaged on some imagination-staggering discovery, asks Smoky for his help in guarding the remote and impenetrable laboratory Smoky comes a-running.

And that night, with Smoky on watch, an explosion blows out the laboratory walls and tears off the side of a mountain. Had Darrell tapped some terrific atomic force—or was the flaming havoc the work of the mysterious "they" that Darrell called Smoky in to protect him from?

Cassidy is nagged by a feeling that somehow he might have saved his friend—and even more insistent is his unreasoning conviction that Darrell—somewhere, somehow—is still alive. A piece of wood that is not like any wood known to man is found in British Columbia. On it, in the scrawled penmanship of Cleve Darrell's boyhood, is the cryptic message:

Bound north of Alaska for the smoking land . . .

CASSIDY then and there determines to find the Smoking Land—and Cleve Darrell. He studies the Esquimau language, sells his ranch, and moves north. But the natives do not know the Smoking Land, and old-time traders and trappers treat Cassidy's quest as a joke.

Nevertheless, bit by bit, Cassidy develops the theory that the Land may be one of the

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little known glacial islands near the Ice Pole. Scanderov, a Scandinavian scientist, intrigued by Cassidy's project, gives him all the assistance and advice he can, and Cassidy sets out in a small boat-sled, accompanied only by Murder, a white, half-savage dog of unknown breed inherited by Cassidy from a mysterious fugitive who trembled with terror when Smoky mentioned the name of the Smoking Land.

After eight months, Cassidy finds the island he seeks. On it is a mountain from whose crest rises a billowing plume of white smoke—and he knows that his trail is ended. He has found the Smoking Land.

But things are not so simple as that. Cassidy is taken prisoner by a party of huge, bearded fur-clad men who look like the Vikings of old—and speak English!

FROM that point on the nightmarish aspects of Cassidy's adventure expand at an alarming rate. Because of his revolver, and because no one will believe that he could have come across the ice-locked sea except through the intervention of unearthly powers, Cassidy is accused of sorcery. Hungry for the taste of beef after eight months of exclusively seal diet, he had killed one of a herd of musk-oxen he had seen grazing on the tundra. The cattle, it develops, are under the protection of the nameless goddess and Cassidy's action is regarded as sacrilege. It looks, in fact, as if Cassidy is to be roasted alive.

Meantime he has been led through a town and into the very heart of the smoking mountain. He has seen crowds of men, women, and children dressed according to the fashions of Elizabethan England. The soldiers who guard him carry halberds and axe-headed spears. The people address each other as *thee* and *thou*. In the huge rock cavern to which he is led, there is a mammoth statue of the nameless goddess—and a lovely, silvery girl who is her priestess, and who, quite without malice or cruelty or any sort of feeling at all, condemns Cassidy to the flames.

But the priestess, at the last moment, accepts the dog Murder's frenzied attempt to save his master as a sign from the goddess. Cassidy is released and dressed in fabulous garments. He begins to enter into the spirit of the occasion, and struts like a peacock in his new and outlandish finery.

The priestess, seen in a less official capacity, proves to be a charming person, young and calm and gentle. She and her companion, Alice, take a great interest in Cassidy's story, and Sylvia, the priestess, promises to aid him.

FARTHER inland live the men of the mountains whom no one dares approach. Holy men, they are, and very wise. If Cleve Darrell is in the Smoking Land, the men of the mountain will know him, and Sylvia sends them a message.

The answer she receives plainly disturbs her. She looks at Cassidy with pity in her eyes. "You have come far—for a friend," she says. "Listen. 'Thou wilt say to the stranger that what he would find may be found. But the way to it leads by the Fountain of Life!'"

She drops the parchment into her lap and sits there looking at Cassidy with all the compassion in her heart.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE

"THE Fountain of Life!" muttered the captain of the guard, with a nervous awe in his voice.

"The Fountain of Life!" Alice gasped, losing her pertness for the first time.

"It turns out that I'm right, and that Darrell *is* here," I said. "I don't care where the trail goes, because I'm taking it. If you'll tell me where it begins, I'll try to finish it off!"

"Wilt thou attempt it?" says Sylvia.

"He never has seen the Fountain," said Alice, "or the way that leads by it. Otherwise, his heart surely would shrink and wither at the thought of such a thing."

"Nay, Alice," said the priestess, "for friendship is a mighty thing, and it flies to the stars, and anon it reacheth to the center of the earth. Thou shalt behold the way, and I myself shall show it to thee. Alice, wilt thou come?"

The pert Alice shook her head until her fancy headdress tinkled like small bells. "I have seen it once," said she, "as we all must do, and once is enough for my spirit. The horrid dream of it follows me by night. I have seen the Fountain of Life, and one sight of it is enough. Wilt thou go down willingly, even to the entrance to the monstrous place, Sylvia?"

"Behold, my will is even the will of the goddess," said Sylvia, "and I feel that she leadeth me now."

So she stood up, and we left Alice behind

us in the garden, still calling after Sylvia, imploring her not to be rash; but the priestess was as calm and steady as a statue.

We had for an escort on the beginning of this strange journey—the strangest, surely, that ever a man could make—two pairs of halberdiers, led by the gallant captain. We marched by long, descending chambers, halls, and narrow corridors, sometimes along inclines, sometimes down interminable flights of steps carved in the naked rock, until we had gone down to such a depth that the temperature increased perceptibly, and a warm reek of moisture was standing out on the walls, and the lantern light gleamed weirdly along the corridors.

Finally we reached a great vaulted room in which there were a dozen soldiers, scantily clad because of the heat.

They made a great scampering to cover themselves when the priestess came in, but her straightforward eyes did not so much as glance at them. To a gray-headed man whose gleaming sword hilt seemed to pronounce him a gentleman, she said:

"There is one come who would look at the Fountain of Life, and the way that goes beside it. Therefore, let the door be opened!"

The gray beard gave me a long, bewildered look, and then he bowed to Sylvia and said that the thing should be done. He declared, though, that it was a bad time.

He had no sooner said it, than we heard an explosion that shook the floor under us, a vast and muffled sound that roared behind the thick walls of stone.

THE gray beard, who had turned away, came back and asked if Sylvia still wanted the thing done. And she smiled at him, gently.

"Thou knowest well," said she, "in whose name I come!"

"I know well," said he, solemnly. Going back to a corner of the room, he pulled on a lever that thrust up out of the floor. I heard a click and a grinding, as though great bolts were drawing. He pulled several more levers, and now I saw a great section of the wall yawning outward, turning on a pivot.

A gap perhaps ten feet high allowed a tide of hot air to pour out at us. And I could gaze into an enormous enclosure, where the red of firelight played, wavering up and down. It was like looking into a furnace where the fires have been banked.

"There is the Fountain of Life," said Sylvia, pointing.

And, as she spoke, looking far down into the abyss I saw a white fountain of fire rise, and stand trembling, throwing off incredible floods of light before it broke at the neck and fell in a brilliant rushing of luminous drops.

A faint groan came from the other men in the room. I wanted to groan, myself, but my voice was frozen in the bottom of my throat, and my hair was lifting on my head.

"There is the way," said Sylvia, who was totally unperturbed. "There is the way—running to the right, along the cliff. You may follow its winding with your eye, from this point. And when you come to the sharp turn, then you will see it extending further, toward another portal, like this, with what seem to be great columns standing before it. This is the entrance to the dwelling of the men of the mountain, the seers and the wise ones who govern the land under the will of the goddess. Beside it is a metal shield, sunk in the rock. Strike against this, and the door will presently be opened, and admit you. Go, therefore, my friend, while the way is open!"

I went on to the doorway, and one step through it along the path which she had pointed out, but there my feet stuck to the rock and would not budge, for looking down, I saw such a sight as staggered my mind.

Imagine a caldron a thousand feet deep, scummed over with the dross of lead, but churned from beneath, and writhing and twisting as the liquid that fills it boils, and now and again, where the scum is broken, there is the red glow of molten metal, or the white gleam of intense fire!

That was what I was looking down into, and a horrible, almost irresistible desire took me by the throat to leap from the verge of the cliff and throw myself into that boiling pot.

I knew well enough what it was. I had come to the Smoking Land, and here was the source of the smoke! It was literally the bowels of the volcano that I was looking into; and the reeking fumes of phosphorus and sulphur filled the air, and would have stifled me, except that they had overhead a free outlet, and were expelled upward by a mighty draft of heat. For I could see the lips of the crater high up, sometimes lost in the clouds of vapor, and sometimes revealed as the fires broke from the surface of the caldron.

I could not go forward along that frightful path. At any moment, another great explosion might fill the interior of the pit with thunders and with liquid fires.

I wondered about the wisdom of the "wise men" who lived next door to a volcano!

Then I heard a voice say close to my ear—for there was a continual deep roaring and growling from the liquid mass beneath me, "Brother, all that is strange seems terrible. Come forward after me, and thou wilt find the path an easy one!"

As she said this, Sylvia walked straight past me into the fire-lit gloom of that hell!

SHAME and pity and admiration all worked to dissolve my fear for a moment, and I ran forward after her. I reached her and touched her arm.

"Go back! Go back, Sylvia!" I shouted in her ear.

She said, calmly, "All is as the goddess wills it. And she wills that I go forward with you to the limits of my domain."

With that, she turned and went straight forward, again, and I followed her not because I wanted to go, but simply because I could not be outfaced by the courage of a mere girl like her!

And the heat increased around us. I never have felt such a terrible blast of it, burning and biting. She had flung a fold of her cloak about her head, and I tore off my coat and used it similarly as a shield against the heat. But no shield could help very much.

To make things worse, one moment we were stumbling over heaps of cinders, and the next, the narrow ridge almost pinched out, and we were walking on a ledge hardly half a yard in width.

I had to look down to make sure of my footing, and when I looked down, I saw the frightful vitals of the mountain writhing and throwing up crimson arms to me.

I hate to think of that moment—I hate still worse to think of the instant when, just as the path widened, I stumbled on a rolling, loose bit of rock, and fell flat, spinning over and over, until I was on the edge of the abyss.

I was on the edge, and I was falling—and then I felt the grip of the girl on me. She had thrown herself on her knees, and now I lay on the brink of the precipice with a thousand feet of nameless horror beneath me, and saw her holding her grip, though the momentum of my fall was toppling her forward.

Yes, she had committed herself utterly to the will of the goddess, that much was clear, and in another instant we both would have hurtled down into that red inferno.

But by ounces the scale turned in our favor, and I felt the strain relieved as I recovered a knee grip of the rim of the ledge, and then found a hand hold, and scrambled back to safety.

What followed, I hate to think about. It makes me bow my head and shudder. But I'll tell the truth. I got back to safety on my hands and knees, and I caught hold of the priestess and hid my frightened face in her cloak like a panic-stricken child!

Yes, and she put her hand on my head and leaned over and spoke comfort in my ear, and gave me her strong, slender hand, and helped me back to my cowardly feet!

So, hardly knowing what I did or where I was going, because fear had taken the strength out of my knees and the wits out of my head, with my shaking hand upon her shoulder, I went along that frightful

cliff with her, and turned the corner of the abyss, and saw straight ahead, perhaps a hundred yards away, a great, columned portal just as the priestess had said that I should.

It looked to me like the entrance into hell!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WHITE FIRE

WELL, I was finally steadied on my feet by some sense of shame and the hand and voice of the girl. And it seemed to me that I scarcely cared what happened then; I would be willing to jump straight into the arms of death, if necessary, to keep from showing my lack of nerve again.

When I stood up I found that things were worse than ever. In the great pit below, I heard a series of muffled explosions, and with each of these explosions there was an upward leaping of a peculiar, greenish light; followed by the showering and splashing sound as of water falling into water—except that I knew that the liquid in this case was molten rock and metals!

At the same time, the heat was trebled, and the air was thick with the stink of sulphur.

I looked back now toward the door from which we had come, but it was closed, and I had a frightful stifling feeling, as though we had been thrust into an oven and left to bake. And bake we would have, if we had lingered. The heat was so great that it seemed to lift the lids of the eyes and pry under them against the nerves of the eyeballs.

It was perfectly plain that the smoking mountain was ready for something more than smoke. And the girl and I ran until we were hardly a dozen steps from the second gate.

Then she touched my arm, and holding out her hand she pointed.

"Thou seest the shield," said she. "Strike on it, and the door will instantly be opened, even if the liquid fire were flowing at that moment outside it. As for me, I must go back. This door is forbidden to me!"

Through the fold of cloth that covered my mouth to shut out the fumes, I shouted at her, "You can't go back! You've got to come on with me, or else I've got to go back with you. I can't let you be alone!"

I saw enough of her face to notice the calm smile on it. She simply said, "Oh my friend, I cannot be alone. The goddess is with me to the end. Farewell!"

Now, as she said this, and while I said to myself that she was the bravest creature in the world, the same fountain of gleaming white which I had seen when I first looked into the crater now burst upward again, and from the same spot. It scattered, dissolved in overmastering brilliancy all the green glow, and shooting upward to a prodigious height, it thrust its head into the very top of the crater, filling it from lip to lip, while streams and showers more brilliant than diamonds fell back, and great masses dropped, with furling rims of bluish smoke here and there about them.

I felt a drop of liquid on my forehead, and it burned to the bone. It was like an electric shock. And I saw fire rain on Sylvia's clothes, and the curling of flame as it shot up.

But, in this moment, as she said goodbye to me, she turned and started to walk straight back along the ridge—yes, although the path was showered over by the terrible rain of that white fire, which every moment grew thicker, so that the whole interior of the volcano was a roaring and flaring mass of white flame, a thing to be dreamed of, and never truly conceived even in a dream. Vast forms seemed to be leaping and whirling in it, and voices thundered and shouted.

It might be the purpose of the priestess, Sylvia, to trust the goddess and go straight back the way that she had come, but I could not let her do that. I caught up with her in a bound and grabbed her up, burning clothes and all.

She resisted. She put her hands against my face and thrust me away. Her voice came thin and high and clear to me. "Let

me go! To pass that gate is death for me! Let me go!"

I heard the words, but they had no meaning to me.

I mean to say, there was too much else going on, and the one thing that mattered was to get the pair of us out of the touch of that ocean of liquid fire.

And I reached the shield and beat on it like a madman. It seemed to me, as I turned my back on the towering Fountain of Life, that the thing bloomed greater behind me, and reached for me with millions of hands.

For only one thing could I be grateful, and this was that Sylvia no longer struggled to get away. Instead, she lay limply against me, her head fallen to the side—she had fainted.

REASON enough for that, of course, but to see her so stupefied me almost more than the fire that was roaring around me.

The heat caught me on the back of the head and the neck and filled my brain with flaring red—and then the door was no longer a solid wall before me. Hands caught at me, and snatched me in along with Sylvia. And the great rock panel closed with a crash again. My poor head was still spinning; the frightful heat did not seem to disappear suddenly, but rather it retreated in waves.

In the meantime, I found myself in a great hall, very much like that which had led to the entrance to the crater on the farther side of it. There were a score of men here all in vast turmoil. They were pointing at me, and they were jabbering about the priestess.

Now, then, as Sylvia recovered her senses and stood up from the chair into which she had fallen, a pair of big guards in steel cuirasses caught her, one by each arm, and hurried her off toward the door. They were ejecting her. She had to go back by the way she had come, and she had to go at once!

When I thought of that inferno outside the wall, and the fire that was showering upon the ledge over which we had walked, I turned sick. I ran and got in front of the men and the girl.

She was stepping along as calmly as you please, and her head was high, and her look was perfectly steady. I could not even see that her face was very pale.

I held up my hand and stopped them. "Do you realize," I shouted at them, "what it would be? Murder! I tell you, it would be murder! No goddess, nothing else that you believe in could keep her alive for one minute out there!"

"Answer him, lady," said one of the guards.

And she said to me, "Do you doubt her power, when she has laid her own finger on your forehead and marked you for her own? How else could you have walked through the fire, except by her permission? And if I am worthy, I shall return unharmed even through the heart of the flame!"

As she finished this magnificent balderdash, the two guards nodded in solemn agreement.

"Let the door be opened!" one of them said. "Pull the levers, Ralph!"

"You infernal murderers!" I shouted, and grabbed my saber out of its scabbard.

I wanted to carve their heads to the chin, and I was too dizzy to realize the number of hands that were against me. Two or three caught me from behind and jammed me back against the wall with enough force to knock half the wind out of my lungs. At the same time the door to the crater slid open.

It was like opening the door to a furnace. The heat that thrust into the room struck through my clothes as though they had been tissue paper, and seared my skin. I could hardly see and the serene face of that girl as she walked forward was a dreamed vision.

The frightful blast had literally knocked her escort back on their heels, but Sylvia went straight forward, with a smile, and her head held high, into the crematory. One instant more, and there would be nothing left of her but an ash flinging about and

dissolving in that accursed Fountain of Life, as they chose to call it.

But then a voice shouted loudly, in command, and instantly the door slid across the gap and closed the white fire away from my aching eyes.

I tried to shout, but all that came from my throat was a babbling groan. My body went limp, and I felt the sagging of my weight as the two guards held me up.

Then, like a womanish fool, I fainted.

I CAME to looking up at an arched ceiling, coffered and carved in the most elaborate fashion, with three Gothic liernes springing from the three corners of the oddly shaped little chamber and meeting in a rosette in the center of the ceiling.

Then I was aware of a bandage that had been fitted around my forehead, and of the sting of the wound under it, and of twenty other burning places where the fire had cut through to my flesh. I was feverish and cold, at the same time. And I was still trembling a good deal.

"He lives!" said a woman's voice.

"He was marked for life by the goddess," said another.

I turned my head and saw a pair of old women close beside the bed. They were huddled up in what looked a good deal like Mother Hubbards; they had white neckerchiefs done about their shoulders, little white three-cornered hats on their heads, like pictures I had seen of sixteenth or seventeenth century village women. I liked their faces. They looked wise and calm as only old women can look. No man ever reads through such a book of experience as a woman comes to know. The print is too fine for man's grosser eyes.

When they saw me turn my head, one of them came up still closer and asked me how I was. I said that I was well enough, and I wanted to know where the girl could be. At this they both looked dark and shook their heads.

They were so exceedingly gloomy about it that I sat up at once and repeated my question. They only shook their heads again.

Said the older of the two, "Thou knowest that the will of the goddess must be accomplished. She hath delivered her priestess through the forbidden gate. Surely death must follow."

I had gooseflesh from head to foot when I heard this. "But look here," said I, "you don't mean that they'll throw her out into the crater of the volcano? They wouldn't do that!"

One of the dames smiled a little at my simplicity. "Truly, if the goddess would have taken her by fire, with her own terrible hand she would have seized her and made her her own. But instead, she delivered her over to the hands of men, and sent her through the forbidden door, and robbed her of her senses."

"Yes," said the other old woman, "and laid her finger upon your forehead, that every man might know that you were her messenger. There was never a manifestation of her will more direct than this!"

I stared at the pair of them. "Exactly what will happen to Sylvia?" said I.

"What should happen to her except the headsman's ax?" said the oldest woman. "Now you are better, taste this cup. It will give you sudden strength and lighten your heart."

With that she held out a goblet of glass of the finest rock crystal. Crystal, I should have said, by the weight of it, and I looked into a rich, dark red liquid that had faint sparklings of light in it.

The fragrance of it filled the room; but I was not of a mind to be drinking liquors when there was murder in the air—murder planned for Sylvia. I got to my feet, forgetting my burns and other aches and pains.

There was no window in this room, and yet a current of cool sweet air blew lightly against my face. I had been lying on a long divan, or couch, and opposite me there was a stately four-poster, draped with rich and tasseled curtains that had the sheen of velvet. They were blue and red, and handsome enough for a king to sleep behind. A very thick carpet covered the floor, and made footfalls silent, and in the center of

the room was a table on which lay all of my belongings that had been taken from me when I first arrived in the mountain. There was my good old Colt's, and the long stiletto-like knife, and there were even my sooty, travel worn furs, and my little heap of ammunition. Not many bullets, but enough to count in some pinch, perhaps. I stared at them wonderingly trying to decide how they got there. At the order of the mountain men when I had laid off my things? Probably. Apparently little happened on the island that the mountain men were unaware of.

I took in these quarters and decided that if they had been assigned for my use, I was being very handsomely treated. However, I wanted to get the frightful thought of a judicial murder out of my mind. I was seeing Sylvia led up to a block, with her hands tied behind her, and a black mask tied across her brave, patient face. I could see her still smiling, as she had smiled when she stepped forward to enter the crater.

"THIS thing has to be stopped," I shouted. "I've got to get to someone in authority. I've got to tell him what actually happened. You hear me? Don't stand there like a pair of blithering idiots. Tell me what I'm to do! I can't stand here while Sylvia is slaughtered like an ox. I owe her my life!"

One of these bland nitwits said to me with the calmest of smiles: "It was the goddess who saved thee, my son; for what power is in the hand of her priestess except the will of the nameless name?"

This answer made me hotter than ever. I told them that I would go mad unless I could get to someone with power to stop that execution.

"Oh, there is no haste. For such a thing as the execution of a priestess is not quickly done. The people must be warned, and a great festival be made, and who will keep from singing and happiness on such a day as that?"

I was fairly flabbergasted by this. "Woman, do you mean to say that people would sing and dance while that charming, that lovely—is being murdered?"

The old eyes opened innocently at me. "Ah, my son," says she, "and what could make us sing and laugh except the knowledge that the goddess—"

"Oh, confound the goddess!" said I.

They huddled away from me towards the door, terrified. "Oh, vain-hearted man, what a word dost thou apply to the nameless name?"

I listened to them, somewhere between amusement and disgust. If I had a bit of time, perhaps I could do something. And it seemed that because a splash of molten stone had scalded me to the bone in the exact center of my forehead, I was more or less a distinguished fellow in their eyes.

In the meantime, I got certain facts straight. They were about the strangest facts that I ever heard, but I put them down in order.

1. No member of the priesthood of the land must ever enter the house of the sages. 2. If a sanctified person crossed the boundary, he must be repelled and hurled back at once into the fire, or else the headsman would put him or her to death before all the people. 3. That at such an execution, the sacrifice assumed all the guilt and all the sins of the entire populace, and that when a priestess was murdered in this way, her blood atoned for every crime. The criminals were even let out of the prison, and those doomed to punishment were forgiven by the state. 4. These executions of a priestess did not happen very often.

As for the vicarious atonement for sin, making one person the scapegoat of many, I had heard something about the business long before. But it was a frightful shock to find that English speaking people in the Twentieth Century, at the Ice Pole or at the equator, either, should believe in such dark superstition as this!

However, the fact was there, and Sylvia would have to die because, in doing a good turn to a poor fool of a stranger, she had been cut off from return to safety.

But I could understand, now, why she fainted when she saw that I was bent on carrying her to the forbidden gate.

You might think that she would have preferred a later death by the axe to an instant horror by fire. But as long as life was in her, she would not be able to believe that the fire of the goddess could touch her; and if in fact she was swallowed by the flames, it meant that the goddess had decided to accept her, and had instantly gathered her to the divine bosom!

When I made this out from what the old women told me, a good many things were clear. And if I had luck, I would beat this bloodthirsty people out of their chance to get rid so easily of all their sins!

WHILE they were talking, they brushed me off, and when they saw that I was pretty well singed, here and there, they went off and brought me a complete new outfit, about ten jumps ahead of the burned one. And now, all in purple and gold, with a tremendous cloak sweeping back over one shoulder, I was taken to interview they did not know whom—they simply had been ordered to bring me to a certain door.

And, when they had landed me there, at the end of several winding corridors and flights of steps, all apparently cut out of the living rock, they knocked, and turned the doorknob, and saw me inside; then scurried off.

No, I was sort of pushed in by myself, and then I found myself in a long, narrow room which was rigged up like a laboratory. At its far end was a big man wearing a long white robe, or apron, that covered him from neck to heel; and his head was covered with a white coif. His back was turned to me, and he was giving all his attention to a balance scales of the most delicate sort. The beam, mind you, was no bigger than a ray of light, so to speak; it looked as though a breath could be measured in that machine, and the man in white was adjusting the balance by touching it with a long needle.

I waited a minute, but no one else appeared, and no one spoke to me, so finally I cleared my throat rather noisily.

The big fellow in white turned slowly about. When he faced me, I saw that his face was masked in a gruesome way, and that he was looking out of narrowed eye slits. Perhaps that was because of the faint, acrid odor that filled the air.

But when he saw me, the needle—if that's what the tool was—dropped out of his hand and tinkled on the floor. And the man himself slumped into a chair, and grabbed the arms of it hard with his hands.

Even at that distance, I could feel him shake. I said, "I was sent here. But maybe I'm interrupting something important."

The man in white gave me no answer for another long moment. Then he pushed himself up from his chair on trembling arms and standing before me, he tore the hood from his head.

His hair was as white as the cloth had been; I never have seen a finer, purer head of silver hair. But the face under it was young. It was a worn and tortured face, but it was wonderfully familiar to me.

And then he said, "Are you, in mercy's name, Bill Cassidy—or his ghost?"

It was the voice of Cleve Darrell!

CHAPTER XIX

REUNION AT THE ICE POLE

MY mind, stunned and protesting, half denied my eyes and all my other senses, and vowed that this could not be he—not Cleve Darrell—but a cousin, a brother, an older man, who had lived a long weary time in the center of hell!

But I started for him with my hands out, grinning, and then laughing, and then howling like an hysterical fool with joy and bewilderment and wonder. For I had spent too much life and time in the search for him to really believe, in the end, that I had found him.

And as I crossed the floor to get to him, a million pictures crossed my mind, also, such as the gun of poor Franklin, and the Eskimo dead, face downwards, in the snow; and I saw the iceberg turn turtle again, and felt once more the flaming white rush of the Fountain of Life as it filled the crater of the volcano.

I began wringing his hands, while he looked on me without a smile, but with wonder and awe.

Then, when I could get my voice working, I cried out, "Cleve, what brought you here, and how did you come, and what happened in the laboratory, and what was behind your disappearance, and did you really come up here just to be safely alone with your work?"

Then, at last, he smiled, faintly. "Leave that all to the side. I got up here without a miracle. You may find out how, later on. I'm not sure. But you—did you fly? Have you landed an aeroplane up here?"

I shook my head.

"You don't fly an aeroplane," said I, "to find a place that doesn't exist. No, Cleve. I'll tell you what—I came out of a crazy story in a crazy book that's out of print, and the only copy is destroyed. Everything that happened to me from first to last is a dream that never happened—any more than it's true that I'm talking to you here in the midst of nowhere."

He merely nodded. "Now start at the first," said he.

Well, I started at the first. I told him the whole yarn. By the time I was nearly finished, I had lost most of my interest in what *had* happened. I broke out:

"Now what happens to that girl? Don't tell me that she's really to be sacrificed for any such fool idea as the atonement for public sin!"

I'll never forget how he looked at me, when I said this, and how his grave glance seemed to measure me up and down, while he found the right words for the answer—as a man does when he has to speak to a child about a matter which it's hard to express in words of one syllable.

"Out with it, Cleve. Tell me the truth. You don't have to use logarithms about a subject like this!"

"Tell me what the girl means to you, Smoky."

"It isn't what she means to me that counts," said I. "She's over and above me. She's outside the understanding, even, of an ordinary fellow like me."

Said Darrell, with his faint, old smile, "She's one of those rare creatures, a perfect woman. Is that it?"

It made me mad. I glared at him. "You think that I'm sentimental about her," said I. "But let me tell you this. If she's not perfect to look at, at least she's *my* idea of beauty. She's all that my eye can hold. And as for the rest, she has all the courage, dignity, grace, gentleness, sweetness, and humility that could be packed inside one human skin."

"Men always are apt to do this. Christian men, I mean. It's the inheritance we have from the middle ages—the worship of the Virgin Mary, transferred to an idealization of all women. I'm not criticizing you, Smoky. But it's interesting to see the thing break out in you in such a clear and elementary form of worship. She *does* seem more than mortal to you, by a good long shot, doesn't she?"

"What if she does?" I snapped. "And now I want to hear you, as you sit back and analyze me, and analyze a girl that you've never seen. I want to find out what higher mathematics does when it lays hold on a creature that's only a name. I want to see you materialize Sylvia. Go ahead, Cleve."

"YOU'RE angry," said he. "And I don't blame you, in a way, for being angry. I can only tell you this, about the girl, the priestess. It may be for the best that she is to be sacrificed. If she is sacrificed at all, it *will* be because it is for the best."

"You mean to tell me," said I, lowering my voice, and speaking through my teeth, "that there's a *best* which can be served by the murder of that girl? Lord, Cleve, if you could have seen her walking toward the horrible white face of the fire, ready to step right off into it—you wouldn't be so calm about the thing, just now!"

"Wouldn't I?" said Darrell.

I hardly dared to look up from the floor to his face, because I expected to find the cold, reflective smile on it. And by heaven, I was right—the smile was there.

I stepped back from him, because I wanted to get a better, a more thoroughly comprehensive mental grip on the whole subject of this man's mind and heart.

"Cleve," said I, "you are always outside my sphere in mathematics, and that sort of thing, but you always had a human being's heart. Have you lost it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "According to your way of looking at things," said he, "perhaps I have."

"The poor girl I've been talking about—say it straight out, that she means nothing to you."

"If I must say it straight out, as you command," said he, "then I must admit that I care very little what happens to her."

I was white hot. I was choked with anger and disgust, and disbelief that this was Cleve Darrell speaking to me. I counted out my points on the tips of my fingers.

"Am I your friend, Cleve?"

He said, with something in his voice that meant a good deal, "No man ever had a better."

"Thanks," said I. "But I just want to be logical. Except for that girl, where would your friend be now?"

"Charred in the bottom of the crater, I suppose," said he, blandly.

"She saved me from that," said I. "Then answer me—how can you help feeling something about her?"

"Well, Smoky, I won't go into the thing and try to be logical. I'll simply have to tell you that my heart has invested itself in other things. That's all!"

"Heaven help you, Cleve," said I. "You've gone ahead so far that you've dehumanized yourself!"

He listened to me quietly, thoughtfully, and his voice was deep, and utterly calm, as he answered. "There are goals of the human race—goals of achievement and of progress so glorious, so divine, Smoky, that when one conceives them, and begins to put hand to the labor, the welfare of individual ceases to be of much importance."

I believed what he said. It sickened me, but I believed it. And suddenly my whole journey to the north seemed a fantastic and senseless thing. The Cleve Darrell I had been trying to "rescue" was utterly non-existent. The old Darrell was wiped out and in its place was a mere reasoning machine.

I said at last. "All I've heard about her, so far, is from a pair of old women; I don't believe what they tell me. I can't believe people can be such devils. Will you find out the truth for me—the exact truth?"

He hesitated a moment, even over this request, but at last he nodded. "Yes, I'll find out for you exactly what is to happen to her. And now, Smoky, tell me what your hopes and plans are."

"My plans are to get you and that girl, and take you both back to civilization."

"How?" said he.

"By the way that I came."

"You had one of the greatest bits of freakish luck that I've ever heard of. I doubt if another man, even with all of your courage and adroitness, could manage to get through—not one in a hundred, if a hundred tried every year for a century. The drift of the ice must have been exactly perfect. If we three were to start out on such a trip, we'd all die."

He was so calm and logical about it, that I grew furious again. "Then, if my plan doesn't seem good to you, what do *you* suggest?"

"You must understand, Smoky, that your magnificent journey to the north was undertaken through a misconceptoin. You thought that I would wish to be rescued from some mysterious difficulty. You'll have to understand, instead of that, that I'm engaged in greater and happier work than I've ever undertaken before. I can't leave my place here. I don't wish to." He said it with a lift of his head and a ring in his voice.

I TELL you, malice and almost hatred came up in me when I heard him say that. "Tell me this—that piece of metallized wood or whatever it is—that piece with the message scratched on it—"

"Well?" said he.

"Wasn't that a cry for help that you threw out—and an incomplete cry because you were cut off from the chance of finishing it?"

His face darkened. "That's a matter that I can't discuss," said he.

"All right," said I. "We'll drop it. But let's talk some more about the other thing. . . . I've spent a couple of years and more in trailing you. And I can't help being interested in you, even if you're no longer interested in the world. Tell me again—you really prefer to stay here, at your work?"

"I do," said he.

"With a hope of returning to your country, or not?"

"That's a matter of no importance," said he.

"Your country is of no importance?"

"No."

"The fact that you're an American—that's of no importance?" He shrugged his shoulders. His head went up higher than before, and I continued, in a hard, steady voice, pressing him. "And the whole business that used to knock you kicking, you loved it so much—the old Rocky Mountains, and the shooting trips, and the evenings by the campfire—"

"Smoky," said he, "I'm sorry to say that it seems to me that you're talking like a child!"

"I remember you sitting by the campfire, one night," said I, "after we'd been trailing an old scoundrel of a grizzly all day—and the grizzly, we finally found, had been play-hunting us—I remember at the end of that hot day, when the cool of the night was turned on, and the stars came out of the faucet and filled up the sky with a shower—I remember you drinking your coffee, and looking up, and saying that all your work could go hang, and all the mathematics in the world could never get a man half as close to God as you were at that moment! But you've changed your mind since then, I guess?"

"Smoky," said he, "a man's life cannot be measured by years. It's only a little over two years since I last saw you. But I'm more than two years older. A good deal more. To you it seems, I'm sure, that hardly enough months and years have passed to enable me to take up an entirely new viewpoint. But to me, the time seems ample. It was centuries ago that I gave up my old ideas, and melted into a new world of ideas and tastes and desires."

I looked at his white head, and his sunken eyes. No, there was nothing left to him that resembled the man I had known before. Nothing except that glorious, great, smooth brow, that seemed to represent a capacity for all the high thinking in the universe. The rest had been changed. Work, long hours, immense conceptions, might have altered him. But I had a feeling that there was something else. Pain—that was what it looked like to me.

"Well, then, Cleve," said I, "you've thrown the whole business smash out of your life. You're not going back?"

"No," said he. "Well, I can't be entirely sure. The fact is that I don't know. I might pop up there among my old haunts at any time. It's indefinite."

"Say it once more—you like this, up here—without a home, without your country, without your own West, without your friends—"

"You don't understand—" he began.

"Say yes or no."

"Then it's—yes," said he.

I laughed in his face. "You're a liar!" I told him.

CHAPTER XX

INTERLUDE

THAT touched him, and to the quick, mind you.

He had a temper. I saw his nostrils flare and his eyes flash, now. I was glad of it.

"That's a strong word," said he.

"You've been telling me some strong lies," said I.

He took a breath. "Don't say that again," he remarked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I've earned a right to get something from you besides upstage hooey," I told him. "You can't

talk me off like this. I want to get at what's behind you. And it's up to you to let me know. You're not playing fair and square, and you know it."

"I know nothing of the kind," said he.

"You're not a hound," said I. "I know you too well for that. Your heart bleeds for that girl. And you're aching inside on account of your country, and the old barren range, and the jingle of spurs, and all that. You're lying to me, Cleve, because up here there's something that holds you in the hollow of its hand. You're afraid. That's what's aged you. Fear! You've been living with it, breathing it, eating it. Why don't you come out with it? Why dodge and hide? I've fought my way through to your side. Tell me what's got at you. If it's not all algebra, maybe I can help. I've this, for a starter!"

And I slid Judge Colt out of my clothes, and let him flash, and put him back again. Then I saw that he was looking at me with a sort of pity. And suddenly I changed the talk, altogether, and said:

"Well, then, you want to stay here. But I don't. If I can't help you; and if Sylvia is outside of my reach; then I want to get back to my country as fast as I can. Rubbing elbows with an active volcano may be your idea of a grand time. But I prefer to herd dudes on the old ranch. You tell me how I'm to get back, will you?"

He sighed and shook his head. "Smoky, I can't," said he.

"You can't? Well, tell me just to please my curiosity, how *you* got up here?"

He shook his head again. "I can't do that, either," said he.

My anger fairly stifled me. "I'm to stay here and rot—you wouldn't lift a hand to help me. Is that it?"

At this, he took in a long breath; he couldn't face me, but looked past me as he said, "I can tell you this much. My—associates—have to be consulted in everything. Certainly I shall put your case before them."

"Don't trouble yourself too much," said I. "Suppose that they're too busy to listen when you want to talk about me?"

"They are men," said Darrell, "of brains so great, of interests so huge, Smoky, that I am no more than a child compared with them. You can be sure of one thing. Whatever they decide will be for your best interests—or rather, for interests greater than you and I, Smoky, can conceive."

"Oh, blast these wise men," said I. "They're the same lot that made the rule about killing the priestess if she enters that outer door from the crater, I suppose? Is that the same crowd?"

"You're simply being flippant, now," said he.

I began to sweat. "Cleve," said I, "I know that you're better than this. A lot better. But I'm pretty sick from listening to you. I've told you everything from the first. I've not hidden a thing. And you've given me, in return, a lot of wind and mystery that means nothing. You're hitched up to events so infernally important that life and death no longer means a thing to you, it appears. Well, I don't hitch onto that sort of thinking. I say, if you're being honest with me, heaven help you! And if you're not being honest with me, you're a low hound. Now, if I'm free to get out of this room, I'm going, and the next time I see you, it'll be because *you* hunt me up."

I turned around and marched to the door.

AT every step, I expected to hear his voice sing out behind me, or to hear his footstep overtaking me, but I was wrong. There was no move from him, no move whatever! When I got to the door, I turned the handle, and found that it opened readily, and then I looked back at him.

He stood exactly where I had left him, and his head had dropped to the side and down, as though a weight sank it, and if ever weariness and thought combined in the face of a man, I saw it in the young-old face of Cleve Darrell.

My heart melted. I wanted to go back to him and try all over again, but somehow I realized that nothing I could say

would be apt to budge him. He was beyond my reach. So I went out into the hall, and there I found the two old women, and they showed me the way back to my room.

I had one encounter on the way back.

We had passed out of the one of the regular, narrow corridors of communication into a larger hall, and crossing this we met up with that same high-headed brunette whom I had seen with the priestess in the garden, or conservatory. I stood and blinked at her. The old women had been right. Anyone had access to this place—if he or she had courage enough and the white fire was not roaring and burning outside—save only Sylvia, who was a priestess. A messenger had brought my clothes. Alice had followed us here. But Sylvia must die.

When she saw me, she came straight on and stood close, and her fine eyes narrowed to glints of light.

"Oh, hero that thou art—worm that thou art! Thou inconsiderable nothing! Thou wearest the form of a man, and thou hast the soul of a puff of wind. And now thou has betrayed the noblest and the best, the simplest and the sweetest of all women. May terrible hell receive thee!"

And she went on, while I stood in a trance, without being able to speak a word in reply. She had not spoken over a whisper, and when my two escorts came bearing down on me, she was gone again before they could catch her.

That encounter gave me enough to think about, the rest of the way to my room, for it was clear from what Alice had said that there were some members of the community who did not share in the belief that the sacrifice of blood could purify the others and free them from the dangers of sin.

If Alice doubted it, as she most apparently did, the others were sure to agree with her.

I thought I must find out something about those strange people and I got one of the old crones to talk to me about their beginnings, and the land they had come from.

She told me that their race had always lived in the Smoking Land, and that they had, according to legend, sprung up out of the soil to honor the great goddess.

I listened to this fable with interest. These people were like a slice of sixteenth or seventeenth century England put down here in the Arctics; and if their forebears had not come from that England, I was willing, as before, to eat a fur hat.

But the old lady knew nothing of that.

She entertained me, then, with ballads. She chanted them to soft, droning, weary tunes—ballads about the merry greenwood, and good old England, and Robin Hood, and all the rest. It was grand to hear her. She was a charm when she sat forward in her chair and fixed her eyes on the floor, and went through her tunes. I found myself laughing and nodding with the rhythm.

But all that she knew of the history of the country was vaguer than mist, and yet I could imagine that she had the whole tradition locked up in her mind as it came down to the people.

If I wanted to know more details, she said, I would have to speak to one of the wise men, since it appeared that access to them was granted me freely.

THEN she went off, and presently she came back carrying a tray, and I sat down to eat meat that was not beef, but that tasted like it. It was the flesh of the musk-ox, of course. Besides, there was a mess of stewed greens, of some sort, and a root that was something like potatoes.

There were just those three articles of food, but all were good, and all were served up in such quantity that there was more than I could eat, besides a meal of leftovers for Murder. They had brought him in with the food, and he lay at my feet and guarded me against the dangerous world. I was mighty glad to have him, let me tell you!

I finished off my meal. The dishes were taken away, and I said that I would like to sleep, so she showed me where the light turned off. That, finally, was the proof that this whole little underground city was lighted by electricity!

She showed me, too, where the baths were to be found, and pointed out the button I was to press in case I wanted anything.

So she went off, and I peeled, and dived into the bed. The mattress was not all that it could have been, I suppose, but it was better than drifted swan's down to me after two years of camp life. I dropped a thousand fathoms into a profound sleep.

When I woke up, it was still dark in the room, and for a while I lay there, wondering why it was that the sun had not come up. Then, gradually, I remembered that I was underground, and that the only light would be from the electric fixture.

After a warm bath and a good breakfast, I began to tell myself that life up here in the middle of the Ice Pole was not half so bad. A man could enjoy himself so long as he had comfortable sleeping quarters, a fine room, excellent clothes, all the food that he could eat and all the liquor that he could drink.

I thought of Sylvia and a deep melancholy flowed over me.

So I asked one of the crones about her, and she said that this was the day of her trial and that certainly I would have to be there, because I was one of the important witnesses. Since she was the priestess of the goddess, only one of the wise men could sit in judgment on her.

"Who are these wise men?"

"Thou knowest," said the dame, "for thou has spoken with one of them."

"I saw only one. Are the rest like him?"

"How shall I try to describe them? They are not all alike. Some are old, and some are young. But they are all terrible in wisdom and in strength."

"What can they do?" said I.

She waved her hand, and laughed a little. "Everything," said she.

"Make the sun shine in the dark of the year?" I asked.

"Yes, if they wish to," said she, simply.

"I don't believe that," I answered.

"To see is to believe," said she. "Also, they bring storms, and they send them away. They fatten the flocks in the fields. They cause the plants to grow. They part the rocks, and make them close again." I remembered the door in the cavern where I had nearly been drowned. The wise men had done that, too, then.

She pointed, downward. "It is they," she said, "who keep the boiling Fountain of Life from springing up, wildly, and bursting the mountain apart, as once the mountain burst, in the ancient days."

"The mountain burst, eh?" said I.

"Yes, and liquid fire ran out over the ground. Thou mayest see where it hardened, twenty feet deep on the surface of the good soil."

I could imagine the eruption. "But now," said I, "there's no more fear of the volcano?"

"There is no fear," said she. "For the wise men know. They control it."

"How," said I. "With witchcraft?"

She turned up the palms of her hands and her eyes. "They make light which is cold, and cause the fresh wind to blow through the heart of the mountain," said she. "How shall I say how these things are done? Who may understand, except their own wise hearts?"

I agreed that they must be very wise indeed, and I asked when we were to go to the trial, and then, pat, like a stage direction, there came a bang at the door, and it was opened by a sleek little youth in tights who said that I was wanted at the trial of the priestess.

CHAPTER XXI

JUDGMENT OF THE WISE MEN

THE boy was not alone. With him was a squad of soldiers who guarded me to the place of the trial. And on the way, I had a glance at one of the basic industries of the Smoking Land. We came down one of those subterannean roads and, by the opening of a door, I heard a tremendous clangor and clattering. I looked in through the big entrance at such an underground chamber as I had never dreamed of.

It must have been two hundred feet long, and the ceiling was a good fifty feet

from the floor. It was supported by huge pillars, roughed out of the living rock from which the space had been hollowed. And once more I was shocked and amazed to think of the amount of labor that had been spent in making that underground city! This big hall was split up by barriers into small compartments, and in every compartment was a forge, and around every forge there were men at work. I think that those expert mechanics were making anything and everything from needles to plate armor, and the din of the hammers was terrific.

A little later we got to the place of the trial. And that was a chamber very nearly as large as the forge room. It was still loftier, though. I've never seen a cathedral nave to compare with it for sheer size, and the whole floor was black with people, thousands of them. I saw that there were children with them, some of the mothers held up the little ones high on their shoulders to avoid the danger of having them crushed in the sway of the crowd.

My guards made a way for me through this human mass. Two of them extended their long halberds so as to make a wedge, inside of which we walked. Whatever the point of the wedge touched was soon sure to move, and move with a spring.

I took this opportunity to size up the faces of these strange people. There were some with faces so round and eyes so slanted that they would have passed easily among the Esquimaux around Point Barrow. And there were others as blond as you please. But the average type was big in body, apt to be bowed in the legs—rather a feature of strength than deformity, I should say. The face was broad, and rather rounded, though the nose might be decidedly acquiline.

Our goal was a dais at the farther end of the room, and on it was a higher platform where three men sat behind a long table, with fellows who looked like clerks nearby them. On the lower part of the dais were several soldiers, and I was placed before them.

I stared hard at the three at the long table. They were elderly men, two of them, and looked to be of the pure Caucasian type—blue-eyed, blond. And they were handsome, in a grim, unhuman way. Men of about fifty-five or sixty, I should have said, with thought in their faces, and infinite refinement expressed in their slender, tapering hands.

But the third man got most of my attention, for it was Cleveland Darrell!

He was be-wigged and be-robed like the other two, and he looked enough like them to have passed as the twin of either.

I saw that he avoided my eye; and my heart fell. Yes, every pair of eyes in that great crowd was fixed on me, the stranger. Even the two older judges seemed seriously interested in me; for they stared, and then murmured to one another. But my friend Darrell, whom I had trekked so many thousand miles through a cold hell to find—he found it embarrassing, it seemed, to look at me at all!

Just then the interest of the crowd switched suddenly away from me, and I heard a rumble, deep-voiced, through the crowd. "The priestess!"

There she came, guarded, and two women in splendid robes beside her—Alice and another. But in spite of their greater height, their fine faces, their magnificent clothes, Sylvia in simple black and white, with her still, far-off look, made them look like beggars beside a queen.

SHE was brought up onto the dais and placed not far from me. There was a chair for her, and before she sat down in it, she bowed three times to the judges, and then she looked calmly about her and gave a smile and a nod to the soldiers of the guard whom she knew. She did not overlook me, but gave me a special smile.

The crowd was quieter, now, but I could hear the wide whisper of the thousands breathing, and the rustle of clothes, like a far-off wind. The central figure among the judges said:

"Sylvia, daughter of Cuthbert, onetime priestess of the goddess and keeper of the nameless name, it is charged that you have

passed beyond your bounds and entered the forbidden gates. Witnesses stand here ready to confront you. What say you—guilty or not guilty?"

She stood up and answered. "I am Sylvia, the daughter of Cuthbert, but I am still the priestess, as well. I was endowed with the office; I have kept it truly; and what man or woman or child dares to say that the word of the goddess has gone out against me, to strip me of my place?"

The words were much louder than the voice, but the clear, easy enunciation carried her speech to the distant corners of the hall. She spoke without anger or any other passion. And out of the crowd there arose a wide murmur of affectionate approbation. They loved her. It was plain to see that. The air fairly throbbed with their emotion.

"That is a point not to be argued. Sylvia, daughter of Cuthbert, how do you plead?"

"I shall not plead," said she, "until you have answered my protest. Am I here as the daughter of Cuthbert, only, or as the priestess, only?"

"Thou *must* plead," said the judge. "Otherwise, I must call the witnesses, examine their statements, and then proceed to judgment."

"I shall not plead," said she, calmly, "except as the priestess of the goddess."

The judge frowned, but here the man on his right whispered to him, and finally he nodded.

"Then we allow you that title," said the judge. "Is your voice now guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty, my lord!" said she.

A faint moan came from the audience. The judge frowned with them and they were still. Yes, with a single glance, he whipped them into silence! That same look would have been enough to sink my own heart into my boots, I think.

"If thou art guilty," said the judge, "thou shalt assuredly die."

"For death I am prepared," said the girl in her dauntless way.

"In what manner, and out of what madness didst thou enter the forbidden gate?" asked the judge.

"In this manner, as thou seest me now free to make a step forward," said she.

The judge shook his head.

"Ralph, son of Raoul," said he," dids't thou see her freely enter, of her own will?"

And a burly soldier answered, "I saw her carried into the hall in the arms of this man."

The judge looked at me. "Didst thou," said he, "carry this woman through the gate, she lying senseless in thine arms?"

I hesitated. Then it seemed to me that there might be a dash more of hope for Sylvia if I answered yes. "Yes, I carried her in. The fire of the volcano was bursting all around us. It was showering like water!"

"What has thou to say, then, to give reason why we should not sentence thee, and give thee to death?"

"I never heard of such balderdash!" I answered. "This girl, this holy and good woman, had showed me the way to that gate, and your own people had sent word to her that I could only come by going past the Fountain of Life. Well, by her aid I managed to do it, and then, as the fire broke out and the devil was loose, she would have turned back and been surely eaten up in the fire. So I caught her up in my arms. And she struggled against me. And when she saw that I insisted on carrying her toward the nearest gate, she fainted. That's the gospel truth that I'm telling."

The judge merely said, "Force or no force, the priestess has entered the gate. She confesses her guilt. As for the other, the man—give thy judgment, my friend."

And then Cleve Darrell stood up, and looked at me with a thoughtful eye, and said, "Why should you hesitate? Here's a law broken, and the man who broke it. If the priestess goes to the fire, he must be punished, also."

I listened to this speech and would not believe that I heard it. "What punishment will you name?" asked the central judge.

"The executioner and his ax!" said Darrell.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

MEN OF

by STOOKIE

LONG CHANCE CHAMP

BROOKLYN'S THOMAS SWINTON TAKES HIS THRILLS WHERE HE FINDS THEM — HIGH IN THE SKY OR DEEP IN THE SEA. AT 18, ALREADY AN EXPERT DIVER, HE STARTED SMASHING DEPTH RECORDS, WITH A 215 FOOT DIVE.

SEARCHING FOR THE TREASURE SHIP S.S. RIO DE JANEIRO, HE WAS ATTACKED BY TWO HAMMERHEAD SHARKS. HE FOUGHT LIKE A MADMAN, KILLED BOTH MONSTERS BUT RECEIVED 3 BROKEN RIBS.

THIS EXPLOIT WON HIM A MOVIE CONTRACT. STARRED IN ONE FEATURE BASED ON HIS OWN HAIR-RAISING EXPERIENCES, HE LATER DOUBLED FOR PEARL WHITE, AND OTHER FAVORITES OF THE DAY. ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK WERE CRASHING MOTOR CARS, SPEED BOATS, EVEN TRAINS, AND HIGH DIVES FROM BRIDGES. IN 1916 HE WAS A MACHINE-GUN EXPERT WITH THE CANADIAN OVERSEAS FORCES. WOUNDED AND GASSED IN THE SOMME, HE BECAME AN INSTRUCTOR FOR THE DURATION OF THE WAR.

AFTER THE WAR SWINTON TURNED TO DOG-TEAM FREIGHTING IN NORTHERN ONTARIO, BREAKING RECORDS RIGHT AND LEFT, AND BECOMING A SEMI-LEGENDARY FIGURE IN NO TIME AT ALL. CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD ONE DAY, HE TOOK REFUGE IN THE LEE OF A BLACK-ROCK FORMATION ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT HE HAD STUMBLED ACROSS A RICH SILVER LODE!

Next Week: Gates and Canfield—Gamboleers

Señor Vulture

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

IT was an amazingly beautiful morning at the mission of San Juan Capistrano. The sun shone brightly on the emerald green grass and there was contentment in the hearts of all men. But then, like a fleet messenger of evil, came the runner whom folk called *El Viento,* the Wind, and his tidings were not good.

For El Viento told of the coming of one Marcos Palma, known far and wide as Señor Vulture. He rides a black horse and his fine clothes are black, and he is a man of sinister reputation. Attending him is his ill-visaged body servant, Felipe the Frog, and together they are a pair that any peaceful community might well wish to be without. But Señor Vulture carries papers from the governor, and must be received with courtesy and discretion.

JUAN BARDOSO, innkeeper, ex-pirate and scoffer at religion, frowns at El Viento's news—for he, Bardoso, will have to offer hospitality to Señor Vulture, and that is not a pleasant thought. Fray José, brother superior of the mission of San Juan Capistrano is worried, too. When gallants like Señor Vulture come to a place, they leave nothing but disaster in their wake. Wenching, gambling, bad blood, perhaps even sword play and death. . . . Fray José shudders. Señor Vulture is plainly in the devil's pay.

Sergeant Valdez, in command of the small garrison, has *his* misgivings. For the sergeant dislikes trouble and prefers to take life easy. And he fears that Señor Vulture will make that difficult for him. Too, as the governor's representative, he will have to be scrupulously careful not to offend Señor Palma.

LATE in the afternoon, Señor Vulture and Felipe the Frog arrive, and lose no time in living up to their advance notices. By nightfall they have more than made their presence felt.

At the mission there is a great fiesta to celebrate the betrothal of Don Ricardo Rizal, son of a wealthy landowner, to Dorotea, daughter of his father's oldest friend. All is gaiety and lights and lilting music, except for one small shadow. Dorotea's twin brother, Valentino, has not yet arrived, and Ricardo, a little worried, goes to Bardoso's tavern to find him.

Valentino is not there, but Señor Vulture is, and scarcely have he and Ricardo exchanged two words when anger and distrust flame up between them. Ricardo is openly insulting to the black-clad stranger, and in Marcos Palma's eyes, Bardoso can read a spiteful will for vengeance.

"A keg of powder, and a spark," Bardoso mutters. "The explosion cannot be far away."

VALENTINO does not arrive at the tavern until after Ricardo has departed. Valentino is a weak stripling who tries to forget his own inadequacy by doubling the recklessness of his fellows. When Marcos Palma brushes up an acquaintance and suggests that they retire with a few friends to Palma's rooms for a quiet game, Valentino readily agrees.

Meantime Bardoso has got hold of Felipe the Frog in whom he recognizes an old pirate companion. And while Bardoso has received full pardon for his past misdeeds, Felipe has not. This makes a convenient sword to hold over the Frog's frightened head.

Felipe begs Bardoso to keep his secret and suggests that Palma, his master, may have profitable work for Bardoso if only he will hold his tongue. Bardoso says he must think it over. Returning to the tavern he sees that Palma is gone, and Valentino, too. He swears under his breath.

"*Madre de Dios,*" he breathes. "Already? The evil swine!"

CHAPTER VII

ENSNARED

MARCOS PALMA'S room was heavy with smouldering incense, and in his own bejeweled silver candelabra, which he carried with him in his traveling pack, the candles burned.

He served Don Valentino and Manuel Gonzales with potent wine, and spoke with them for a time as to equals in the knowledge of the world's affairs, which warmed Don Valentino's heart and made him easy prey.

Afterward, Don Valentino could not

This story began in last week's Argosy

remember when they had started playing, first with cards and then with dice, nor which had suggested it. But he remembered Marcos Palma continually filling his wine cup, and that of Manuel Gonzales, and urging them to drink.

He remembered, also, how it seemed he was watching a scene through a hazy curtain, how his own voice rang peculiarly in his ears and that of Marcos Palma had a soothing influence. His hands grew heavy and he fumbled, but he drank more when Marcos Palma thrust wine at him, wishing to appear a man of the world.

They talked, played, talked again, changed from dice to cards and back. Don Valentino knew he was losing heavily, and heard Manuel Gonzales complaining, but it did not seem to matter. He was half asleep when Marcos Palma did a bit of writing and had Don Valentino sign. Then Don Valentino nodded and slept beside the table, while Marcos Palma and Manuel Gonzales played on.

Manuel Gonzales came from a family which could not boast blue blood, the members of which always had been compelled to fight to hold their own with the world. He did not consider, as did Don Valentino, that all men were honorable. He held wine better than Don Valentino, also, and was not so befuddled as Marcos Palma believed.

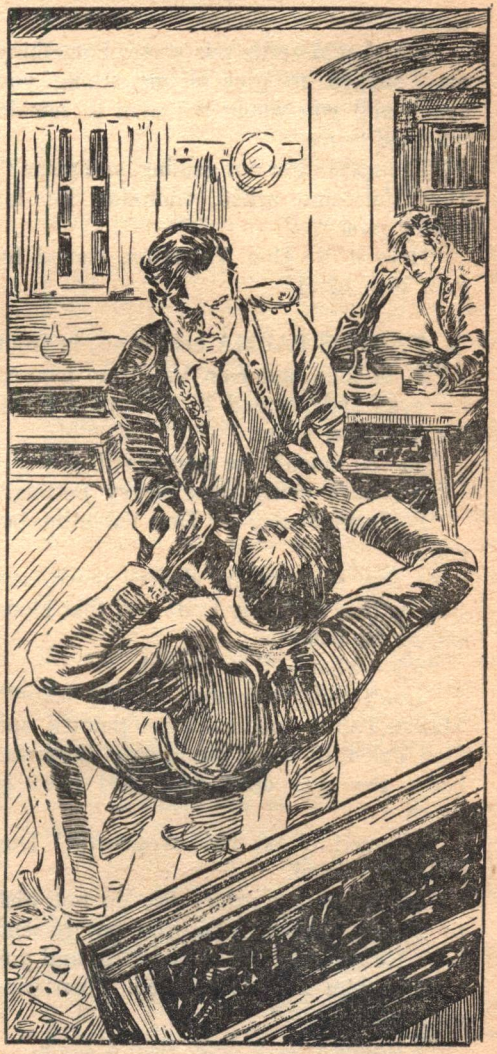
So, though he mouthed when he talked, and scarcely could hold cards, he was alert enough to see Marcos Palma manipulate the cards as it pleased him, and called him to account.

"So, *señor!* You are but a cheat!" Manuel Gonzales said. "You have robbed my friend, Don Valentino, and have robbed me. All men shall know of it. They'll whip you down El Camino Real after branding infamy on your cheek with a red-hot iron—"

He lurched angrily to his feet, spilling cards and dice and money. Marcos Palma, his eyes mere pinpoints of flame, caught him by the throat and hurled him back against the adobe wall. His head cracked sickeningly.

Don Valentino was in a drunken sleep when Marcos Palma took the knife from his girdle. He did not see Señor Palma deliberately slip that knife between the ribs of Manuel Gonzales, and the latter's life blood gush forth. Then, Marcos Palma slipped the hilt of the knife into Don Valentino's hand, and the latter clutched it unknowingly.

Stepping swiftly to the door, Marcos Palma listened a moment, then opened the door and glanced out. Felipe the Frog was waiting in the shadows. Marcos Palma beckoned him, whispered, then closed the door again.



But he removed the draperies from the window, knowing that Felipe the Frog was on guard outside, and let the cool air rush in. It blew the fumes of wine from Don Valentino's brain, and he realized that his host was shaking him roughly.

"I—I must get to the guest house," Don Valentino muttered. "They will be expecting me."

"Surely," Marcos Palma agreed. "You must put in an appearance there, young *señor*. Social duties must be observed. Now, I dislike to mention such a thing, *señor*, but I am sure you will understand—"

"You mean—?" Don Valentino questioned.

"We should settle our score. Something may happen to prevent me seeing you again, and you would not wish to remain indebted to me."

"The score? For our gaming, you mean?" Don Valentino asked, fumbling for his money pouch.

"Here it is, Don Valentino, signed by your own hand."

MARCOS PALMA held it out in front of him, and Don Valentino focused his eyes and perused it, and gulped and his face turn white.

"So—so much?" he stammered.

"We were doing some heavy betting."

"I—I cannot pay—" Don Valentino began.

At that moment, he glanced down, saw that he held a bloody knife and that blood was on his hand.

"Wh—what—?" he gasped.

"Don't you remember, young *señor?*" Marcos Palma stood aside and pointed, and Don Valentino could see Manuel Gonzales' body, the eyes open wide and fixed in death.

"Manuel! What has happened?" Don Valentino cried.

"Softly, young *señor!* We do not wish to attract anybody. Do you not remember? He accused you of cheating, and you stabbed him so that he died. Then wine overcame you—"

"I couldn't have done such a thing."

"But there he is, young *señor*—dead. And there is the bloody knife you were holding—your own. A murderer! And a cheat—because you say you cannot pay a gaming debt. And you are a Cruz!"

"I—I cannot believe it!" the boy cried.

"Do not screech, unless you wish to bring trouble upon yourself. There is a way out, young *señor*. I like you, and I am your friend."

"What can be done?"

"My servant will dispose of the body and clean up this room. If we are confronted, young *señor*, we'll say he played with us a time, and won, and departed. We do not know where he went nor who did him to death."

"Lies like that—"

"Are better than being known as a man without honor, or as a murderer. Do you want your father's head bowed in shame? Do you perhaps desire to be hanged—"

"No! No!" Don Valentino cried.

"Do not shout, else the soldiery may be coming. You are unnerved, and need a strong hand to control you. Listen to me carefully, *señor!* You are my man from this moment, if you would have me keep my mouth closed. Do you understand?"

"What is it—you wish me to do?"

"Nothing to harm you. Wash your hands in this bowl. Put your attire to rights. Cleanse your knife and return it to your girdle. Quickly!"

Don Valentino moved like a man in a trance, but obeyed. He was fighting to get control of himself. He would not look at the horror against the wall. He realized dimly that somebody had come into the room and carried out the body.

Then he found himself outside with Marcos Palma, walking in the moonlight with the cool breeze blowing over him, and sobered rapidly. Marcos Palma talked, told him what he had to do, brushed aside his weak protests.

Presently, they went to the guest house at the mission, and Don Valentino was almost himself again. They stopped at the well, where he drank cool water. They went

across the thronged patio and entered the guest house, Don Valentino leading and Marcos Palma a step behind him, his haughty head held high, his eyes gleaming, his facial appearance so like the popular conception of the Evil One that natives and peons backed away as he passed.

Some men surged toward them as they entered the guest house, and among them Don Ricardo Rizal.

"Valentino, where have you been?" Don Ricardo asked. "We have been searching everywhere for you. My betrothal to your sister has been announced—"

Then he understood that Marcos Palma was with Don Valentino, and knew the boy had been drinking heavily and that something had happened to him, judging from the queer expression in his face.

Marcos Palma plucked Don Valentino's sleeve, and the boy straightened and drew in a long breath like a man bracing himself for an unwelcome task.

"Don Ricardo Rizal," he said, "allow me to present my friend, Marcos Palma."

Don Ricardo clutched his arm and spoke in hisses: "Are you mad, Valentino?"

"My friend, Marcos Palma," the boy insisted.

DON RICARDO bowed coldly but did not unbend, then took Don Valentino by the arm as though to lead him away. But the latter pulled free and took Marcos Palma's arm in turn, and led him along the wall and straight to where his father and sister were sitting, the blushing *señorita* still receiving good wishes on her betrothal.

Don Ricardo stood like a man stunned to inaction. He could not pretend to understand this. He saw a queer expression in Don Carlos' face, and Dorotea's bewildered glance as her brother presented the man.

He saw Don Carlos bow gravely and glance sharply at his son, saw the little *señorita* turn her head away, saw grim Señora Anita look still more grim as she tilted her nose toward the ceiling and sniffed.

"Mad—he is mad," Don Ricardo muttered. "It will be necessary, I presume, for me to hold stern speech with this Marcos Palma and instruct him as to his proper place."

Don Ricardo saw those around Don Carlos and his party drift away, and Marcos Palma bending forward and speaking to Don Carlos and Valentino. The expression in Don Carlos' face revealed that what he heard shocked him. Dorotea's face turned white also, for she had been included in the conversation, and Don Ricardo, seeing that, pulled himself together and started in their direction.

"May I have speech with you a moment, *señor?*" Don Ricardo asked, touching Marcos Palma on the shoulder.

But Don Carlos Cruz touched his shoulder in turn, and spoke in low tones:

"At another time, Ricardo, please. Kindly leave us now. We are all fatigued. Ride over tomorrow . . ." And Don Carlos sighed and turned back to the others.

DON RICARDO felt as if he had received a blow in the face. He glanced swiftly at the *señorita,* but she had turned away and was talking to Señora Anita. He looked around for his father, but his father had disappeared, no doubt to gossip with friends.

He realized then that many eyes were watching him. Feeling a measure of embarrassment, he went quickly out of the guest house and down the dusty highway to the inn. There Bardoso greeted him.

"I have heard of your good fortune, Don Ricardo," Bardoso whispered. "Allow me to extend my congratulations. No doubt you are a happy man. The little *señorita* is charming and good. But something seems amiss with you."

"It is something of which I may not speak," Don Ricardo said.

"If at any time I can be of service to you in a personal matter, Don Ricardo, you have but to command."

"I thank you, *amigo,* I shall remember it."

"Don Valentino Cruz was at the inn earlier in the evening," Bardoso said then,

"but he played for only a short time and then disappeared. No doubt he went to attend the festivities at the guest house."

"He did not reach there until a moment ago, and he had this Marcos Palma with him."

"You mean that Marcos Palma went to the mission after his cold reception there when he arrived?" Bardoso asked.

"He did, and in some manner induced Don Valentino to make him known to others."

"Ha! It occurs to me that it were best for us to keep eyes and ears open. You can depend on me, Don Ricardo, to do what I can in the matter."

"We must learn more of the man and his purpose," Don Ricardo said. "He is more than a common gambler. Since he carries a pass from the governor . . . But even such a pass would not deter me from what I consider proper to do."

"Be cautious, Don Ricardo," Bardoso warned. "Do not walk into a trap. Young blood heats quickly. Only after a man has acquired age and many hurts does he learn to move slowly and with good judgment."

"But this fellow—"

"I am cultivating his servant," Bardoso put in. "Perhaps something may come of it. I'll keep you informed."

Don Ricardo left the inn, got his horse and rode homeward. He had preferred not to go to the guest house again. Don Carlos' rather abrupt dismissal of him rankled. It was something he could not understand.

In the morning, he spoke to his father concerning it.

"Do not be troubled, my son," his father advised. "Don Carlos, I believe, was merely embarrassed because Don Valentino, in his cups, made the error of introducing the man. Perhaps Don Carlos feared your hot blood might cause you to make an unpleasant scene in the guest house. He asked you to ride over today, did he not?"

Don Ricardo nodded. Feeling reassured, he dressed with care and called for his favorite horse, and before midday was on the trail and riding toward the Cruz *hacienda.*

He loped down the long lane beneath the rows of huge pepper trees to the front of the big, sprawling house, dismounted and gave his reins to a servant, and trod up the steps as he had done so many times before.

Another watchful servant opened the door as he approached and bowed low as he entered.

"Don Carlos—?" he questioned.

"In the patio, *señor,*" the servant replied.

DON RICARDO strode through the long hall, his spurs jingling and his bootheels ringing on the tiles, and opened the patio door. The patio of the Cruz house was large, with living trees in it, and the adobe walls were covered with vines and roses. There was a wide verandah spotted with comfortable benches and chairs, and with small tables scattered around.

Don Carlos Cruz was standing near the playing fountain, and he turned and approached swiftly when he saw Don Ricardo in the doorway. Don Ricardo's swift glance already had revealed to him something which amazed him. On the end of the verandah, sitting beside a table with a cup of wine in his hand, was Señor Marcos Palma.

"*Buenas dias,* Don Ricardo!" Don Carlos greeted.

"*'Dias!*" Don Ricardo replied. His first shock of amazement had vanished, and now his face was a thundercloud. "I am surprised, Don Carlos," he added, "to see that fellow on your verandah."

"Since when, Don Ricardo, has it been your privilege to dictate my choice of guests?"

"Guests?" Don Ricardo cried. "You mean the fellow actually is a guest here?"

"I do not relish having a guest of mine called a fellow in that tone, Don Ricardo."

"Are you attempting to quarrel with me?" Don Ricardo demanded, drawing himself up.

"Certainly not, Don Ricardo. I merely question your right to criticize my desires in the matter of guests."

"For making such criticism, I ask your

pardon," Don Ricardo said. "I exceeded my rights. But I reserve the right to my secret thought. If it is your desire to entertain this person as an equal, it is no concern of mine. We have more important matters to discuss."

"Ah, yes, the betrothal!" Don Carlos said. He motioned Don Ricardo to a seat beside a table, sat himself on the opposite side, and a watchful servant brought wine and cakes.

"It is my desire, Don Carlos, with your permission, to have the marriage ceremony as soon as possible," Don Ricardo said. "I have delayed long enough in taking a bride."

"I have been thinking seriously about it," Don Carlos replied. His face was gray, drawn, and he looked across the patio and did not meet Don Ricardo's eyes. "Perhaps we have been too hasty."

"Hasty? In what?"

"In announcing the betrothal, Don Ricardo. It may be a mistake. My daughter is young—"

"Seventeen."

"She may not know her own heart."

"I am quite sure she does, Don Carlos. Are you trying to tell me she has changed her mind?"

"It may be better, Ricardo, to defer the marriage."

"Until when—and why?"

"Until a later time, when we can all be sure that it will be for the best."

"Do you realize that this is a grave affront to me? What has happened to change you?" Don Ricardo asked.

"Must I make account to you for my thoughts and actions, *señor?*" Don Carlos snapped.

"You are trying to enrage me," Don Ricardo accused. "There is some reason for all this. If the *señorita* really has changed her mind, we must abide by her decision. Perhaps it is but a moment of maidenly fear and panic—"

Don Carlos lifted his head and looked straight at him. "Let us have an end of it!" he said. "Don Ricardo Rizal, the marriage has become impossible."

"SEÑOR!" Don Ricardo cried. "Are you intimating that marriage with a Rizal—"

"I assure you, Don Ricardo, that in my estimation you are a proper man."

"There can be no question concerning the *señorita,*" Don Ricardo said. "So then—?"

"The marriage is impossible, *señor.* Let that statement end the matter."

"But it cannot. I have some rights. Our families have been close for three generations. I love Señorita Dorotea passionately. You have said I am a proper man. You know the condition of my estate—"

"It is something beside all that," Don Carlos broke in. "Something which I cannot explain."

"I have the right to demand an explanation," Don Ricardo cried. "At least allow me to see the *señorita* in your presence and ascertain her wishes in the matter."

"I am her father, and her wishes do not enter into it, Don Ricardo, as you know. However, if it will ease your mind—"

He called a servant and instructed that Señorita Dorotea come to him at once. Presently she came with her *dueña* beside her, and Don Ricardo bowed low when she walked toward him across the verandah.

There was no color in her face now, no smile on her lips, and Don Ricardo could tell she had been weeping. Señora Anita was showing emotion also.

"*Señorita,*" Don Ricardo began, in low tones, "your father has been telling me we are not to be married. I cannot understand. Last evening—"

He ceased speaking as she lifted her head and looked at him. He never had seen such an expression in her face before—pain, and pride and determination as well.

"It—it would be a mistake, Don Ricardo," she said, so low that he scarcely could hear.

"A mistake? I cannot understand."

"I have changed my mind, *señor.*" She would not look at him, and Don Ricardo was sure he heard a sob as she turned away.

"You have heard now, Don Ricardo, from her own lips," Don Carlos said.

"I have heard—*sí!*" he replied. "Whatever the desires of the *señorita,* they are sacred. Her will in this is to be obeyed, though it break my heart and crush all my aims in life, my purposes and ambitions."

Then the *señorita* really did sob, and turned abruptly to the door to disappear into the house, her *dueña* with an arm around her and clucking pityingly.

His face white, Don Ricardo drew himself up and looked at Don Carlos and bowed. Then he brushed him aside and stalked the length of the verandah to where Marcos Palma was sitting.

"Señor," Don Ricardo said, "I have an intimation that you have been concerning yourself in my private affairs. You are an offense to my eyes and nostrils, *señor."*

"Don Ricardo—!" Don Carlos begged, touching his arm.

"I understand you are called Señor Vulture in some parts," Don Ricardo continued, bending toward Marcos Palma slightly. "The vulture is a bird which feeds on another's kill—"

"At times, *señor,* I kill my own," Marcos Palma cut in.

"Sí? There is a place down the road well suited for the purpose. I am willing to lower myself and engage you, *señor,* to rid the community of a foul presence. I can break my blade afterward and wear another."

Enraged, Marcos Palma sprang to his feet, and so they stood with the table between them, their palms upon it, their faces scarcely a foot apart.

"Señores!" Don Carlos cried.

"Don Ricardo Rizal," Marcos Palma said, speaking through his teeth, "I shall give myself the pleasure of killing you. But not today, *señor.* I am on business of His Excellency and under promise to engage in no brawls, to refrain from fighting save in defense of my life."

"You will be defending your life, *señor."*

"But I shall not draw blade against you, because of my promise. And you scarcely would murder me, *señor."*

"Your attitude smacks of cowardice!"

"Ah! Now you are trying to anger me into forgetting my obligations. At another time, Don Ricardo." Marcos Palma turned from the table and walked along the verandah.

"So!" Don Ricardo cried. "This is the sort of guest you have in your house, Don Carlos! A man of evil reputation, a gambler and coward!"

"Don Ricardo, you forget yourself!"

"I forget nothing. You must be mad. The entire Cruz family must be mad."

"Señor!"

"Perhaps that is why you do not wish the marriage. There is a taint in your blood—"

"Enough! Leave my place!" Don Carlos cried.

"Gladly, *señor.* My father shall be told of this. No doubt he will regret he has spent some years in friendship with you and be ashamed men know it. I am sorry, Don Carlos, that you have no son of my age and strength to take up this quarrel with me."

"Must I ask you again to leave?"

"I go, *señor,* and leave you to your madness, your vultures, whatever foul birds you desire to honor." He stalked toward the door. But there he turned and his face had softened. "If you have courtesy enough, kindly give the *señorita* my respects, say to her that my heart remains hers forever—and that I regret she is not more happily situated as regards a parent."

CHAPTER VIII

BREAKING POINT

LIKE a madman, Don Ricardo vaulted into his saddle and ripped with his spurs, and his horse raced wildly down the lane and into the road.

But Don Ricardo pulled him up almost immediately, patted his glossy neck in payment for the spurring, and spoke soothingly to him. His rage was not at the horse, but at men.

He rode home, to find his father had gone to another rancho and would not be home until evening. So Don Ricardo took the

trail for San Juan Capistrano.

He went first to the mission and talked to Fray José, explaining to him the entire matter as he saw it. The *fraile* frowned.

"I cannot understand it," he said, seeming greatly troubled. "Were I you, I'd not blame Don Carlos too much, but wait for the entire truth to be known. His change of heart is too rapid to be sincere. He was delighted last night when the betrothal was announced."

"This Señor Vulture—"

"Is a bird of ill omen for some of us, I fear. He is working against the missions, helping the politicians. Our present governor is not a pattern of honesty, I have heard. Governors change so rapidly these days. If you will excuse me now, Don Ricardo, I have a duty to perform. Manuel Gonzales—he was found drifting in the tide, dead from a knife wound."

"Ha! A wild one he was, always drinking, gambling, quarreling."

"There was an investigation, but nothing has come of it," Fray José said. "Sergeant Valdez could learn nothing except that Manuel Gonzales was playing at the inn last night, but disappeared during a commotion."

Don Ricardo rode to the inn, to find Bardoso sitting in front of it. He could not discuss the breaking of his betrothal with Bardoso. But he could speak of Marcos Palma.

"In some strange manner, I fear, he has Don Valentino and Don Carlos in his clutches," he said. "I wish I knew more about the purposes of the man."

"Ha! Regarding that, perhaps I may be of service," Bardoso said. "I see Felipe the Frog coming along the path from the sea. Go to the second room and shut yourself in, Don Ricardo, and listen. Make no noise. Promise me that, whatever you hear, you will not let your hot blood lead you to extreme action."

Don Ricardo hurried into the patio, sequestered himself in the second room and waited silently.

In front of the inn, Bardoso's eye gleamed as he watched Felipe the Frog approach, and when the man would have gone to the rear of the building beckoned him.

"This is a proper time, *señor,* for us to talk," Bardoso said, "unless you desire me to have speech with the sergeant. Let us go to a private place, where none may overhear, and talk and drink a mug of wine."

A MOMENT later, Don Ricardo heard them in the room adjoining that in which he was hiding. He could hear plainly, for the partition was thin and not a thick adobe wall as some of the others.

"Well, Felipe the Frog, what have you to say to me?" Bardoso asked.

"I spoke to Señor Palma, and he will have speech with you."

"Where is he now?"

"At the Cruz *hacienda.* He is at work."

"When that one works, the sun will swim the sky backwards," Bardoso declared.

"He works with his brains, Bardoso, and not with his hands—except when it is with dice or cards. Have you not guessed his mission?"

"Perhaps my guess is not so accurate as the facts you can tell me."

"He is sent by the governor to stir up trouble against the missions. Stirring up the peons and natives is my share. I show them, generally talking at night around a fire, how the *frailes* make them work hard for no pay, giving them in return only a few chants and a new religion in place of their own."

"Ha! A trouble-maker!" Bardoso said.

"I point out to them they should have the fruits of their toil, should live in fine homes instead of adobe huts, and wear fine clothes instead of rags."

"And this Marcos Palma—?" Bardoso questioned.

"He deals with bluebloods, men of rank. He gets them into his hands, then issues orders."

"Such as—?"

"They, too, must make a stand against the missions. There is no interference with religion. But all things pertaining to trade

must be handled by those not connected with the mission chain."

"Would you have the *frailes* starve?" Bardoso asked. "They are rich in horses and cattle, sheep and goats. But, if they cannot trade, they cannot get what else they need."

"Dealers will buy their stock," Felipe the Frog explained.

"Swindle them, you mean."

"Trade must come out of the hands of the *frailes*—that is the order. Others can use the huge profits. Let the Franciscans do their mumbling and chanting—"

"Did it ever occur to you, insignificant gnat on the crest of a mountain, that they do more than that?" Bardoso asked. "They give food and drink at their guest houses—"

"And you, and other men who run inns, lose that business," Felipe the Frog said. "Every bit of business the *frailes* do, of whatever kind, keeps profits from others."

"Ha! I commence to understand," Bardoso said. "But this master of yours may not have success compelling men of blood to take his orders."

"He drops a hint that a word from him and the governor will confiscate an estate and charge its owner with treason. It has been done in both the north and south."

"Some *caballero,* tired of the fellow, will call him out and run him through."

FELIPE grinned. "He has security against that. It is the order of His Excellency that Señor Marcos Palma engage in no fighting. And what *caballero* will strike down a man who refuses to draw blade?"

"What about me?" Bardoso asked.

"Señor Palma will pay you well, Bardoso, for information regarding certain men, their histories and habits, so he will have material with which to plot to get them in his power. He has the Cruz family already in his clutches."

"In what manner?"

"I cannot reveal that," Felipe the Frog replied. "It is enough to say that the proud Don Carlos will jump whenever Señor Palma cracks the whip. Don Valentino introduced him to his father and sister last evening at the guest house. He is a guest at the Cruz *hacienda* now. And he told me he will compel Don Carlos to break the betrothal between his daughter and Don Ricardo Rizal. He hates this Don Ricardo and would see his heart torn with anguish."

"Don Ricardo may tear Señor Palma's heart out with a blade instead of with anguish," Bardoso said.

"You forget. Señor Palma will not fight, and Don Ricardo would not murder."

"What is to follow?" Bardoso asked.

"Through the son, he got the father. Through them he will get others who are friendly enough to wish to save them. And on and on!"

"Did it ever occur to you," Bardoso asked, "that all this would end quickly if somebody split the head of this Marcos Palma open with an axe?"

"He will not duel, and if anybody try murder, he will meet with disaster. It has been tried before. How shall I tell him regarding you, Bardoso? Will you be his man?"

"If I do not—?"

"If you do not, *señor,* you may find within a short time that in the opinion of the governor you have built this inn on public land and so it is confiscate. And you would be fined more than you possess for having used the land. The fine in excess of what could be collected would be worked out in peonage."

"Ha! A pirate in peonage?" Bardoso roared.

"But you are a reformed pirate."

"And you are not! If I inform the sergeant that you should be hanged—"

"Señor Palma would save me. I told him of the circumstance, and because Señor Palma has a pass from His Excellency, the sergeant would not dare act contrary to Señor Palma's wishes."

"So that is the way of it!" Bardoso said.

"Bardoso, we were pirates together, and I am your friend. I will explain something to you. Be Señor Palma's man and collect

gold while you may. For the season of good profit may not last."

"What mean you?"

"We received a rumor that the present governor has made a few mistakes. He has affronted the wrong persons, and there is afoot an effort to have him removed and an honest governor named for a change. The moment that happens, Señor Palma's pass loses authority. So he picks fruit while the sun beams."

"I'll think of this and give you a word this evening," Bardoso said. "I must get back inside the inn."

"And I must saunter around and talk to natives, showing them what fools they are to work for the *frailes*."

IN the adjoining room, Don Ricardo heard Felipe the Frog croak his laughter, heard him and Bardoso leave and walk along beneath the arches in the patio, He remained there a time.

He understood Señor Palma's game. And he understood now the vast change which had come over Don Carlos Cruz. In some manner, Señor Palma was controlling Don Carlos' words and actions.

Don Ricardo left the room soon after and went to the main room of the inn. There he shouted for Bardoso to fetch wine.

"You heard?" Bardoso asked.

"I heard."

Bardoso poured wine, and Don Ricardo drank, saying nothing. Bardoso turned aside to get some of the little cakes Don Ricardo liked so well. A clatter of hoofbeats sounded outside, and Bardoso glanced through the window.

"He comes, Don Ricardo," he said. "This Señor Vulture. He is dismounting in front of the inn. He will enter."

"I am awaiting him," Don Ricardo said.

"Don Ricardo, you have honored me with your friendship, and I would save you annoyance. I'll pick a quarrel with the fellow and slay him with a knife."

"And be hanged for it?"

"I can escape. True friends such as you are scarce, *señor*."

"I thank you, Bardoso. And I command you to do nothing. We'll find a way out of the difficulty."

Don Ricardo watched the door. Marcos Palma came striding through it arrogantly, blinking to accustom his eyes to the semi-gloom of the interior. He went to one of the tables, drew off his riding gauntlets and tossed them down.

"Wine, Bardoso!" he shouted.

"The fellow is always bellowing," Don Ricardo said, loud enough for him to hear.

Marcos Palma whirled swiftly and saw him sitting beside the table under the window. He grinned evilly, and turned to pick up the cup Bardoso had put before him.

"I had a pleasant visit at the Cruz place," Marcos Palma said. "Don Carlos is a noble host. And the little *señorita* is charming!"

"A *caballero* would not mention her in a public place for drinking," Don Ricardo observed.

Señor Palma whirled toward him again. "*Caballero?* I am something better, *señor* —I am a man!"

"There may be a difference of opinion regarding that," Don Ricardo replied.

"No thin blue blood is in my veins. My blood is rich and red—"

"I cannot take your word for it, *señor*," Don Ricardo interrupted. "But there is a way of finding whether you speak the truth."

He stood, stretched himself, bent forward slightly and looked at Marcos Palma from glittering eyes. His lips were a firm straight line as he took a step forward and drew a dagger from his girdle.

SEÑOR VULTURE displayed a calm which was commendable. He sipped his wine, his black eyes gleaming over the rim of his cup, then put the cup down on the table and folded his arms across his chest. Don Ricardo went forward and stopped so near that he could have reached out and touched the man.

There was a sudden clatter of hoofbeats, and three riders stopped in front of the

inn to drop from their saddles and barge through the door, drawing off their riding gauntlets and howling for service. But they stopped abruptly and became silent, astounded at the scene before them, then stepped aside and stood against the wall to watch.

"So it is your intention to murder me, *señor?*" Marcos Palma asked, relieved that witnesses were present.

"A Rizal does not murder, but he slays when it is necessary to remove something obnoxious."

"I have explained to you that my obligation to the governor denies me the right to resent with my blade an insult offered me. Do you seek to take advantage of the situation?"

"I doubt the truth of what you say," Don Ricardo told him.

"You are calling me a liar, *señor?*"

"Precisely! More than that, Señor Palma, you are but a common rogue, a gambler and cheat, a swindler of children, thief and poltroon—"

"Señor!" Marcos Palma cried, infuriated.

"I even doubt the purity of your parentage, *señor.*"

The supreme insult!

But Marcos Palma, though his rage was terrible to see, though his face grew livid and his eyes bulged, swallowed it.

Don Ricardo waited a moment, then his lips curled with scorn.

"You are not worth fighting, *señor,*" he declared. "You are not fit for killing. Your presence in San Juan Capistrano causes a stench. Get you gone!"

He had returned his dagger to his girdle, and now his right arm shot out, and the palm of his hand cracked against Señor Vulture's face.

"Felipe!" Marcos Palma howled.

"Señor?" Felipe the Frog, who had seen his master arrive and was in the doorway awaiting possible orders, lumbered into the room.

"Kill me this man!" Marcos Palma cried. "Use your dagger on him! Come get my firearm and shoot him down!"

Don Ricardo whirled to get his back to the wall, put his hand to the hilt of his blade, bent half forward and looked at Felipe the Frog, who crouched by the wall in an agony of indecision.

Bardoso growled and reached beneath the counter for his old cutlass. But there was no need for him to act. The three riders who had entered the inn, all young men of blood and friends of Don Ricardo, suddenly whipped out their blades. Felipe the Frog found them in front of him, saw three points presented at his breast, and flattened himself against the wall.

"It is not proper, fellow, for you to concern yourself in this affair," one told him. "Outside, rogue!"

Glad that he had an excuse for doing so, Felipe the Frog turned and darted through the doorway.

"Get you gone, *señor!*" Don Ricardo ordered Marcos Palma again. "By set of sun—"

"I am here on official business, *señor,* and am not to be ordered away," Señor Palma said. "Some day we shall have an accounting for this."

Don Ricardo snapped his fingers at one of Bardoso's servants crouching in mingled terror and delight against the wall near the fireplace.

"Outside quickly, and fetch me a mule whip!" he ordered.

THE servant hurried out. Bardoso's eye gleamed with interest. The three caballeros stood by the wall again, folded their arms and prepared to watch. Marcos Palma made a pretense of nonchalance by lifting the empty wine cup and putting it to his lips, and motioning Bardoso for more wine.

The servant returned and handed Don Ricardo the whip, then darted to a corner. Don Ricardo gripped the whip and pushed back his sleeve.

"Now—" he began.

"One moment, *señor!*" Marcos Palma interrupted. "If you touch me with that lash, it means your death!"

"Can you not get it through your thick

head, *señor,* that I am trying to get you to forget your fear and fight? Draw, *señor,* and I toss the whip aside."

"I have told you—"

He was interrupted by another clatter of hoofbeats. This time it was Sergeant Valdez and three of his troopers who came into the inn, returning from questioning certain persons about the death of Manuel Gonzales.

"Sergeant!" Marcos Palma cried. "I am being harassed by this Don Ricardo Rizal, who is egging me to fight him—"

"With no success," Don Ricardo put in. "I am under an obligation to His Excellency to engage in no duels while about his business. I call upon you, Sergeant, as His Excellency's representative here, to control this man. He is becoming unbearable."

Pulling off his gloves and blowing out the ends of his enormous mustache, Sergeant Valdez strode across the room and stood betwen them, fists planted against his hips.

"You act as *magistrado* here, do you not?" Marcos Palma asked him.

"When it is necessary, *señor.*"

"Are you acquainted with the law which says that a person resisting, annoying or retarding a man in the service of the governor shall be sentenced forthwith to the lash?"

"I am aware there is such a law."

"Then I call upon you to arrest and secure the person of this Don Ricardo Rizal, and try him for that offense, and as *magistrado* sentence him and see that the sentence is carried out."

"You would apply such a regulation to Don Ricardo Rizal?" Sergeant Valdez cried.

"The man transgressed, and his name and station mean nothing to me. Do I understand that you refuse to do your duty?"

"But such a thing—to try a *caballero* on a charge and sentence him to the lash—! Think well, *señor!* Do not let your anger cause you to make a bad mistake."

Don Ricardo, now at the table with his friends, laughed.

"In hot water again, Valdez?" he called. "This rogue is causing you to dance on hot stones. I'll make it easy for you, my friend. I'll rush to the mission and seek sanctuary in the chapel. I had it in mind to visit Fray José anyhow, and a few minutes in the chapel will not injure my soul."

Sergeant Valdez caught the significance of it. In professional tones, though his eyes twinkled, he began:

"Don Ricardo Rizal, in the name of the governor—"

But Don Ricardo and his three friends howled with laughter and rushed to the door. The three entangled themselves there and got in the sergeant's way while Don Ricardo rushed out, sprang into saddle, and galloped away toward the mission.

Sergeant Valdez turned back to face Marcos Palma.

"He escaped me, *señor,*" the sergeant reported.

CHAPTER IX

ARREST

DON RICARDO rode to the mission and sought Fray José, and they went into the chapel to talk. Don Ricardo told him everything he had learned, of what he had overheard Felipe the Frog say to Bardoso, how he had confronted Marcos Palma.

"It is plain what they intend," Fray José said. "But you, my son, must control your anger. It is the wish of this man, perhaps, to get you into serious trouble."

"But we cannot stand by idly, *padre,* and let this man work his will."

"We can use brains and strategy," Fray José said. "We can delay the man in his enterprise, offset the work he does by contrary work. One thing impresses me."

"What is that?" Don Ricardo asked.

"The fear of this Felipe the Frog that the governor may be deposed, in which event Señor Palma would instantly find himself without authority. If we could get the news swiftly . . . I have an idea, my son."

They talked for a time, then Fray José

sent a neophyte to find El Viento, and soon the native runner stood before them.

"El Viento is a great runner, is he not?" Fray José asked.

"None can beat him," El Viento replied.

"He is faithful to the Franciscans?"

El Viento knelt and bowed his head.

"And is he also faithful to men of blood and honor, such as Don Ricardo Rizal, who now stands beside me?"

El Viento bowed again.

"It is well," Fray José said. "El Viento, I am going to give you a task. It is a great task. If you accomplish it, men will talk of you for years to come. I am going to put trust in you, also."

"I will try to be worthy of it, *padre.*"

"Well spoken, my son. Attend me! Far up El Camino Real, where you have never been, is Mission Santa Barbara. It is almost one hundred and fifty times the distance from here to the crest of yonder hill. Can you realize the distance?"

"I realize it is very far, *padre.*"

"I am wondering if El Viento can carry a message to a *fraile* at Santa Barbara, making good speed yet sparing himself so he will get through safely. I am wondering if he can do this and guard the message well, letting nobody get possession of it."

El Viento squared his shoulders. "I can, *padre.* If the message is ready, I can start at once."

"Return here within a short time, and the message will be ready. Tell nobody where you are going."

Fray José went to his own quarters to prepare the message. It was addressed to an influential friend at Mission Santa Barbara, and it asked that friend to send it on north by a trusted runner and get a reply which could be relayed back.

BY the time the message was ready, El Viento was waiting. He had changed moccasins and put on a different loincloth, and a small package of dried meat was fastened to his belt. Fray José handed him the message, and he tucked it into his loincloth over his right hip in such a manner that it would not bother him while running.

"I am trusting you, my son," Fray José said. "Whatever may happen, do not let the message fall into other hands. The *fraile* at Santa Barbara will instruct you what to do there, and you will obey him. You will perhaps wait a time and bring another message back. It is understood?"

"Understood, *padre.*"

"Some may try to prevent you."

"El Viento is clever as well as swift, *padre.* I know trails which are shorter than El Camino. My own kind will help me along the way."

"My blessing!" Fray José said.

El Viento knelt and received it, then sprang erect.

"Good fortune attend thee," Fray José said. "Come back to us safely. My son, *a Dios!*"

"*Dios!*" El Viento muttered.

He turned and trotted across the patio and went through the arch, not glancing back. They watched him dodge children and dogs playing among the adobe huts and go toward the highway. Then he sped, a film of dust trailing behind him.

"Ha!" Don Ricardo said, as they started to walk toward the guest house. "It were better that I returned to the chapel and sought sanctuary. Observe!"

Sergeant Valdez and two troopers were riding toward them, and with the soldiers was Señor Palma.

"You think this man really would demand your arrest?" Fray José asked.

"Undoubtedly. Nothing would suit the fellow better than to have me lashed."

"Go into the chapel, Don Ricardo," Fray José ordered. "I will stand in front of the door."

Don Ricardo went in, and Fray José leaned against the casement. At his signal, so slight it scarcely could be noticed, two *frailes* approached him.

The riders stopped and dismounted a short distance away, and Sergeant Valdez strode forward with his men, Marcos Palma beside them.

The sergeant's face expressed his bewilderment. Here was a difficult situation in which he found himself. He could not re-

fuse to honor the pass of His Excellency, and he did not wish to serve Marcos Palma's interests. Least of all did he desire to cause annoyance to Don Ricardo Rizal.

"Fray José, is Don Ricardo about?" the sergeant asked.

"He is in the chapel, my friend."

"I have an order for his arrest, but if he is in the chapel he is in sanctuary."

"That is true," Fray José replied. "The law of sanctuary is well known. He cannot be touched while he is in the chapel."

"And why not?" Marcos Palma demanded, thrusting himself forward. "Order the man out, Sergeant, and if he does not come go in and get him. If there is a disturbance, it will be the fault of Don Ricardo, and his the blame for it."

"But the chapel is sanctuary, *señor,*" Valdez protested.

"You should know the law better, Sergeant. It is sanctuary, says the law, for all except those accused of murder or treason. The offense in this case is treason."

"I should hardly call it that," the sergeant said.

"Such is my judgment. He attacked, annoyed and retarded the work of an envoy of His Excellency. That is treason. I order you to enter the chapel and fetch him forth."

FRAY JOSÉ stood straight in the doorway, his face aflame and his arms stretched out, and the other two *frailes* beside him.

"This chapel is sanctuary," Fray José said. "You cannot enter save for proper purposes. I forbid you!"

"You forbid, *fraile?*" Marcos Palma cried. "In the name of the governor—"

"The governor does not rule mission property. He does not have power in the chapel. Does he dare assume such power?"

"So it is to be a clash of authority? You defy me?" Marcos Palma cried.

"I defy you when you would desecrate the chapel. Your work is well known to me, *señor,* and it is devil's work. I cannot prevent you doing it elsewhere, but in the chapel—"

"Sergeant Valdez! Brush this *fraile* aside, enter the chapel and bring out your prisoner," Marcos Palma thundered. "If he resists, use force. Do your duty!"

"Are you mad, *señor?*" Valdez cried. "Knock over a *fraile,* a holy man, and carry violence into a sacred house?"

"Obey me!"

Sergeant Valdez realized he had come to the parting of the ways. Whatever happend to him afterward, he intended to refuse to carry out such an order. But Don Ricardo, listening and realizing the predicament in which the sergeant found himself, saved him again.

Don Ricardo got through a window at the rear of the chapel, ran around the corner of the building and got to his horse, sprang into the saddle and gathered up the reins.

"Señores, a Dios!" he cried at them. He touched his mount with the spurs and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"He has escaped again!" Sergeant Valdez said, a twinkle in his eyes. "Confound the fellow!"

"Mount, and after him!"

"I know the horse he rides," Valdez said. "We would not get near enough to see his dust. He must be taken later. I shall make a note of it."

"See to it!" Marcos Palma cried, enraged. "I want him punished. But there is a service which can be done immediately. This *fraile* who defied us held us here until Don Ricardo could escape. He is guilty of aiding a criminal. Arrest him!"

"Arrest Fray José?" Valdez cried.

"And try him on the charge!" Marcos Palma added.

"Now, by the saints—" Valdez began.

"Sergeant Valdez, my friend," Fray José interrupted, "I appreciate the situation in which you find yourself. Have no thought of me, but do your duty. I consider myself under arrest. But I have work to do. Kindly allow me to attend to it, and when you wish to bring me to trial notify me and I'll appear."

Sergeant Valdez looked miserable. But he took some courage from the peculiar

expression in Fray José's face. Perhaps the *fraile* had some clever way out of the predicament.

"So be it, Fray José," the sergeant said. "The trial will be held at my usual hour for such affairs, tomorrow morning in my quarters."

"You may expect me there at that time," Fray José replied, bowing and smiling slightly.

CHAPTER X

CONSPIRATORS

DON RICARDO rode speedily for a distance, then circled and stopped on an elevation from which he could look down upon the buildings. He saw Valdez, Marcos Palma and the troopers ride from the mission. The soldiers returned to their quarters, and Marcos Palma went to the inn.

Moments later a man who had been at the mission on business came riding along the trail, and Don Ricardo cut down over the hill and intercepted him. So he learned of Fray José's arrest and that the trial would be in the morning.

Sagging comfortably to one side of his saddle, Don Ricardo pondered as the man rode on. It was unthinkable that Fray José be the victim of such indignity. Don Ricardo blamed himself in part for it, since it had been his presence in the chapel that had brought it about.

But Don Ricardo saw beyond that. He realized it was a part of Señor Vulture's game to belittle the *frailes*, see them shorn of dignity and revealed to the natives as no more than ordinary men. Fray José would lose prestige, and the mission also, especially if the humiliating lash was put to his back.

Don Ricardo shuddered at thought of that, wheeled his horse and touched with the spurs, and raced along the trail toward home. As he approached the spot where the road forked, one branch running to the Cruz *hacienda*, he slackened speed and finally brought his mount down to a walk.

Understanding the situation now, he regretted the manner in which he had treated Don Carlos and the things he had said. But he held there was some justice in it. Don Carlos should have confided in him, he thought, since the two families had been so close for generations.

He decided this was not the proper time to visit Don Carlos again. He would speak to his own father first and tell him all and ask advice. He started on slowly.

At a curve in the road, where it was shadowed by overhanging trees, Don Ricardo came to an abrupt stop. Out from beneath the trees rode Don Valentino Cruz, his face white and showing emotion.

"I have been waiting here for you, Ricardo," he said. "Will you not speak to me? Are we not still friends?"

Don Ricardo reined in beside him. "Whatever happened, why did you not come straight to me, if I am your friend?" he asked.

"I was bewildered and had no proper thought of anything. I didn't know what I was doing, Ricardo. The horror of it—"

"Horror? Of what are you talking?"

"You have heard of Manuel Gonzales?"

"What of it?"

"I—I did that, Ricardo. And Señor Palma knows, and—"

"Tell me!" Ricardo ordered.

Don Valentino told, and Don Ricardo listened with close attention.

"You did not do it!" he decided.

"Oh, I want to think that, Ricardo!"

"You are not the quarrelsome kind. Your pride is such that if you found a man cheating you would scorn to use a knife on him. And you had taken too much wine. Gonzales would have handled you had you tried it."

"But this Señor Palma—"

"Can lie about it," Don Ricardo concluded for him. *"Si!* We must be clever about it, Valentino. And we must act quickly. Our families are quarreling, I have quarreled with Señor Palma, I am fugitive from arrest for treason, and Fray José is to be tried on the same charge—"

"What is this?" Don Valentino cried.

"You were but the start of it. Attend

me!" Don Ricardo spoke rapidly, telling Don Valentino what had occurred, all he had discovered.

"What can be done? What can I do?" Don Valentino asked. "I'll do anything."

"I have an idea," Don Ricardo said. "You ride in one direction, and I'll go another, and we'll whisper to our friends about Fray José and band them together. But we cannot appear openly in it. Our fathers' estates may be confiscated if we do. We must be outlaws with masks on our faces—"

"I understand, Don Ricardo." The boy grew excited. "Which way am I to ride?"

Don Ricardo outlined the plan, and told of other young *caballeros* he had in mind, and they prepared to separate.

"One thing you should know, Ricardo," Don Valentino said. "Your betrothal to Dorotea—my father wished it broken because of our disgrace. Dorotea has been weeping. I heard her say to our aunt she never would wed any man but you."

"Nor will I ever wed any girl but her," Don Ricardo told him. "God grant that it may come right in the end."

"I can have no peace, Ricardo, until I am sure that I did not—"

"Do not let it trouble you," Don Ricardo broke in. "We'll get at the truth of it."

THEY separated then. Don Ricardo rode hard until almost sunset, going from rancho to rancho, locating friends and giving them the news and having them pass it on, and Don Valentino rode also and spread the word.

Don Ricardo got home to hand over his jaded horse and order another made ready for riding. He also spoke to a peon workman and gave him orders, then strode into the house where his father was marching back and forth across the living room.

"You are just in time for the evening meal, my son," he said.

"I have much to talk about."

"Possibly nothing of which I am not already aware. I have heard from the Cruz *hacienda* and from the mission."

"This swine who calls himself Marcos Palma—"

"Is even lower than a swine, no doubt, and carries a pass signed by one yet lower, but he has certain power. He will not fight, and we do not murder. He has but to lift his hand and command the soldiery. Sergeant Valdez is our friend, but what can he do?"

"Do you know he plans to have Fray José whipped?"

"I have heard, my son."

"I have some plans—"

"Let us talk as we eat," his father interrupted.

"At the Cruz *hacienda* . . ." Don Ricardo began, when the servants were not about.

"I know what happened, my son. Don Valentino rode here and told me, then went to meet you on the road."

"Notwithstanding the circumstances, Don Carlos' treatment of me—"

"His words were those of a frantic man. That monster of a Señor Vulture was sitting there, watching and listening. Let me hear your plans."

As Don Ricardo talked, his father's eyes glowed. There were some objections, and some suggestions from the sire. But when he had finished and the meal was done, Don Ricardo went from the house with his father's blessing ringing in his ears, and also his last word:

"Ha! I wish I were young again!"

The peon to whom he had spoken on reaching home was waiting for him, with a bundle of ragged clothing in such condition that he apologized for handing it to Don Ricardo. But it was exactly what Don Ricardo wanted, and he said as much, and rode away carrying the bundle with him.

AS he neared San Juan Capistrano, he saw flares burning around the mission and candles gleaming in the inn. The cooking fires were smouldering in front of the huts. Some natives were singing around the fires, but it seemed quieter than usual.

Don Ricardo avoided the buildings and rode to a jumble of rocks between the inn and the sea. He tethered his horse to a

stunted tree, and in the shelter of the rocks removed his clothing and dressed in the peon's rags.

He smeared his bare legs and feet with mud, so their whiteness would not betray him, soiled his face also, put on a tattered sombrero and pulled it down well so its flapping brim partially obscured his features.

He had noticed natives going furtively toward the beach, toward a clump of trees in a small gulch which ran down to the water, and saw the red pinpoint of a fire there. He went that way also, careful to avoid meeting the others.

He approached cautiously when he saw the tiny fire and natives sitting around it. Beside it, the firelight reflecting on his face, stood Felipe the Frog.

Without being detected, Don Ricardo slipped closer and sat on the ground where he could hear, but far enough from the others so they would not discover he was not one of them.

Felipe the Frog had been speaking for some time and had warmed to his work. He was telling the natives that the *frailes* made slaves of them, frightened them with religious nonsense and got them to work hard for nothing.

"You have food, but do you have such fine food as the *frailes?*" Felipe the Frog croaked. "Do your women wear fine clothes? Are not the feet of your children bare? How much longer are you going to be blind fools, señors? In the south, in the north your brothers are refusing to work unless they are paid a proper share."

Don Ricardo listened to a deal more like that and watched the others who listened. The majority were being stirred by the speaker's words. But many, not liking such talk, crept away through the shadows.

Then, Felipe the Frog began urging them to remain in their huts on the morrow and refuse to labor. If the *frailes* rebuked them, let them say they were tired of being fools and working for nothing. It was even proper, Felipe the Frog told them, that the *frailes* distribute from the warehouse.

"How about the soldiers?" Don Ricardo called.

Felipe the Frog peered into the shadows, but could not tell from where the words had come.

"My master, Señor Palma, carries a document from the governor, which all soldiers must respect," Felipe the Frog howled. "Can't you see that what I say has the approval of His Excellency? The governor and soldiers will stand by you, for they think you are being wronged."

"Do not listen to the man!" Don Ricardo cried from the darkness. "He is evil and will get you into trouble. You will have your backs lashed—"

"Who speaks?" Felipe roared.

"One who knows you are an unhung pirate!" Don Ricardo shouted. Then, before any could discover him, he darted through the shadows to a new position.

"Come forth and stand beside me, and let us see you!" Felipe cried, enraged. "Let these men, my brothers—"

"They are not brothers of a frog!" Don Ricardo shouted from his new position and in a new voice.

Some of the natives were on their feet now, peering into the darkness by the rocks. Silently, Don Ricardo changed position again.

"Run! The troopers are coming!" he barked, suddenly, in a voice still different.

Guilt at being present at such a treasonable meeting heavy upon them, the natives bent low and scattered through the shadows. They dodged among the rocks, rushing to get away from the spot and back to their huts. There they would stretch on the ground and be prepared to swear they had been there all evening.

In a matter of moments, Felipe the Frog found himself an orator deserted by his audience, standing alone beside the fire. He searched the shadows with his eyes, but could see nothing. But from the near distance came a soft chuckle, then a gale of mocking laughter.

"Ho, conspirator!" somebody called. "Where have your dupes gone?"

"Stand forth!" Felipe bellowed.

But another burst of mocking laughter was his answer.

CHAPTER XI

TO THE WHIPPING POST

STILL wearing his peon's rags, Don Ricardo circled back toward the highway and the inn, knowing his horse would be safe where he had been tethered. One side of the inn was in darkness, and Don Ricardo went quietly along the wall through the shadows and came to an open window of the kitchen. He stopped when he heard Bardoso's voice.

Bardoso, it seemed, was speaking to one of his servants, and the servant was talking in a manner unusually bold.

"Too little do we get for such work, *señor,*" the man was saying.

"Work? No sweat has dampened the dust on your body for a moon, base scoundrel! Your hands are soft and your belly is fat," Bardoso informed him. "I have watched you shift work to others, a thing at which you are adept."

"If I do not like to work, I can quit."

"Are you itching for a beating?" Bardoso roared.

"If you beat me, I'll make a complaint to the soldiers, and you will be punished."

"The sun has gone to your head. Punished for beating you? They do not even punish a man for beating a mule. Who are you, speck of filth in a pigsty, to bother the soldiers? Where got you these fine ideas that you should live like a *caballero,* you choice hunk of stable refuse?"

"I have heard a man talk, the one they call the Frog. He told the men not to work for the *frailes* unless they were given horses and cattle. We are but fools, he said—"

"He was correct in that," Bardoso interrupted. "Empty the slop instantly!"

Outside the window, Don Ricardo heard the servant leave the kitchen, heard Bardoso howl orders to the cook, and knew that somebody else had entered from the main room.

"Ha! My friend, the sergeant!" Bardoso exclaimed. "You wish to eat, no doubt. Do you ever attend to your duties, *señor?* I have just had speech with a foul native servant, who tells me Felipe the Frog is teaching them they should not work."

"His activities are known to me," Valdez replied.

"And you make no move concerning them? Have you not an adobe prison with bars at the windows?"

"He is servant of Marcos Palma and speaks with his knowledge and consent, no doubt. It is all a part of the plot against the *frailes,* and I can do nothing."

"How about Fray José?"

"I am worried about that. He will be made to appear guilty, and if that occurs I'll have to sentence him. I am searching my mind for a way to avoid it."

"Ha! Take your men and ride into the hills after some native thief," Bardoso said. "Leave me here alone with this Señor Vulture, and I'll settle everything with a slash of my cutlass."

"Big talk!" Sergeant Valdez said. "I feel that way about it also, but we cannot countenance murder. Nor is the ice beneath your feet especially thick, my friend. Offend this Marcos Palma, and he may have your inn taken from you."

"And how is this pretty affair to end?"

"If somebody could handle it in an unusual manner, without his identity being known . . ." Valdez said. "If the man's work could be stopped without anybody so appearing in it that he could be—"

He stopped speaking, for a hiss had reached his ears, coming through the nearest window.

"Sergeant!" a low voice called. "Plans are being made. Hold your trial of Fray José and do your duty. We'll attend to everything."

"Who's there?" Valdez roared.

Bardoso rushed to the window with the sergeant a step behind him, and they thrust out their heads. They saw a shadow slip swiftly along the wall through the other shadows.

"Halt, *senor!*" the sergeant called.

But Don Ricardo did not stop. He darted behind some rocks and was gone.

"SOMEBODY overheard us," the sergeant was saying to Bardoso in the kitchen. "Let us hope it was nobody who may cause us trouble."

"Trouble!" Bardoso roared. "I am having my fill of it. I have wineskins to open and guests to serve. You are a soldier, *amigo*. You attend to the trouble, and I'll attend to my roast."

As Valdez laughed and turned to leave, the door was opened and Felipe the Frog swaggered into the kitchen.

"Señor Palma desires to know if you intend to serve his supper tonight," he said, insolently. "Also, the last wine you served him was sour as vinegar."

"Are those the only complaints?"

"Señor Palma expects to be treated with delicacy."

"Come here to me, Felipe," Bardoso purred. "Come to me, unhung pirate!"

"What is this you dare call me?"

"Unhung pirate! I have told Sergeant Valdez as much, and he understands how you have present protection. But never let him catch you as much as six paces away from it!"

"What is your desire?" Felipe asked.

"A word in your ear. It happens that in making your speech and stirring up the natives, you stirred up one who works for me, so he did not wish to carry out the slops. That brings the matter close to home, nameless nothing in a sea of zeros! You are interfering in my business. Is it perhaps your desire that I take you apart and make certain your vitals are in their proper places?"

"I call upon this sergeant to witness your threats and ask him to remember whose servant I am!"

"So, rogue, you would hide behind your master and the governor's troopers? A proper show of bravery! Because I have only one eye, I see doubly well. And I have beheld a vision concerning you, gnat on the tail of an ox! I beheld you with your ears cut off and your nose level with your face, both hands and feet missing, and your base body swinging at the end of a rope."

"Enough!" Felipe the Frog cried.

"There was a figure nine floating in the air around your head, which everybody knows is a bad number for a pirate. It meant that the last of your nine lives was leaving your carcass to descend to the special perdition reserved for animals like you."

"You saw no vision!" Felipe cried.

"Ha! Nor have I told you the worst of it. Get out of my kitchen, meaningless wart on the back of a toad, and tell your precious master that his supper is coming in, and that the wine will be the same as he had before. *Vamos!*"

Felipe the Frog retreated, and Sergeant Valdez chuckled.

"Let me catch him when he has not his present protection, and the hanging part of your vision will come true," the sergeant said. "I wish there was some way out of this difficulty. I wonder what he meant—the fellow who shouted at us through the window?"

WHEN the mission bells rang the following morning, everybody in San Juan Capistrano already was astir. The people grouped together, spoke in low tones, glanced frequently toward the long, low adobe building where Sergeant Valdez held his court.

As the appointed hour approached, they began gathering in the vicinity of the barracks. Señor Marcos Palma appeared, riding his black horse, and with Felipe the Frog attending him on his mule. They dismounted, and Marcos Palma went inside. Felipe the Frog remained standing against the wall of the building.

Sergeant Valdez came to the door and howled something which was meant to convey that the court was formed and ready. Men of importance entered to sit on benches against the walls, and some of the bolder natives also, while others crowded at the door and windows to watch.

A mule clattered up to the building and a native servant dropped off and went inside, looked around until he saw Marcos Palma, and went to him to extend a written message. His brows lifting in surprise,

Señor Palma opened it and read. It was a scrawl inviting him to the Cruz *hacienda* again that day after the siesta hour, to partake of the evening meal. Marcos Palma beckoned the man.

"Say to Don Carlos that it is my pleasure to accept his invitation," he said, so all in the room could hear.

Sergeant Valdez took his position behind a huge table and scowled at those in the room. The sergeant was uncomfortable, but making an attempt to uphold his dignity.

"Is it not the hour?" Marcos Palma asked.

"About the hour, *señor,*" the sergeant replied.

"And your prisoner is not here?"

"As you can see, *señor,* he is not here."

"In such a case, few men could be trusted to appear."

"In my estimation, *señor,* Fray José may be trusted at all times in everything."

Señor Palma's eyes glittered, but he made no retort. There was a commotion among those outside the door, and the natives fell aside and made a lane through their midst, and Fray José appeared, walking slowly and smiling.

He entered the trial room and bowed to those assembled, took his seat on the end of the bench where Sergeant Valdez indicated, and looked up.

"I am here," he said.

"Who brings the charge?" Valdez bellowed.

Marcos Palma arose. "I bring it," he said. "Yesterday I made complaint against a certain Don Ricardo Rizal, who fled to the chapel to escape arrest. This *fraile* delayed the troopers until Don Ricardo could escape. So I demand as punishment the lash, since the *fraile* overstepped the bounds of his authority and aided a fugitive."

Marcos Palma resumed his seat, and Sergeant Valdez, his face showing his misery, turned toward Fray José. The *fraile* smiled and stood at the end of the table and calmly faced them all.

"I have heard the charge," he said. "It is true that I gave Don Ricardo sanctuary in the chapel, as was his right to have, as is the right of any—"

"Except those guilty of murder or treason," Marcos Palma put in.

"*Sí, señor,*" Fray José agreed. "I maintain I had the right to defend the sanctuary of the chapel in this case, since the man I harbored was guilty of neither."

"What is this?" Señor Palma cried. "Is he not guilty of treason in annoying an emissary of His Excellency?"

"I have heard him accused, *señor,* but have not been informed as to his guilt," Fray José replied. "The law specifies one guilty of treason. Don Ricardo has not been tried on the charge, hence has not been found guilty."

"I say he is guilty, and was when you harbored him!"

"You may be an agent of the governor, *señor,* but you are not the law," Fray José replied. "You are rather a man who spurns laws except when they react to your advantage."

"What is this?"

"Your works are well known, Señor Palma, and unfavorably. Wherever you have visited, you are despised."

"Indeed? Say on!" Señor Palma's eyes glittered evilly.

"Since you ask for it, *señor.* You are a common gambler, a libertine, a swindler and a cheat, men say."

"And you repeat it?"

"I do, *señor.*"

"Ha! Señor Sergeant, I bring a fresh charge against this man. I charge him with traducing and defaming a man who is under the present protection of the governor, and order that you sentence him to the lash for so doing. Perhaps, my clever *fraile,* you can argue your way out of this."

"THERE is nothing to be argued, *señor,*" Fray José replied. "It is true I made defaming statements against you—but at your invitation, which removes the offense. A moment ago, when I would have ceased speaking, you said 'Say on!' "

A murmur ran around the room, and there was a note of enjoyment in it, and

Marcos Palma's face grew almost purple with wrath. But he controlled himself, bent forward, and fixed his beady eyes on Fray José.

"Before I said 'Say on,' you made the remark: 'Your works are well known, and unfavorably. Wherever you have visited, you are despised.' All here are witnesses to that. In those words you defamed an emissary of the governor, and for so doing are liable to punishment. Sergeant Valdez!"

"*Señor*?"

"I call upon you to make an example of this man who dares dispute the authority of the Gobernador."

"We do not dispute the authority of His Excellency when he confines it to its proper realm," Fray José said. "But the proper realm of His Excellency is scarcely a religious precinct. Sergeant Valdez!"

"Fray José?"

"The situation is plain. This man is determined to see me humiliated under the lash. I appreciate your position, but you are an officer and have a duty to perform. Look on me only as an unknown brought before you for judgment."

"But this—this—" Valdez gulped.

"Am I to report to the governor, Sergeant, that you refuse to do your duty?" Marcos Palma asked.

Sergeant Valdez looked over the heads of those in front of him and through the open window. He saw no way out of the predicament.

And Sergeant Valdez suddenly remembered the voice that had called to him through the kitchen window of the inn the evening before, telling him to hold this trial and do his duty, and promising the situation would be handled.

"It irks me to do this, *señores*," Sergeant Valdez said. "Under the law, sentence must be passed and punishment given unless the one accusing shows mercy. Señor Palma, are you inclined to exhibit mercy in this case?"

"I regret the necessity of refusing," Marcos Palma said. "I feel it my duty to His Excellency to see this man punished."

"Let us remember he is a *fraile*."

"Which makes his offense the more serious. A *fraile* should abide by law and order."

"So be it!" the sergeant said. "It is my sentence that the accused be given five lashes on his bare back, by a trooper named by me for the work, and that punishment take place after the usual manner immediately."

"Five lashes? Does not the law say ten to fifty?" Marcos Palma asked.

"I say five," Valdez replied.

The sergeant stood, and all the others in the room also. Fray José held his head high, and his face was like a mask. The natives around the door and windows were making little clucks of pity. Those in the room began leaving.

Sergeant Valdez gestured to one of the troopers, and the man nodded, and the glance he gave the sergeant informed him that the lashes would be as light as possible. The sergeant motioned to two other troopers, and they touched Fray José on his arms and indicated he was to go forth.

Near the wall of the mission patio, a huge post was set in the ground. On it were dark stains caused by the blood of punished men. The troopers led Fray José toward this post.

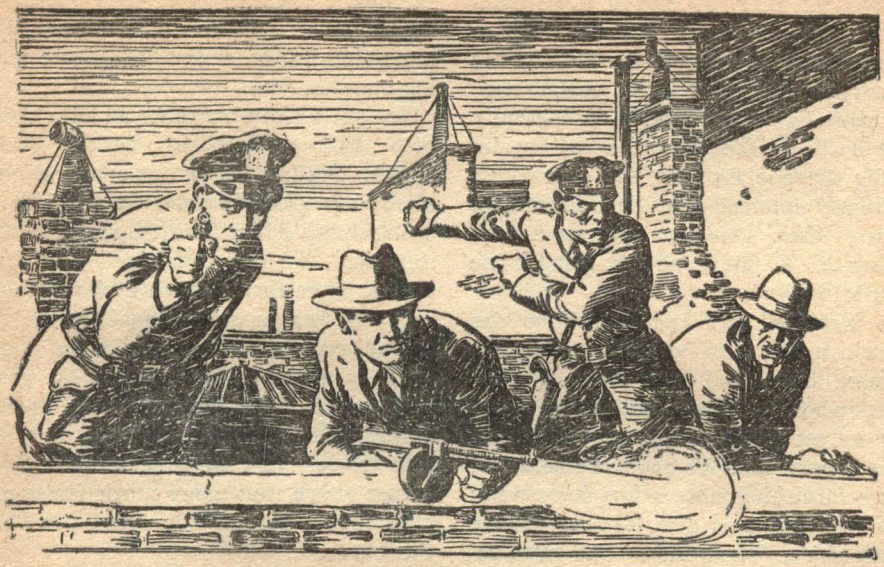
Sergeant Valdez followed close behind. Marcos Palma strode along with them to witness the execution. Felipe the Frog tied the horse and mule and hurried after the others.

Sitting in front of the inn, Bardoso saw the procession, growled like an angry dog, and promised himself that sooner or later he would even this score. He arose and went inside, refusing to witness what occurred.

He howled for one of his servants to fetch him a tankard of wine, and carried it into the kitchen and berated the cook as he drank, talking loudly so he would not hear Fray José's cries of anguish if they were carried toward the inn on the wind.

So Bardoso did not see what happened, much to his later chagrin.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Your Own Funeral

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

Author of "Speak to Me of Death," "Holocaust," etc.

THE demure little lady stepped into the grocery store, rested her large parcel on the counter, and stood by to be waited on. Outside a man just passing glanced incuriously in through the glass front of the shop as he went by. Just a brief turn of his head, one quick glance, no more. The only unusual feature about it being that male passersby will glance at haberdasheries, cigar stores, even barber shops, but seldom at groceries as a rule.

She was a pretty little thing, and she gave her order in a low, pleasant, half-shy voice, keeping her eyes on the list in her hand. She looked absurdly like a child, gravely reciting a lesson. But there was a wedding ring on her ungloved hand. So she must have been at least eighteen.

"Want me to send it over for you?" he offered. "Kind of heavy—"

"No, thanks, I'll carry it myself," she murmured. "No trouble at all."

She emerged, her arms pretty full, and continued on her way. She wore a short sealskin jacket that swung as she walked; her clothes were plain and inexpensive looking.

The man who had passed the grocery as she'd gone in hadn't progressed very far. He had stopped at the newsstand at the next corner to buy a paper; then he retreated, his back to the line of buildings, to glance through it quickly before taking it home with him. The hands that held the paper wore stained pigskin gloves.

The little lady with the bundles passed him a moment later. Neither of them glanced at the other; there was no reason for them to. He was lost in the baseball scores boxed at the top of the page, she was eying a light diagonally opposite to make sure she could cross on red. Halfway down the next block she stopped in at another store, a bakery.

A moment after, by one of those coincidences that so often happen, Pigskin Gloves passed in front of the bakery. He was carrying the paper in his pocket now. Once more his eyes strayed indifferently to the inside of the store, then out again. But the average man on the street isn't particularly interested in the interiors of bakeries either. This one may have been thinking of the supper he was going home to—so leisurely.

She accepted her change from the counterman, put it in her purse, and came out more bebundled than ever. Pigskin Gloves, who was obviously in no great hurry to get home, had stopped at last at the proper kind of showcase—that of a men's furnishing store a few doors down—and was gazing in at a luscious display of trick shirts. The window had been recently washed, unlike most of its neighbors; except that it lacked a little quicksilver backing, it was every bit as good as a mirror.

The busy little housewife marched by with her packages, and her watery reflection followed across the glass store front. But just as she came abreast of Pigskin Gloves who was standing there with his back to her, the pupils of her eyes flicked briefly sideward toward him, then looked away again. It was as instantaneous, as hard to catch, as the click of a camera shutter.

She went a few steps further. But there was a change coming over her eyes now. Or rather over the skin around them. It was hardening, tensing a little. Instantly, as though she realized it herself, she relaxed them, and they became as smooth as ever. But she seemed to remember a purchase she had forgotten to make. She stopped, turned abruptly, and began doubling back the way she had just come.

Pigskin Gloves was still idly looking at shirts and ties as she passed behind him a second time. But this time her eyes were blankly unaware of him; there was no flick toward him; and his oblivious back expressed equal unawareness of her.

At the corner that had the traffic light, she didn't cross a second time but turned up the side street and passed from sight, remaining just a demure little figure carrying bundles.

Instantly, from nowhere at all a second man had materialized beside Pigskin Gloves. Pigskin Gloves gave him a quick almot unnoticeable prod in the side, as though urging him forward, and then they separated. No one could have seen it; it was no more than a gesture of recognition between two passing acquaintances. The second man, who was dressed in a gray ulster, a gray soft hat, reached the corner and turned it, taking the same direction as the little housewife. The first one, Pigskin Gloves, was hurrying onward to the corner above, but going much faster now. He took the second side street, parallel to this one.

On the one the little housewife had taken, Gray Hat also was going along briskly. A discarded bag full of groceries caught his eye, just outside an areaway entrance. An untouched loaf of bread in wax paper had rolled out. He didn't stop to examine it; on the contrary his brisk pace changed to a jog trot. Further along was a second bag of groceries. This one had rolled toward the street and spilled out over the curb. The jog trot became a headlong run, the unfastened gray coat ballooning out behind him like a parachute. The street ahead was empty.

TO BE accurate, not strictly empty, but there was no little housewife on it. And that was all that Gray Hat was interested in. Down at the corner, crashed open against a fire hydrant, was the third and last brown paper bag. A pair of bright tin cans had rolled out of it; two boys were bearing down on it from across the way, frantically urged on by a plump maternal figure in an open upper story window.

As Gray Hat, by one of those coincidences that were now becoming a little overworked, reached the corner, Pigskin Gloves was coming at a full run toward him, having rounded the block from the

other side. They both turned and followed a single direction.

They went one more block east, then one south. It was incredible how the girl had managed to get so far so quickly. Just beyond the next corner the demure little housewife, packageless now, and hatless, was careening along at a frantic, lurching speed, hugging her arms to her body as most women do when they run. That she could get anywhere at all on such spindly heels, much less as far and as fast as she had showed to what limits the human mechanism can force itself.

Halfway down, a doorway seemed suddenly to engulf her, and she was gone. The white and violet crepe ribbons fastened there fluttered with her passing. Long after she was gone, the glass street door was still slowly jolting back into place on reluctant hinges.

Just too late to catch sight of her, Pigskin Gloves and Gray Hat turned into the block, raced to the next corner. But they didn't turn it. An elderly man, standing there, approached at their command and said something to them. He made an abortive gesture with his arm, as though to point, and one of them slapped it down. Once again, as they had before, they separated. Gray Hat stayed where he was, pulling his hat brim further down over his eyes. Pigskin Gloves hurried off toward a very little thing, an almost inconspicuous little thing that he had spotted a second before. A blue and white enamel disk affixed to the baseboard of a store window that said: *Public Telephone.*

Twilight was deepening into night; the street lights suddenly came on in long serried rows as far as the eye could reach. . . .

On the second floor of the hallway the demure-faced girl was leaning breathlessly against a door, limp as a rag doll, not making any sound, her face pressed flat against the wood to still the gasping of her breath. Her hands roamed up and down it on each side of her, not knocking but pushing against it, incoherently seeking admittance. She turned just once to look fearfully at the stairs, then pressed despairingly flat against the door again. It opened without a sound; she vanished like a shadow; the door closed again.

On the other side of it, in the orange dimness of a single bulb from far down the long hall, she spoke. A steamy whisper, with no larnyx sound at all. "Feds, Champ! Whiskers' boys, Champ! Right on top of me, almost, before I knew it!" She passed the flat of her hand across her brow, staggered a little from so much running.

THE man in the blue shirt finished putting away the blue-black automatic and interlacing the door-seam with chains, as though he hadn't heard her. Then they moved down the long hallway together, away from the door. In the room at the end he flexed his arm just once, and she was down suddenly on one supporting arm.

"And you came back here! Right straight back, like in a paper chase!" He reached up and turned the bulb out, went over to the blank wall opposite, and from there diagonally up to the windows. Spider-webby net curtains criss-crossed the silvery arc-light glow coming in from the street. He didn't touch them, didn't even let his breath disturb them, as he pushed his face close up against them. Champ Lane, in the dim light, looked a good deal like a kid. His hard, cunning face was obscured; his body in silhouette was small, almost stunted; its movements wiry and tense.

"I made it, Champ, I lost them." Her voice sounded muffled somewhere in the darkened room behind him. "I had to get in out of the open, I had to pull a hole over my head, and I didn't know which way to turn. If I'd stayed out I'd have been picked up sure as—"

"Why didn't you pull the river over you, then?" he said bitterly, eyes glinting through two intersections in the closely webbed net.

She picked herself up, swung open a closet door, stepped behind it—outside the closet but away from the windows. Sand-

paper hissed once, there was a momentary match-glow, then darkness again. She came out from behind the door with her hand turned down and under over a winking red spark. "I lost all the grub too. I don't know what we're going to do, I can't show my face in those same stores again. My seal coat's hot, too, now, and it's the only thing I've got to go out in—"

The red spark moved restlessly back and forth in the velvety darkness of the room. In the silence as she stopped whispering, a muffled wail, an eerie piping sound, came thinly through the ceiling over them.

She shivered. "They still got that stiff up there with them?" she said querulously, tilting her head back. "Why don't they take it out? It drives you wacky listening to them."

The man at the window, Champion Lane, wanted by almost the whole nation these last few weeks, hadn't stirred, hadn't taken his eyes from the two net pinholes that served each pupil as a frame. He hadn't seemed to breathe all this time. He spoke again at last.

"You lost 'em!" was all he said, in a clipped, choked voice.

Instantly, without a sound, she was at his shoulder, peering over it down into the street. The red spark in the hollow of her hand was hidden from the window by her palm. He didn't hit her any more, just dug abruptly back with his elbow. She went away, came back again without the glowing match.

Three men were gathered into a tight little knot on the opposite side of the street; they weren't looking over this way at all. They melted apart, each went up a different brownstone stoop. One wore a cravenette waterproof coat. One carried a violin case tucked high up under the pit of his arm. No doors opened to admit them at the tops of those stoops, they just ebbed into the shadows. There were some uniformed policemen, too.

"Warm weather on its way," Champ said grimly.

She pulled at his sleeve. "Let's get out. Maybe we still can make it. This is an awful set-up to be caught in—a dead end without any turns!"

"It's too late, you fool, it's too late. We've got the whole District of Columbia on our hands."

A FELLOW and his girl were coming up the street arm in arm from the lower corner. A man suddenly accosted them from an areaway, dropped back again. The couple turned, went hastily back the way they had come, turning their heads repeatedly to look over their shoulders.

"Roping us off, eh?"

"The back yard, Champ. We can get out that way."

"If they're on this street, they're on the next one over." He turned briefly away, shrugged into a suit coat. Instantly the ghostly blue of his shirt darkened to invisible black. He took the gun out again from under it. "They're not getting me alive," he said quietly.

The futile bleating coming down through the ceiling sounded weirder than ever in the tense prickling stillness; it was like the monotonous fluting tune an Indian snake charmer plays, or the whistle of a peanut stand on a lonely street corner.

Champ Lane had always had a sense of humor; perverted, perhaps, but it was there. His eyes flicked upward. "Move over, whoever you are," he chuckled, "there's two more coming up!"

The girl in the room with him winced, drew in her breath sharply, as though something sharp had cut her.

Out in the street a taxi halted, was reversing with difficulty. A directing figure jumped off the running board as it started back the wrong way on a one-way street. Lights were going out by the roomful in the houses opposite. They became strangely blank, inscrutable. A woman came hurrying out of one of them guided by a policeman, a birdcage in her hand. He gave her a parting shove at the elbow and she went waddling down the street to safety.

"Any minute now," said Champ Lane,

showing his teeth in what might have been a grin.

Suddenly the mourners' lament above broke off short, razor-clean. The waspish buzzing of a door-bell battery, clearly audible through the paper-thin floor, took its place. *Z-z-z-z.* Footsteps hurried to and fro across the planking up there, scuffled briefly as though someone were being forced to leave against his will.

Then, incredibly, it sounded right there in the same flat with them—louder, as angry as a stirred-up hornet's nest at the other end of the long hall.

"What do they expect me to do?" he said, "Walk down to the door with my hands up? Take it," he instructed her briefly, "or else they'll know for sure which flat—"

She moved down the hall on soundless feet. "Yes?" she breathed into the perforated disk on the wall.

"Everybody out! Everybody down to the street! That's a Department of Justice order!"

She came back. "They're clearing the house."

"Gas, that means," he said.

"Champ," she pleaded hoarsely, "don't just stay in here with your back to the wall and die! Don't count on your arsenal in the kitchen, you've got a whole Government against you! The minutes are going, once they've emptied the other flats it'll be too late—"

An incessant throbbing of feet was sounding from the galvanized iron framework of the staircase outside—all going one way—all going down. It was vibration rather than sound. The warning buzz kept sounding distantly as doors opened. Below, above, somewhere on the same floor. The thin, keening sound suddenly burst into full volume again, but it wasn't overhead any more, it was going down and around the stairwell, ebbing to the street below.

Champ surged forward swiftly.

He was at the window again. A bowed figure in widow's weeds, face veiled, was being hurried on reluctant feet across to the other side of the street, a policeman on one side of her, the building superintendent on the other, holding her up.

She, Champ's wife, must have been at the door without his knowing it; he would probably have shot her down if he had. She came running back. "The roof, Champ, the roof!"

"Whaddya think they are—hicks?" was all he said, not turning his head.

"Then do your dying out in the open hall at least, not sealed up in this sardine can! The stairs're still clear from this floor up. Let's give it a try, at least. We can always beat them down in again, if it's no go—" She was pulling at his left arm with both of hers.

"All right," he said suddenly, "get started, up there. I'm going to begin it from here. It's coming anyway—and I never yet fired second in my life. Here goes your friend with the raincoat."

She could just about make out the figure, across his shoulder and through the curtains and the window glass, up on top of a stoop there on the other side, signaling to someone unseen on this side.

He didn't touch the curtain or the pane. "Watch your eyes." she squinted them protectingly. It went off like a cannon, the flash lighting up both their faces, and bits of glass spattered all over them like raindrops. The curtain quivered violently; a singed hole was in it now. The figure on the stoop took a nose-dive down the whole twenty brownstone steps, rolled all the way across the sidewalk into the gutter.

INSTANTLY a whole unguessed insect world came to life. Swarms of yellow butterflies fluttered from every areaway, from every stoop, all up and down the street. Whole hivefuls of angry bees seemed to loose themselves against both windows, and hop around inside the room like Mexican jumping-beans. In an instant there wasn't a shred of glass left in either frame. Champ jerked back, cursing, and threw himself flat on his belly pulling her down with him. The curtains were doing a buck-and-wing. Wisps of smoke came from the roof line across the way and floated off

into the night sky. A searchlight beam suddenly shot down from somewhere, found the range of the windows, and bleached the room inside talcum-white.

They were both flat on their stomachs, wriggling snake-like for the safety of the hall, the girl in the lead. Champ swung bodily around his gun, like a rudder steering a floundering boat, ducked his chin to the carpet, and shot *up* the beam to a cornice across the street. Glass fluted plaintively, the white-hot whorl that centered the beam went yellow, then red, then out. The beam itself snuffed out, like an erased white line. They couldn't see anything themselves for a minute, much less the others over there around it.

He felt his way after her, hand on her uprighted heel; then they both reared behind the hall wall. "C'mon," he said, "we're good for ten minutes yet, after that. They probably think Frankie or somebody else is in here with me."

A window in the hallway looking out on a shaft that led to the back shivered to pieces just after they'd gone by, their flitting forms must have silhouetted against the light-toned wall behind them.

"Tomcats out on the back fence too," he gritted. He pitched his gun into the kitchen, grabbed up an unspiked one from a china cabinet where they were hanging from hooks like cups. The place was a regular munitions depot. At the door he took the lead, slithered out to the turn of the stairs, peered down to the floor below. She took the branch leading up.

"Champ, don't!" she breathed. "Isn't the rap tough enough as it is?"

His gun blasted just once, malevolently, and thick door-glass jumped apart somewhere below. A swarm of bees winged up to the second floor with a noise like a coffee grinder, and the smooth wall broke out with blackheads. But he was already on his way up to the third at her heels. "Tommy gun," he said. "All they need is tin hats and a flag!"

They shot out around the third landing, past a door with a wreath, and on up to the fourth. The house was all theirs. Below it sounded like a very enthusiastic Fourth of July. On the fourth floor somebody had lost a supper-table napkin in his hurry to get out, probably from under his chin. An overlooked radio was still jabbering away:

"And then little Peter Rabbit said to the Big Bad Wolf—"

Above the fourth the stairs shed their fake marble trim, took on a sharper incline. A roof door sealed them. "Get that hall light!" he ordered, hand on the latch. She high jumped, and couldn't reach it.

"All right, skip it." He sighted on it almost casually and it popped into nothingness like a little balloon.

HE motioned her down behind him, took off the latch, and began to ease the roof door out with shoulder pressure. Instantly, as though it were high noon out instead of well into the night, the gap was fuming with radiance like a seidlitz powder from some waiting beam, and the usual bees were singing all over the outside of the metal door. One of them, getting in, richocheted directly across the girl's feet on one of the lower steps, like some kind of a warm little bug. She shook it off with a kick.

"Musta mobilized the militia," he said with a flash of sardonic humor. They started down again, on the bias, hugging the inside wall away from the stair rail. Out in the street somewhere a futile bombardment—at nothing—was in full blast. They got down to the third again unopposed. Champ's wife had picked up the discarded napkin, perhaps with some unspoken wish that he'd surrender alive, and was holding it balled in her hand without his seeing it. They re-passed the door with the crêpe, hurriedly left on an inch-wide gap by its routed tenants.

He stopped, wavering by the stairs. Her hand pressed against his arm. "Oh." It was a small sound—a little, throaty gasp. "Oh—you're hurt—bleeding—"

"It's nothing," he said shortly. "It was that first blast—here, gimme that napkin." He grabbed it from her, wrapped it around

his upper arm just below the biceps, held the ends for her to tie.

"I won't leave you, Champ. I won't. You're hurt."

"You'll do like I tell you. I'm all right. Stop snivelin' over me. It's just a little blood." He pushed her away from him, mounted the first steps, then stopped short. "You know what I'm going to do, don't you?" he said.

She looked frightened—in a new way. "I—I guess so, Champ," she said, and shivered.

His eyes were hard, commanding.

"Then here's what it's up to you to do—" He told her rapidly, in short, sharp phrases. "Don't worry," he said, finishing. "And as soon as you get a chance get in touch with Eddie. I'll leave a message, see? So just sit tight. Now go ahead—" He pushed her from him.

She crept fearfully down a flight further, to the second—alone. Upstairs in the depths of the building somewhere Champ was firing his gun again—into wood, at close range, it sounded like. It was drowned out in the repeated thud and boom of gas grenades coming in now through the windows of the second floor flat.

SHE came wavering down to the vestibule through the haze of the gas, her hand pressed to her stinging eyes. They led her out to the street, and the barrage against the windows died down shamefacedly. Up at either end were roped-off black masses that were spectators, here in the middle a big bald patch of empty-sidewalk and roadway, like a setting for a stage play.

She came out into the middle of this with a knot of men around her—so very fragile and girlish, she looked, to be the cause of so much racket and commotion. She mayn't have been crying, but the gas made it seem as if she was. "Where is he?" she was asked.

"He got out right at the start," she said simply. "He must have slipped right through your fingers along with the others. I couldn't do it, because you'd already seen me this afternoon—" And she gave them a rueful little smile.

They rushed the flat—and got a kitchenful of assorted weapons for their trouble.

"Rigged himself up and put one over on us, huh?" someone in command said wrathfully. "I told you to check those tenants carefully when you cleared the house!"

"We did, but the extras all accounted for themselves as guests from a party they were having on the top floor, and mourners from a wake on the third—"

"Sure! But you didn't check them *with* each other, you let them come out in any old order, and didn't keep any of them in custody after they did. This ain't the last you're going to hear about this, McDowell!"

The building was searched from top to bottom, but the girl seemed to have told the truth. Once again as so many times before, Champ Lane had eluded capture by a hair's breadth. They had the net to set all over again. At least this time they had his wife, whatever good that did them.

The other tenants were allowed to return to their homes, and she was taken to the local headquarters of the Bureau of Investigation for questioning. A questioning that continued relentlessly all the rest of the night and well into the morning of the next day. Without any other brutality, however, than its length.

The girl was able to satisfy them that she had not known who Champ was, or at least that he was a wanted criminal, when she had married him less than three weeks before. The similarity of names between her husband and the outlaw she had ascribed at the time to mere coincidence; Lane was not the most uncommon name there was, after all. Even the nickname Champ itself she had mistakenly thought had been given him in joking reference to the wanted man and not because he himself was the original. He had not, and they knew that as well as she, committed any overt act during those past three weeks, had been hiding out.

"But then if you didn't know, how is it

you ran for your life from a couple of our agents this afternoon?"

She did know by then, she admitted; she had found out meantime—from the collection of weapons in the kitchen; his resemblance to pictures of the real Lane she had seen. She had intended leaving him at the first opportunity, but he had watched her too closely until now. She had wanted to avoid capture this afternoon, however, for fear she would be forced to reveal his hiding place. He might think she had intentionally betrayed him, and then she would be in danger of her life night and day; he was the kind would have tracked her down remorselessly and paid her back.

IT ALL sounded convincing as she told it. She was calm, and in her answers was the composure of one who has a clear conscience. She wasn't defiant or intractable, but submissive, resigned. Just a little lady who had let her heart lead her head into trouble, that was all; one who was no criminal herself. If they were aware of the one glaring discrepancy between her story and the facts—namely, the two shots, one from the window and one from the stairs, that had been fired *after* the building was emptied—they gave no sign. It was not to her interest to remind them of that. Even though the man in the waterproof coat had not been killed, she knew the penalty for taking up arms against a government agent. And if Champ had made good his escape, as she claimed, then it must have been she who had fired those shots.

But as the night wore out into wan daylight, and that in turn brightened into full morning, a change began to come over her. It may have been that the strain of the protracted questioning was beginning to tell on her. At any rate, her composure began to slip away from her little by little. At six thirty she was fidgety, at seven thirty noticeably nervous and strained, by eight thirty harried, distracted. They even sent out for a cup of coffee for her, to see if that would brace her up a little, restore her some—but it seemed to have no effect.

As the city outside stirred, awoke to the new day, and went about its business, she began to verge almost on collapse. As butchers, barbers, bakers, elevator operators, bus conductors, street cleaners, bootblacks, newspaper vendors—and pall bearers—took up their daily tasks she commenced to beg them:

"Oh, please let me go! I can't stand any more of this! *Please* let me go! I haven't done anything! I tell you I don't know where he went!" Her distress became almost unendurable; she couldn't even sit still on her chair any longer; her fidgeting hands plucked her handkerchief into threads. It was obvious that unless they dismissed her soon they were going to have a first-class case of hysteria on their hands.

After holding what seemed to her like an endless conference in an adjoining room, they sent out word that she would be released on her own recognizance. She was, of course, to hold herself at their disposal for further questioning at any time. If she tried to leave town, she would be arrested.

It was now ten minutes past nine. She fled downstairs to the street like one possessed. She must have sensed that their object in suddenly letting her go was in the hope that she would eventually lead them to Champ Lane.

So she was careful—very careful—even in her frantic haste. She dodged, apparently aimlessly, through the stream of pedestrians, darted into a large department store, dashed down into the basement and left the store by a side-street entrance. Then she plunged across the street and entered a small and grimy but quite respectable hotel.

She had to call Eddie—right away. If she used the pay booth in the lobby, someone might overhear her. She wasn't sure that she'd actually lost whoever might be trailing her. So she went into the ladies' washroom and used the telephone there.

In a minute, Eddie's low-pitched voice

came to her over the wire. She identified herself. "What about—him, Eddie? Is he all right? Where is he?"

"Hold it, sister. I haven't heard a thing."

"But he said—Eddie, he said he'd call you." Her voice rose as panic stirred through her; her fingers squeezed around the mouthpiece of the phone until they ached.

"Look. Don't come over here. Call me later. I'll let you know if I hear anything . . ."

"But, Eddie, *something* must have—" The phone clicked in her ear, and to no one in particular she said, loudly, shrilly, "His arm—the bleeding—dear God, *no!*"

When she was on the street again, she was a woman gone mad. Her face was all pulled apart—the mouth wrenched open, eyes wide and staring. She forgot that someone might be following her, she forgot to be careful, she forgot everything but Champ—and his arm—and the blood—and where he was, lying unconscious, maybe dead, in that awful place. . . .

She waved to a taxi, jumped in with a swift, sprawling movement, and gave the driver the address of the house she'd left the night before.

THE crêpe was still affixed to the front door, and but for the two yawning second-floor windows, and some strips of tape holding the glass in place in the street door, there was nothing to witness last night's battle. The superintendent was sweeping up glass shards from the sidewalk as she got out of the cab and accosted him with a white, strained face.

"I came back to get my things," she said, staring at him with a peculiar fixed tensity.

He glowered at her over his shoulder. "The quicker the better!" He spat, virtuously if inaccurately. "Go on up, help yourself. Fine people to have living in a respectable house!"

She couldn't seem to tear herself away, though. She kept looking from him to the crêpe and from the crêpe to him. Her eyes strayed up the bullet-pitted facade of the building—stopped a little higher than the second floor, where the blinds were drawn down full length.

"What time," she asked as casually as she could, "are they having their funeral?"

"Yah, *you* should ask!" he growled resentfully. "Fine funeral you and that loafer husband of yours give 'em!" And then as she hovered there in the middle of all his glass-sweepings, he went on, "It's all over with long ago. Eight o'clock sharp they come by and screw down the lid. Eight-thirty already they left the house! He's under the ground at Evergreen Cemetery by now, poor man, and may his soul rest in peace—"

Something that sounded like the twang of a snapping violin string fell on his ears, and when he looked, his carefully collected glass-sweepings were scattered all over the sidewalk again.

She got the door of the taxi open and fell in. She didn't climb in, she *fell* in on her face. The driver heard a choked sound that he translated as "Evergreen Cemetery," and acted upon it. Her legs were still sticking out through the open door as the cab veered off.

Down at the lower corner, by one of those coincidences that were happening again, there was another cab drawn up at the curb with three men in it. She had managed to get up on her knees by the time her machine flashed by. She screamed out at them through the open window, "For God's sake, follow me—if you're Feds!" Which was a strange invitation to come from Champ Lane's wife. Her outthrust arm, beckoning them on windmill-fashion, continued to wave frantically out the window for blocks down.

"Quit it, lady!" warned the driver at one point, when she had caught him by the shoulders with both hands to help him get some speed up. "Or I'll turn you over to a cop!"

One cop did overtake them shortly, on a motorcycle, but instead of stopping them, he shot ahead, holding the crosswise traffic in the side streets until they had gone by.

No vehicle had ever yet arrived outside

a burial ground with such indecent haste as this one, squealing to a skidding stop and filling the peaceful air with a smell of burned-out bearings. But she was already tumbling through the dignified ornamental gateway, into the tranquil setting of well groomed shrubbery, neat white markers, and winding, sanded paths.

She drew up abruptly, cupped both hands despairingly to the sides of her head, as though not knowing which way to turn. A distant muffled explosion, like a percussion cap buried in the ground, solved her dilemma for her. She sped in that direction like an arrow out of a bow.

HALFWAY she met a crowd of people running toward her—in fact scattering in all directions from a single focal point. Frightened people, squalling, gibbering people, one or two of them even stumbling over the turf in their frantic, heedless haste to reach the gates. She battled her way through them until she reached the spot where the stampede had started. An equally frightened but more courageous sexton stood at bay on a little mound of freshly upturned earth, a prayer book extended exorcisingly toward a coffin that was precariously balanced on the very lip of the grave. It was pounding as though it contained a dynamo. And as it pounded it rocked, almost see sawed, with a violent inner agitation. The sexton's white lips moved in hurried exhortation, but no sound passed them.

The widow stood, wavering, by him.

Just as she got there a second gun shot echoed hollowly inside the monstrous thing, and wisps of smoke filtered out of bullet holes that the coffin must have received the night before. Champ Lane's wife dropped down beside it, threw her arms over it in maddened, forestalling embrace, to keep it from going over. She was aware of three men running up after her from the direction of the entrance gates. She recognized one of the men who had questioned her.

"Help me," she sobbed. "You followed me because you wanted Champ Lane—he's in there—help me get him out—"

The man's face went hard and incredulous. "In there—how?"

"He was going to hide in there—until the raid was over. In—with the dead man. He was so small he could do it all right. He was going to get out as soon as you'd gone—but his arm—it must have bled—Champ must have passed out and now they . . . Oh don't stand there—help me get him out. A crowbar, a chisel—anything—"

A DISTORTED mask of gray-faced terror that bore a remote resemblance to the widely publicized features of gunman Champ Lane, gazed up into their faces a few minutes later with mute, doglike gratitude. His sworn enemies, at that moment, must have seemed like angels to him. Angels with handcuffs.

He handed them the gun that he had emptied, in his mad terror, when he came alive and found himself lying, weak and dazed from loss of blood, in the coffin with the dead man's cold body. The way he gave up the gun was almost like a gesture of devotion.

"They didn't hear my first shot—or maybe they thought it was the hearse backfiring." He shivered. A hoarse rattle shook in his throat as he looked down at the disarranged corpse. "I was—under that—for hours—all night. . . ."

As they held him upright between them and as one of them reached out a hand with the open jaws of the manacles reaching for his wrists, the small, tough man who had been the terror of forty-eight states suddenly dropped to his knees. The detective jerked the handcuffs back before Champ Lane could press his mouth against them.

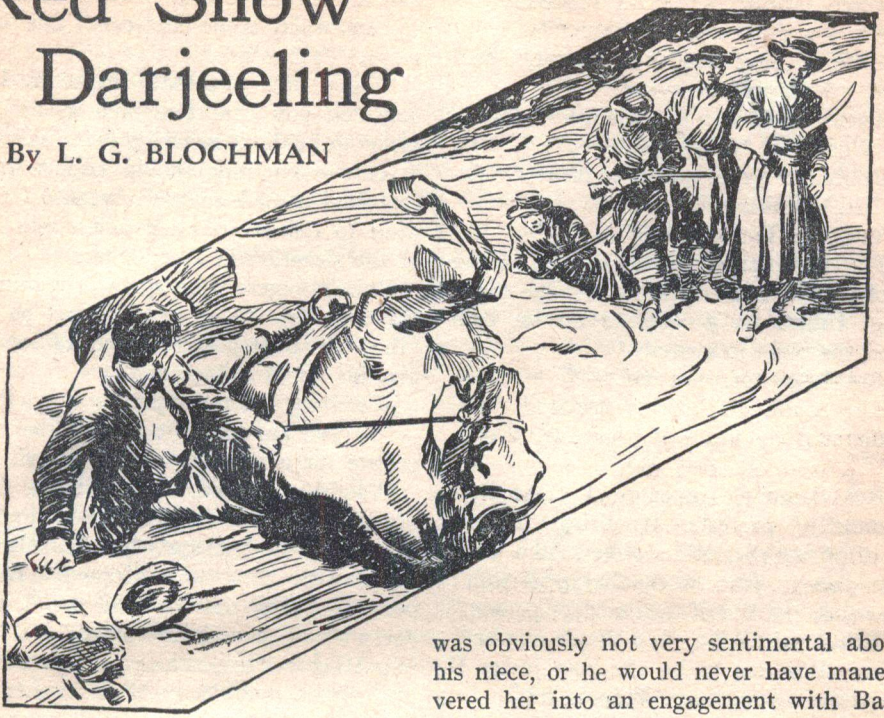
"Bring on Atlanta, Leavenworth—even Alcatraz," he whimpered. "Lead me to 'em. They're *all* all right with me!"

The headline in the papers that evening was, in a way, Champ Lane's epitaph.

CORNERED DESPERADO KISSES CAPTORS' HANDS

Red Snow at Darjeeling

By L. G. BLOCHMAN



CHAPTER XXIV

LEBONG ROAD

IT did not take Woodring long to make his decision. It was made, in fact, before he was even certain that Ruth had been kidnaped. He had always known there could be no alternative. Yet for his own benefit, to convince himself that he was thinking with his mind and not his heart, he went over all the arguments again.

To give up the photographic negative to Ruth's kidnapers would mean a personal loss of 25,000 rupees, for the Shimalghar deal otherwise seemed as good as concluded. It would also mean a loss of his future with the Blenn organization. Blenn couldn't very well give him the sack for acting on behalf of Ruth, but he would certainly blame him for the failure of his great ambition which hinged on the Shimalghar concession. Moreover, Blenn was obviously not very sentimental about his niece, or he would never have maneuvered her into an engagement with Basil Stiller. Blenn liked hard, unsentimental people, men who had no exaggerated ideas about the value of human life, men with enough drive and relentlessness to build an empire.

Empire! That was another angle. Woodring was certain enough that Vaznilko was Ruth's abductor, but he was not sure for what nation he was an agent. He was not British—that was certain. And that was enough for Woodring. After all, he had been working not only to get Alexander Blenn a seat in the House of Lords, but to keep the guarantees of the Indian frontier from slipping into non-British hands. And those guarantees had to be maintained, Ruth Ingram notwithstanding.

At eight o'clock that evening Woodring was at the Himalayan Grand, talking to Inspector Prike.

"I can't give you the information," Woodring was saying, "until you first accept my conditions."

The first installment of this six-part novel, concluded herein, appeared in the Argosy for May 15

"I'm not in the habit of bargaining with suspected murderers," Prike replied.

"Am I a suspected murderer?"

"Until I have made an arrest," said Prike, "I suspect everyone."

"Then I can't give you the information," said Woodring. "Good night."

"Robbins!" Prike sprang to his feet. "Arrest Mr. Woodring."

"Yes, sir. For murder?"

"For obstructing justice," said Prike crisply. "He came here to divulge something. Unless he decides to do so, he'll spend the night in custody."

"But Inspector, you can't—"

"The conditions," Prike declared, "will be dictated by me, not you, Mr. Woodring."

"But dammit, Inspector. I came here voluntarily," protested Woodring. "I came out of purely patriotic motives. All I want from you is your word that you won't jeopardize the life of an innocent person."

"That," said Prike, "is a simple matter—if you allow me to be the sole judge of the person's innocence. Who is it?"

"Ruth Ingram."

"I see." Prike sat down, thoughtfully lighted a cheroot, drummed for a moment on the table with his fingers. At last he asked: "Kidnaping?"

"Yes."

"And you no doubt want my word that you won't be followed when you leave here, that I do nothing to interfere with the payment of the ransom or to apprehend the kidnapers until Miss Ingram is safely released. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"In that case, I can give you my word. Now, what have you come to tell me?"

WOODRING drew a deep breath. He said: "The Nawab of Shimalghar is negotiating—or has negotiated—foreign alliances in violation of his treaty with Britain."

Inspector Prike took the news with remarkable lack of surprise. "How do you know?" he asked calmly.

"A photograph was taken of the Nawab on his visit to Bangkok last month. It shows him in conference with foreign diplomats."

"And where is the negative of this photograph?" Prike asked.

"I can't tell you that, Inspector. I can only tell you that I've seen it, and will make an affidavit swearing to its existence, in case—something should happen to me tonight. I came here solely because I didn't want to risk obliteration unless you knew of the situation in Shimalghar."

Prike's fingers were again drumming on the table top. "I presume, then," he said, "that the photograph is the ransom demanded for Miss Ingram."

Woodring did not reply.

"So you are ready to betray the Blenn empire for a woman?" Prike added.

Woodring colored. "Dammit, the Blenn organization doesn't really need anything from a two-by-four state like Shimalghar!" he blurted. "It's only Alexander Blenn's personal vanity that's behind this deal. He doesn't care how many people are killed in putting it over—as long as he can realize his private ambitions. All he wants is a handle on Whitehall—so they'll make him a peer on the next honors list!"

He stopped, suddenly aware that his pent-up indignation had caused him to say far more than he intended.

"Nevertheless," Prike commented in his suave, even tone, "you are taking Mr. Blenn's money for your part in this, are you not?"

"I was, yes. But I'm not now." Woodring reached into his pocket for Blenn's check. "See this? This was to be my bonus for getting the new concession. Well, watch!"

Savagely he tore the check into small pieces, let the scraps flutter to the floor.

Prike's eyebrows raised slightly. "So you're quitting?"

"Quitting? No! As soon as Ruth Ingram is safe, I'll raise all hell in six languages to get the photograph back from the man I'm going to give it to. But in the meantime, I won't be indebted to Blenn or anyone else."

Prike cast a quizzical glance at Robbins, who was staring at the torn fragments of

paper on the carpet. Then he nodded to Woodring.

"Thank you for coming in," he said. "I promise you that you won't be followed. But you will notify me the moment Miss Ingram is returned, won't you?"

"I will," said Woodring, backing away rapidly, "if I have time."

Inspector Prike was almost smiling when Woodring shut the door.

Once outside, Woodring hesitated. He was tempted to return, ask for his .32 automatic which Robbins had confiscated. On second thought he decided not to risk further delay. He hurried to the clump of rhododendrons near the Woodlands, under which he had hidden the revolver Leda Carmaine had given him.

The gun was still there. He examined it the best he could in the darkness, broke it, removed the cartridges, pulled the trigger six times. The hammer clicked obediently, the cylinder spun. Apparently rust had not yet paralyzed the mechanism. He could only hope that the damp had not got into the cartridges to render the powder useless. He dried them carefully with his handkerchief, replaced them. Then he went to the Woodlands to get from the hotel safe the tiny rectangle of celluloid which had the power to change the lives of so many people.

At nine o'clock he was astride a sturdy Himalayan pony, riding out Lebong Road.

A fine, penetrating rain began to fall as he was passing the Birch Hill Park. He looked up at the shrubbery, blurred by mist and darkness, beyond which was Government House, hot weather retreat for Bengal officialdom. In a few hundred yards he would have left behind the cricket ground, the lawn tennis courts—British symbols of a continent tamed. Tamed! Woodring smiled ironically into the night. . .

He cantered ahead for ten minutes, then slowed his horse to a trot as he began scanning the right side of the road for the opening of bridle paths. It was twenty minutes more before he saw a strip of cloth swinging from a tree, twisting and swooping uncannily in the rain-laden wind.

Woodring's mount slowed to a walk as the mountain trail climbed steeply from the road. The hollow beat of the hoofs plunking into the soft earth seemed scarcely louder than the pounding of Woodring's arteries in his own ears. Giant tree-ferns overhanging the path brushed their wet fronds against his cheeks. The trail zigzagged up the mountainside in a series of hairpin turns.

Suddenly Woodring reined in sharply. Fifty feet ahead of him the luminous eye of a flashlight was gleaming in the night.

Woodring reached into his pocket for the envelope that held the fateful piece of film.

CHAPTER XXV

INSPECTOR PRIKE GOES PLACES

WHEN the door had closed after Woodring, Inspector Prike nodded to his subordinate and asked: "What do you think of the young man now, Robbins?"

"Still the same," said Robbins. "He ought to be locked up."

"Perhaps he should," said Prike absently. He pushed aside a sheaf of papers to disclose a small ledger which he opened. "I've been checking over the ordinance list of the Blenn organization, Robbins," he resumed. "And I find a rather curious entry."

"What's that, Inspector?"

"This," said Prike, handing over the open book. "You'll note there are two entries for Alexander Blenn. The day after he signed for the thirty-two automatic, which fired the empty shell we found in Stiller's flat, he was issued a thirty-eight automatic."

"There's nothing strange about that, Inspector," Robbins said. "If he was planning to give the thirty-two to young Woodring, naturally he'd want a gun for himself."

"Naturally," Prike admitted. "Nevertheless, there's something vaguely disturbing about that second signature. It's not quite like the first."

"There's nothing unusual about that, Inspector," Robbins declared. "A man's

handwriting is often changed somewhat by what he's been eating—or drinking. Many's the time I've had a clerk at the bank call me to task for signing with a signature he didn't quite recognize."

"That's true," said Prike. "Any man—particularly a man with an ambivalent personality—is apt to show differences in any two specimens of handwriting. Still . . ." He took a long, final drag on his cheroot, ground it out in an ashtray. Then he closed the Blenn arms ledger with a snap. "Robbins," he added, "I forgot to tell you that I had a cablegram from London this afternoon."

"About Christopher Jericho?" The deputy inspector's mustache seemed to bristle with new interest.

"About Christopher Jericho," Prike echoed. "It occurred to me that the transfer of Mr. Jericho from an asylum to a private nursing home last year might have entailed the outlay of money. I cabled Scotland Yard to determine, if possible, who was paying the bills at Thornton Heath. The answer came today. Jericho's transfer to the nursing home was arranged by a London firm of solicitors."

"Blenn's solicitors?" Robbins asked.

"No," Prike replied. "Stanley Hubertson's solicitors."

"Hubertson?" Robbins rose like a jack-in-the-box. "What's that mean, Inspector?"

"I don't know," Prike shook his head. "Perhaps nothing. Perhaps—but remember, Robbins, this is pure hypothesis—that Hubertson was aware of some irregularity in the original commitment of Christopher Jericho as a madman. And that, after all these years, the weight of his guilty secret finally began to wear on Hubertson to such an extent that he felt he might ease his conscience by making the old inventor's life more comfortable in a nursing home. . . . By the way, Robbins—this question is of course, superfluous, but I merely want to reassure myself—you're having Hubertson's room watched?"

The deputy inspector's nod was almost reproachful. "Of course," he said. "One of the Commissioner's men is across the hall."

"Good," said Prike. "Then I wish you'd get Hubertson for me. I shall want him later this evening to make an identification for me."

Robbins blinked. "Identification, Inspector?"

"Yes," said Prike. "Perhaps I neglected to tell you that I've had several telephone conversations with Jenkins. He's on his way up from Calcutta. I told him to charter a motor at Silliguri and come on up by the cart road. He should be here in an hour or so. He's bringing a man with him . . . a material witness, I rather fancy."

"Material witness?" A broad smile split the deputy inspector's round, ruddy face. "Christopher Jericho?"

Inspector Prike did not smile. He was busy lighting a fresh cheroot. And before he could reply, the door from the corridor flew open.

Two British constables stood on the threshold, each holding the arm of a tall, dark, exotically beautiful woman in a purple dress. A small beret of Parma violets was perched jauntily on one side of her glossy, jet-black coiffure.

"GOOD evening, Miss Carmaine." Prike's expression did not change as he came forward to greet the shapely brunette. "I'm glad you came in. I was just about to send for you."

"We caught her in the lobby, Inspector," said one of the constables.

"Caught me?" Leda Carmaine gave a brief, sarcastic laugh. "I came here under my own power. Let go my arms. I want to see Inspector Prike."

"You've come, I suppose," said Prike, quietly, "to ask a favor."

"Just one," said Leda Carmaine. "I've got a motor car waiting for me outside. When I finish telling you what I've come to tell you, I want you to give me a note or something so I can get through to Silliguri. Or any place else I can get by motor. I've got to get out of Darjeeling in half an hour."

Prike's cold stare seemed to bore right through Leda's dark eyes. "You're rather

presumptuous, Miss Carmaine," he said, "to think I would consent to let you leave Darjeeling—in view of the fact that I have a witness who saw you in Room 329 at the time Dr. Feurmann was murdered."

Leda Carmaine returned the inspector's stare for a full ten seconds. Then her long eyelashes drooped. She seemed to pale slightly. "All right," she said. "Lock me up, then. That's just as good, if you can keep me locked up long enough. All I want is protection."

"Protection from whom?" Prike demanded.

Leda did not reply.

"Count Vaznilko, perhaps," Prike suggested.

Leda caught her breath. "What do you know about Vaznilko?"

"Enough to occupy you for some time," said Prike. "So you might be seated. In the first place, Vaznilko carries an Albanian passport—chiefly, I believe, because of the paucity of Albanian consuls in the East who might question its authenticity. Second, he wears among his many decorations the red-white-and-blue cross, with rampant lions, of the Order of Montenegro. I happen to know that this Order was given only to members of ruling families—and Vaznilko's name is not listed in the Almanach de Gotha. Third, his loyalty and allegiance are for sale to the highest bidder. For instance, he was a counter-revolutionist for the White Russians in Harbin ten years ago and an agent for the Red Russians in Mukden when the Japanese took over. Fourth, he has been posing as your husband—"

"I didn't come here to talk about Vaznilko!" Leda broke in fiercely.

"Perhaps," said Prike quietly, " you came to talk about the candid photograph you took in Bangkok."

Leda moistened her lips. She stared at Prike in silence.

"How long have you been working for Alexander Blenn?" Prike pursued.

"I've never worked for Alexander Blenn!"

"No, of course not," Prike agreed. "I'd forgotten for the moment that Blenn has a prejudice against employing women. Therefore you must have peddled the photo to him—with the intention of stealing it back before it could be put to use. Rather neat, your idea of collecting twice."

"Who told you this?" The corners of Leda's mouth tightened.

"No one," said Prike. "It's rather obvious. Your camera and a most interesting photo taken with it was in Blenn's possession, and Blenn is too wealthy to stoop to stealing something which was patently for sale. The fact that you and Vaznilko have tailed young Woodring to Darjeeling convinces me that you expected to make your photographic enterprise pay double. You—"

"Talk!" shouted Leda. "Must you go on talking, talking? Can't you act? Can't you stop a murder?"

"Another murder?" Prike inquired casually. "You and Count Vaznilko must be quite busy these days. . . ."

"You *are* a juggins, aren't you?" Leda stalked indignantly across the room until she stood above Prike. She glowered at him. Her arms were raised rigidly a few inches away from her sides, her fingers bent like claws. "Don't you want to save a man's life?" she demanded.

"A man?" Prike leaned back in his chair. "I thought it was Ruth Ingram you people kidnaped?"

"What do I care about Ruth Ingram?" Leda screamed. "They're going to kill Paul Woodring!"

"SIT down, please," said Prike coldly. "Be logical. Woodring is going to be a good boy and hand over the photograph, so that you can sell it a second time. Why should Vaznilko want to kill him?"

Leda hesitated an instant. Then:

"Because of me," she replied. "Vanzilko thinks I'm balmy over Woodring."

"I see. And are you?"

"What difference does that make? Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. Maybe I just want to do something decent for once in my life. Maybe I'm sick of being a pro-

fessional double-crosser. Maybe I've been bad news for every man I've met since I was old enough to bead my eyelashes, and maybe I liked it. But maybe I just happen not to like it any more . . ."

"And what do you expect me to do?" Prike yawned.

"Stop Paul Woodring!" Leda declared. "They're going to ambush him in a bridle path just off the Lebong Road. They're going to shoot him in cold blood. You can stop them, Inspector. You've got to!"

"Sorry," said Prike, "but I can't. I've given Woodring my word that I wouldn't follow him."

"But you must, Inspector! You can't let him walk into a trap like this! You—"

"Where is Ruth Ingram being held?"

"I don't know."

"Then I can't help you. Unless you tell where this girl is, so that I can safeguard—"

"But I don't know where she is, I tell you! I swear it! I don't know where they've taken her. All I know is they're going to kill Woodring. And you've got to stop them! You've got to!"

Leda's voice rose to a shrill crescendo. She had seized Prike's shoulders in both hands, was emphasizing her words by frantic, jerking gestures.

In spite of the mild mauling he was getting, Prike maintained an air of complete nonchalance. He even managed to light a fresh cheroot, while his steady piercing gaze bored deep into the great dark eyes of Leda Carmaine as though sorting the thoughts that lay behind them, separating the true facts from the false, the real motives from the sham, seeking prime causes for the brunette's hysterical assertions.

"Here, here! Stop that!" Deputy Inspector Robbins came striding to the rescue of his superior. But he halted and doubled back when he heard a knock outside. He opened the door a crack. There was an exchange in undertones. When he closed the door again there was a peculiar blank look on his face.

"It's the Commissioner's man, Inspector," he said. "He's lost Hubertson."

"Lost him?" Prike stood up.

"Says he went down the hall for half a minute, about an hour ago," Robbins explained, "and that Hubertson must have gone out while he was away. Because when he looked in just now, Hubertson was gone. Of course it's not serious, Inspector, because I'll have him back for you before Jenkins gets here. Now I—"

"Robbins!" With one brisk movement Prike flung aside Leda Carmaine, stalked across the room to snatch up his rain coat. "What was your last report on Quombi La?"

"At seven o'clock this evening, sir," Robbins replied, "he went to the Lamasery of the Red Monks on the Lebong Road."

"Lebong Road. Good!" Prike had drawn his automatic, made a brief examination to satisfy himself the magazine was loaded. "Robbins, tell the Commissioner's man to come here. No, get me three Darjeeling men, so they can keep each other alert. I want them to stay here with Miss Carmaine. You and I are going places, Robbins."

The Inspector holstered his gun, started for the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHOTS IN THE RAIN

PAUL WOODRING raised himself in the stirrups as the luminous eye in the darkness winked out. It flashed a second time—the portentous signal he was awaiting.

For an instant his fingers clung to the envelope, as though reluctant to part with an object which enfolded so much destiny—the ambitions of Alexander Blenn, the fate of the Nawab of Shimalghar, the security of a frontier, the life of Ruth Ingram, his own life, perhaps. . . . The light continued to glare at him. He dropped the envelope, watched it spiral to the ground.

He drew rein to turn his horse in the narrow path. The horse backed a dozen feet. Then Woodring saw a man spring from the undergrowth. His lips formed a silent exclamation as he recognized the

plump figure of Henry Emmet-Tansley!

Metal gleamed in Emmet-Tansley's right hand. His left was extended as he pounced upon the envelope Woodring had dropped.

Two shots thundered in the night.

Woodring's horse bolted forward.

A third shot roared. A damp shower of bullet-clipped leaves sprayed Woodring's face.

The horse set his forefeet, slid to a halt. Whinnying with fright, the animal reared, wheeled, lost footing in the mud, slipped, fell. The fall bowled over Emmet-Tansley, pinioned Woodring's right leg.

Struggling to drag himself free, Woodring saw the flashlight lying in the mud, illuminating a scene of mad confusion. Men were swarming from the thicket. Running legs scissored grotesque patterns of light and shadow upon Oriental faces. Guttural voices barked Mongoloid monosyllables.

When Woodring disentangled his foot from the stirrup, he saw Emmet-Tansley sprawled almost at his elbow. A scowling hill-man was standing above him, the cruel curve of a *kukri* gleaming in his upraised hand. Instinctively, unreasoningly, Woodring lunged. The whole weight of his driving body was behind the straight left thrust that crashed against the hill-man's chin.

Emmet-Tansley scrambled to his feet, ran right into the arms of Count Vaznilko, who had appeared from nowhere to block the path. Woodring had a glimpse of the mud-spattered envelope in Emmet-Tansley's hand. He also saw the puffy eyes of Vaznilko leering avidly at the envelope. Then two men crossed his line of vision, loping toward Emmet-Tansley.

One of the two men turned his head to look back, and Woodring's nerves tingled with the shock of recognition. Unless his imagination was playing him tricks, unless the queer unreal light of the abandoned flashlamp was creating an illusion, he had glimpsed the black, rain-bright face of Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram!

Another shot pounded on his eardrums, ricocheted shrieking into the night. The flashlight was out.

The floundering horse at last found foothold, came galloping down the trail in wild panic. Before Woodring could get out of the way, the scapula of the flying animal struck him a glancing blow in the chest, catapulted him off the path into a tall fern brake.

Stunned, Woodring lay a moment in the lush, wet thicket, fighting with himself to stave off unconsciousness. He could hear sounds with the far-off objectivity of a brain emerging from a drugged sleep. He was conscious of an aching head and a growing nausea, of the neighing of the horse and the diminishing tattoo of retreating hoofbeats. All human sounds seemed to have dissolved completely into silence.

He raised himself on one elbow. The weirdness of the sudden hush was emphasized by the soft whisper of the rain on the thick foliage. Painfully he got to his feet. He tried to light matches to examine the terrain of the brief, confused mêlée, but his matches were water-soaked and useless. He groped his way over twenty yards of churned mud, seeking possible victims of the fray. He found none.

He was cold—chilled to the skin by the soaking rain, cold inside with the emptiness of despair. He had lost. He had given up the key to Shimalghar. For all he knew he had not even saved Ruth.

Forlornly he limped down the trail toward the Lebong Road.

INSPECTOR PRIKE'S motor car swung into Lebong Road, the twin beams of its headlights groping through the rain like the feelers of some great luminous insect. A European constable sat in front beside the *syce*. In back, Prike had not said a word to his subordinate for several minutes. When he spoke at last, it was with bitter self-reproach.

"Robbins," he said, "I should be asked to resign from the C. I. D. I've made a criminal mistake."

"We all make mistakes, Inspector," said Robbins.

"Not like this," Prike declared. "I'm like a bridge player with a pianola hand, who takes a finesse to win an overtrick,

finds the king on the wrong side of him, and stupidly loses his contract."

"What have we lost, Inspector?" Robbins asked.

"A man's life, I'm very much afraid," Prike answered.

There was a pause. The squeak of the windshield wiper seemed very loud against the glass.

"Hubertson?" ventured Robbins at last.

"Perhaps!" said Prike. "I'm not sure. I refuse to make any more predictions. If you ever hear anyone say that Prike is infallible, laugh at them, Robbins."

"Where are we bound now, Inspector?"

"To the Lamasery of the Red Monks, to try to correct an early error. I should have insisted on smoking out Alexander Blenn last night, as I first planned."

"We turned the town pretty well inside out, didn't we, Inspector?"

"We did not," said Prike. "We showed too much consideration for Government's policy of respecting the sanctity of native religions and religious edifices. We should have taken apart every Lamasery, every *chorten*, every Buddhist shrine and temple between here and Jalpaiguri."

"I shouldn't think Blenn would be spending all this time in company with native Indians," said Robbins. "He wouldn't hobnob with a brown man for a barrel of gold monkeys. He treated 'em worse than a junior engineer in a jute mill treats his sweeper."

"True, Robbins. But we've overlooked the fact that Blenn left Calcutta in a blue funk. He was afraid—afraid of a European, of Christopher Jericho, evidently. The only place he might find reasonable sanctuary would be with some Indian who was under strong obligations. My friend Quombi La is apt to be under exceptional obligations to Blenn until the affair of the photograph is liquidated—which it will be tonight. Therefore—"

Prike stopped. He leaned forward. The headlights of another car were boring through the rain, coming toward them at great speed. Prike touched the *syce* on the shoulder, gave an order.

Prike's car slowed down, swung abruptly to the right, came to a stop standing directly across the road.

"Get out, Robbins," said Prike. "We'll have a look."

The onrushing lights grew larger and brighter. The other car came on at undiminished speed. A collision seemed inevitable, when there was a howl of brakes. A wave of mud and water leaped into the air as the tires skidded. The car sloshed completely around before losing momentum.

Prike and Robbins, guns drawn, jumped on the two running boards. Reclining urbanely in the back seat, smoking a cigarette through a long ivory holder, was Count Vaznilko. He was alone except for the *syce*.

"Climb out, please," said Prike.

"In all this rain?" Vaznilko's voice was politely incredulous. "My dear man, you can't—"

"Climb out!"

COUNT VAZNILKO'S alacrity in no way marred the studied dignity of his movements. With an elegant gesture he tapped the end of his ivory holder against the edge of the car door to dislodge the half-smoked cigarette. He then assumed a pose of bored forbearance, a picture somehow spoiled by the fact that the rain had taken the crease out of his trousers, that one sleeve of his jacket was muddy and torn, and that there was a long bloody scratch across one cheek.

"Search him, Robbins," said Prike. "I'll look into the car."

A few moments later Prike was back, grasping something in his closed left hand.

"Nothing on him, Inspector," Robbins said.

"Where's the photograph, Vaznilko?" Prike demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not a photographer."

"Miss Carmaine is," said Prike. "And a very good one. Haven't you seen Woodring yet tonight?"

"Never heard of him," said Vaznilko.

"Nor of Ruth Ingram either?"

"No."

"Then how did this handkerchief get into your car?"

Prike opened his hand. A resilient wad of gossamer expanded into a lace-edged handkerchief.

"Probably Miss Carmaine's" said Vaznilko.

"You might have said His Majesty the King's" said Prike. "The initials are 'R.I.'."

"This is a rented motor," said Vaznilko. "I have no idea who may have used it before me. And now if you don't mind, I'll be getting along. . . ."

"Where is Ruth Ingram?" Prike held his arm across the door to the car.

"I'm sure I don't know."

"How would you like to go back to China, Vaznilko?"

"China? Never been there. I hear it's a most interesting country."

"Most," said Prike. "And the Chinese are a most ingenious people for thinking up exquisite means of executing prisoners. There's the Death of the Thousand Cuts, for instance. And it's a strange coincidence, Vaznilko, that a man of your name sold three thousand American machine guns and considerable ammunition to a Chinese general named Tsao Wu-ching, two years ago. But he neglected to tell the general that the machine guns were discarded as obsolete by the American army, and the general didn't discover the ammunition was defective until he tried to use it against an advancing Communist army in Szechuan. It's silly of him, of course, but General Tsao still resents having had five regiments wiped out."

"Why are you telling this to me?" Vaznilko demanded haughtily.

"Because you carry an Albanian passport," said Prike, "and I believe that Albania has no extra-territoriality rights in China. So that if I decide to send you back, you will be subject to Chinese law, even in the Treaty Ports . . . Now of course, if you should decide to tell me where you are hiding Miss Ingram. . . ."

Prike paused. The mask of aristocratic unconcern had dropped from Count Vaznilko's face. The loose, blasé lips were white in the glow of the headlamps. There was fear in his eyes as he stared at the automatic in Prike's steady fist.

"Let's not talk of China," he said, with a shudder. "I've just remembered there's a girl in a deserted *bhusti* a mile down the road. Perhaps her name is Ruth Ingram. Shall we see?"

"We shall," said Prike.

FIVE minutes later the inspector was breaking through the wet undergrowth of a rain-swept grove of palash trees. In front of him, a few inches ahead of the muzzle of Prike's automatic, walked Count Vaznilko. Slightly to the rear was Deputy Inspector Robbins, with a flashlight that sent a luminous disc dancing over the crooked, sodden wall of a tumbled-down thatched shanty. The light came to rest on a door hanging at a crazy angle from one rusty hinge.

"You first, my dear Count," said Prike, prodding Vaznilko in the back with his gun.

The single hinge uttered an unearthly screech as the door swung in. The three men crossed the threshold. A dank, mouldy odor filled the darkness. The flashlight beam swept the debris-littered floor, paused a moment on a broken bed-frame laced with leather strips, made another circuit of the sweating walls. The room was empty.

"Well?" said Prike.

Robbins swung the light until it struck full upon the face of Count Vaznilko. The count's cheeks were ashen, his eyes haggard.

"She was here, Inspector!" he declared hopelessly. "She was here fifteen minutes ago. I swear it. I brought her here myself. She was in my car until after—until fifteen minutes ago. I don't know how she could have got away. She . . . she was tied!"

Prike's silence was ominous. His relentless stare stabbed into Vaznilko like the prying bistoury of an autopsy surgeon.

The last vestige of Vaznilko's urbane composure was gone. He was cringing, imploring.

"You can't send me to China, Inspector!" he pleaded. "You made a bargain with me. I brought you here in good faith. The girl was here. She should be here now. She—"

"Put the cuffs on him, Robbins," interrupted Prike. "And bring him along. We've got work ahead of us."

THE C. I. D. men drove half a mile up the road to the Lamasery of the Red Monks. Leaving their handcuffed prisoner in the car with the European constable, they walked between rows of stone chortens—tall, phallic pillars which loomed through the blur of rain like ghostly ranks of giant sentries. As they approached, weird sounds of Tibetan rites surged from within the monastery. The drone of chanted prayers, the clash of cymbals, the blare of horns and conches, the nervous rumble of a drum.

Prike led the way into the fane. Just inside the doorway were two huge prayer wheels, like great upright barrels inscribed in carved Tibetan characters with the mystic phrase: *Om mani padme, hom!* Two devotees, only half as tall as the cylinders they were turning, marched around and around while a tiny bell tinkled to mark the revolutions, each turn counting a prayer. Wicks burning in bowls of *ghee* gave off a faint, soft light. The air was perfumed with the scent of flowers.

Prike and Robbins walked past the two prayer wheels until they could look over the bowed, shaven heads of the crimson-robed monks, to the stolid, cross-legged golden Buddha who sat in an ornate niche at the far end of the hall. The deep cadence of the incantation of a hundred Lamas swelled and died away like the boom and ebb of some distant surf. The blowers of the radong nudged the dirty-nosed altar boys who held up the ten-foot lengths of the great silver trumpets, and a long, mournful wail blended with the renewed din of cymbals, drums and conches. The starry lines of oil lights shivered in the blast of sound, causing the garish colors of the symbolic frescoes on the walls to glow and flicker.

As a compromise with his otherwise sacrilegious action in stalking briskly among the kneeling monks, Inspector Prike, uncovered. Almost immediately a tall, broad-shouldered Lama with a reddish tinge to his round Mongolian face came toward him from the high altar.

"You are disturbing our ritual, Inspector Sahib," said the Lama.

"Quombi La," said Prike, "I want to see Alexander Blenn."

"But I have told you a dozen times, Inspector Sahib," protested Quombi La, "that I do not know where he is. Moreover, your men have already searched our monastery twice today—searched it thoroughly."

"Thoroughly," said Prike, "except for the little shrine in back."

"But that, Inspector Sahib," said Quombi La, "is our holy of holies. It enshrines a relic of the *Thera Vada,* our sacred scripture—"

"Yes, I know," said Prike. "One of the palm leaves on which the original Pali Canons were written. I want to see it."

"That is impossible, Inspector Sahib. No one, who does not profess our religion—"

"In that case I shall have to visit it without your permission," Prike announced.

"Inspector Sahib—"

Prike was already striding toward a side door, with Robbins at his heels. The ritualistic clamor of horns and drums again swelled above the drone of prayers.

Quombi La reached the inspector as he pushed through the door, walked into the rainy night. The Lama grasped the inspector's arm, but Prike did not relax his pace. He continued his way toward the silhouette of a little outbuilding shaped like a spiked helmet. A tiny oil light, sheltered by a crimson globe, burned above the doorway.

Just before he reached the shrine, Prike nearly stumbled over a dark heap lying in

the mud. He stooped quickly, called sharply.

"Robbins! Your torch!"

The beam of the deputy's flashlight slanted down to glisten on a rain-soaked pair of legs. It traveled over the prone figure, pausing briefly on a waxlike hand that held a pistol. Rapidly it moved on to the man's head, on which the rain had plastered down the thinning iron gray hair. The lifeless face stared at the weeping sky—a hard, ruthless face of which the heavy, aggressive jaw hung rigidly open, frozen in a cry for help that would never be uttered.

"It's Alexander Blenn! Robbins exclaimed. "And he's shot himself! He's got the gun still in his hand!"

Prike was kneeling in the mud, his earnest lips pressed together in a tight, grim line as he examined the corpse.

"It's a thirty-eight automatic, Robbins," Prike said tersely.

CHAPTER XXVII

ACCUSATION

PAUL WOODRING had managed to catch a ride on a passing *tonga* for the last mile of his disconsolate return to town, but he was still wet and bedraggled when he walked into the Woodlands Hotel. He had hardly got through the entrance before Stanley Hubertson rushed up to him, and pumped his hand.

"Thank heavens you're all right," said Hubertson. "I was afraid something might have happened to you. Everything go off on schedule?"

Woodring stared at Hubertson blankly. "Get me a drink," he said.

Hubertson guided the dripping youth to a table, called for a double brandy peg.

"I've been waiting here most of the evening," Hubertson said. "I had a devil of a time getting here. The police put a watch on my room, for some reason or other. But I wanted to be here to get the news at first hand."

"There's no news," said Woodring in a monotone.

"At least you're safe," said Woodring. "I thought when Miss Ingram came in that—"

"Ruth back" Woodring suddenly came to life. He stood up.

"She came in about twenty minutes ago. She was so upset that she couldn't speak to me. That's why I thought perhaps something had happened to you.

"Beg pardon, sir." The reception clerk had come over to the table. "Miss Ingram asked to be notified if you came in, Mr. Woodring. She's coming down directly, sir. She said—"

Woodring didn't wait to hear more. He went bounding across the lobby and met Ruth at the bottom of the stairs. She was pale and showed signs of having been under a strain, but there was nothing strained about the smile she gave him. She held out both hands.

"I couldn't wait to apologize for being such a fool," she said. "You were right—I am a spoiled brat and a babe in arms. I'm terribly ashamed of having gotten you into this mess . . . and terribly grateful to you for what you've done. I don't know what would have become of me if it hadn't been for your bearer. . . ."

"My bearer?" Woodring raised his eyes above Ruth's curls and noticed for the first time that Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram was standing diffidently three steps behind her in the stairway.

"Begging pardon, *Sahib,*" the Tamil apologized, "but informed *Memsahib* that all was accomplished through *Sahib's* instructions. Was—"

"Then that *was* you I saw tonight," Woodring exclaimed. "What the devil were you doing with Vaznilko's ruffians?"

"Begging further pardon for mingling in *Sahib's* private affairs," said the Tamil, "but took slight liberties of previewing chit arriving this afternoon time, therein observing rendezvous for Lebong Road. Shortly thereafter embarked upon personal reconnoitering, and was able to follow kidnap motorcar by folding self in luggage rack. Releasing Memsahib thereafter relatively simple. Regret, however, abandoning

Sahib to own devices in height of bombardment. Was *Sahib* badly shot?"

"Shot *at*," said Woodring. "But they missed me."

"Was expecting same," said Malaswaram. "From vantage spot in bushes, was observing *Sahib* approach on horseback. Also observed Count Vaznilko aiming pistol. Therefore undertook to joggle aim by implanting slight kick to coccyx of Count Vaznilko. Was formerly quite expert kicker, *Sahib*, while playing rugger in Madras with team of Blenn employees. . . ."

"You—a Blenn employee?" Woodring demanded.

"For ten years, *Sahib*, have been seventh assistant accountant and third junior translator for Blenn indigo and chinchons estates in Coromandel district."

"So it was Mr. Blenn himself who planted you with me as bearer?"

YOUNG Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram lowered his eyes like a bashful girl. "No deception being intended, *Sahib*," he said. "Blenn Sahib being simply desirous for supplementary means of secret communication in cases of urgency, enlisted self as liaison contact."

Woodring grinned appreciatively. "You've done a good job, anyhow, Clemenceau," he said, "and you ought to get a handsome reward from Mr. Blenn. I'm sure Miss Ingram will suggest it to him. I would myself, but I'm afraid I won't be in his good graces after what happened tonight. You see, I—"

Woodring stopped, aware from Ruth Ingram's expression that someone had come up behind him. He turned to face Inspector Prike.

Prike was standing solemnly with his hat in his hand. He said: "Miss Ingram, I have bad news for you."

Ruth smiled—a little wistfully, a little skeptically. She said: "I suppose it's about Uncle Alex—again."

"This time," said Prike, "there is no doubt about it. Mr. Blenn is dead."

Ruth Ingram's smile persisted, mechanically, without meaning. For three days she had steeled herself for the shock of this news. Now it had come, it was without impact, without reality. She said nothing.

Woodring, too, was silent. He took the girl's hand, found it limp and cold in his fingers.

It was Hubertson who spoke. In a horrified whisper he exclaimed: "How—how did this happen, Inspector?"

"He was shot to death at the Lamasery of the Red Monks on Lebong Road," said Prike. "My colleague, Deputy Inspector Robbins, seems to think he committed suicide."

"That's impossible!" Ruth Ingram broke her silence with a burst of indignation. "You don't know my uncle! He'd never kill himself!"

"Good!" Prike seemed well pleased. "I'm glad to hear you say that. Are you angry enough to accompany me to the police station? I was afraid that the ordeal of questioning might be too much for you. However, under the circumstances—"

"Certainly, I'll come!" the girl said.

"And you'll come, too, Mr. Hubertson?" asked Prike. "And Mr. Woodring? And this Indian lad—?"

"Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram," prompted the Tamil. "Am quite happy to offer humble coöperation."

IN a room at Darjeeling police headquarters, Deputy Inspector Robbins was waiting with two constables, Count Vaznilko, Leda Carmaine, and Quombi La.

"Robbins," said Prike, as he walked in with his group, "Miss Ingram doesn't believe that Alexander Blenn committed suicide."

"Did you tell her, Inspector," Robbins asked, "that the gun in his hand was the thirty-eight that killed Basil Stiller and Dr. Feurmann? And that he was just taking the easiest way out when he saw we had him cornered?"

"No, I didn't, Robbins," said Prike, "because I'm inclined to agree with Miss Ingram. Blenn was murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Certainly," said Prike. "I'm sure that tests with Lunge's reagent will establish later that Blenn did not fire that gun. In the meantime, I'm satisfied that I'm right, by the very nature of the gunshot wound."

A *chaprassi* came into the room and handed Prike a telegram. Prike opened it, glanced at it, then continued:

"A man really intent on destroying himself, doesn't miss. He wants to end his life, not to suffer. Therefore he shoots himself in the head or the heart—not through the abdomen, as Alexander Blenn was shot. Blenn must have gone through agonies before he died."

"Then why didn't somebody hear him yell, Inspector?" Robbins asked, looking at Quombi La.

"For the same reason that no one seems to have heard the shot," said Prike. "The sound accompaniment to the rites of Lamaism is sufficient to drown out any minor noises within a wide radius."

"Have you . . . is there any indication that Mr. Jericho might be in Darjeeling?" asked Paul Woodring.

"I eliminated Christopher Jericho automatically," Prike replied, "because Blenn was killed tonight by someone he knew and trusted. He would not have left his hiding place back of the monastery for Jericho, of whom he was mortally afraid. This theory has just been confirmed by a message from London. Scotland Yard cables: 'Christopher Jericho apprehended Tilbury Dock while boarding India mail steamer'."

There was a thick silence as Prike scanned the faces around him.

After a moment Stanley Hubertson cleared his throat and asked timidly: "Then who do you think, Inspector, might have killed Mr. Blenn?"

"Why, you did," said Prike blandly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MATERIAL WITNESS

STANLEY HUBERTSON slid forward to the edge of his chair. He removed his pince-nez and blinked at Prike.

"You can't mean that, Inspector!" he exclaimed.

Prike nodded to Robbins. "Tell Jenkins to bring his man in here," he said.

Jenkins, a tall, bony detective, came in with a gray-bearded Hindu servant.

"This man is your bearer, is he not, Hubertson?" Prike demanded.

"Why, yes . . ."

"He has been in your service for fifteen years?"

"Ever since I came to India, yes."

"Why didn't he accompany you to Darjeeling?"

"I thought I could pick up a servant here," said Hubertson. "One who knew the country would be more useful in the field. Besides, I owed Motilal a holiday."

"So that he would not be readily available for questioning by the police?"

"Not at all," Hubertson protested.

"But you know, of course," said Prike, "what Motilal has confessed to the police?"

A terrified denial broke from the lips of the bearded servant. "That is not true, *Sahib*," he shrieked. "I have confessed nothing! They have threatened me. They have asked stupid questions. But I have told nothing, *Sahib*—because I know nothing."

"We don't need his confession," interrupted Jenkins. "The attendant at the burning *ghat* has identified Motilal as one of the men who brought in Stiller's body for cremation."

"What have you to say to that, Hubertson?" Prike asked gently.

"There has been some error," Hubertson murmured.

"Indeed there has—several," said Prike. "But most of the errors were yours, Hubertson. For instance the elaborate alibi you constructed for the murder of Dr. Feurmann was a trifle too elaborate. You said you saw Feurmann at the window when the shot was fired. You suggested—quite plausibly—that he might have walked the dozen steps to the bed before he collapsed. Only in this case, Hubertson, it was impossible for Feurmann to have taken

a single step. Your bullet shattered his spine. And a man with a broken spine instantly loses the use of his legs.

"Naturally, when I caught you in one lie, Hubertson, I had to recheck your other statements—the story of your receiving a phone call from Alexander Blenn from Stiller's apartment on the night that Stiller was murdered. That is when I telephoned Jenkins in Calcutta, telling him to round up your servants and take them to the burning *ghat* for possible identification . . ."

"But why should I have killed Feurmann, whom I didn't know?" Hubertson protested.

"Another error," Prike declared. "You meant to kill Woodring."

Paul Woodring's jaw dropped. "Me?" he exclaimed. "But why?"

"I shall begin at the beginning," said Prike. "And Mr. Hubertson I'm sure will correct me if I make minor errors in motivation, as I am reasoning from fragmentary evidence and my knowledge of human nature."

He paused. Hubertson glowered in sullen silence.

"MR. HUBERTSON is the recent inventor of a highly-efficient carburetor," Prike continued, "which is apt to revolutionize the whole world of internal-combustion motors. If it succeeds, it would bring millions in royalties. Even if it did not succeed, it would probably bring millions from the petroleum interests, who, frightened by the prospect of a greatly reduced consumption of their product, would buy the patents to keep it off the market. Is that correct, Mr. Hubertson?"

"I know nothing of its commercial value," murmured the white-haired engineer.

"Ah, but you do," insisted Inspector Prike. "And that is just the point. You are a salaried employee of the Blenn organization and since your carburetor was developed in the Blenn workshops, the patents belonged to Blenn. You knew it would be hopeless to ask a man like Blenn for participation in the profits, because you had the example of Christopher Jericho before you. I don't know how crazy Jericho was when he threatened to kill Blenn, but I strongly suspect that he was not as crazy as the court believed. At any rate, Jericho's rightful profits for fifteen years have gone to Blenn.

"You've been brooding over Jericho for the past year, Hubertson. You've been brooding to such an extent that you paid out of your own pocket to have Jericho moved to a private nursing home. And as a result of your brooding, you saw Jericho's fate in store for you. You saw yourself old, stripped of the fruits of your labors, perhaps put conveniently away — like Jericho. So you resolved to act. You resolved to come into your own, to shake off the leeches like Blenn and his successor, Basil Stiller."

"I had nothing against Stiller."

"Except," corrected Prike, "that he was a second Blenn, like him in every way—hard, ruthless, greedy. So you decided to kill two birds with one stone. You shot Stiller, and planted triple suspicion on Blenn. You knew Blenn was mortally afraid of Jericho, so when you read that Jericho was at large, you forged the telegram which you knew would send Blenn into hiding. You're a clever draftsman, Hubertson, as clever as any engineer I've known—but I think that handwriting experts will be able to show the court that the loops of your *g*'s and the terminal stroke of your *t*'s carry over into your forgeries. Then you told your story of the telephone call, which established Blenn at Stiller's flat at the time of the murder. As a final bit of false evidence, you left an empty thirty-two cartridge on the scene of the crime. This was not difficult, since you had access to the Blenn armory and were more or less custodian of the ordnance register, but it showed that you planned the crime in advance, since the thirty-two automatic was issued to Blenn several days previous. The fact that you shot Stiller with a thirty-eight did not bother you, since you expected the bullet to be lost when Stiller's body was cremated.

"When, however, you learned that I discovered the body intact, you contrived to keep suspicion still pointing to Blenn. You altered the armory list—microscopic examination of the paper shows plainly the erasure and substitution of the forged signature—to show that your thirty-eight was also issued to Blenn. Now you were ready to follow Blenn to Darjeeling and finish your job. With Blenn and Stiller out of the way, you were confident that Miss Ingram would turn to you, as the veteran of the organization, to be the new czar of the Blenn empire. At last you would come into your own. I'm pretty sure that's what you had in mind.

"En route to Darjeeling, however, you discovered a new fly in your ointment. You discovered that Paul Woodring was not only an alert, intelligent, up-and-coming young man, but that a sentimental bond seemed in the process of formation between Woodring and Blenn's heiress. Woodring was showing altogether too much promise. Therefore he had to be eliminated.

"YOU knew that Woodring was to register as John Mapleleaf. You could ascertain from the hotel register that John Mapleleaf was in Room 329. You did not know, however, that the Nawab of Shimalghar was playing a Machiavellian game and had passed on the pseudonym to his German friends in an effort to thwart Blenn. Therefore you sent a chit in the name of the Nawab's envoy—another piece of evidence for the handwriting experts, by the way—to Room 329, suggesting the door be left open.

"In the meantime you had broken your spectacles. By your own admission, and by the convexity of the glasses you wear, you suffer from severe hypermetropia. Therefore, when you walked into 329 and saw a man lying on the bed, your unfocused eyes were unable to distinguish his features. Convinced it was Woodring, you muffled your automatic with a blanket, and shot him.

"I have already gone into the story you concocted as an alibi, which you strengthened, of course, by having the optometrist's *chaprassi* find you undressed.

"Your thirty-eight, when you had done with it, you left in the hand of your last victim. When we have made paraffin moulds of your own hands and have tested them for nitrates, I am sure we will find that you fired the shot that killed Blenn, although I admit I cannot say as yet how you discovered Blenn's hiding place at the Lebong Road Lamasery."

"I—I'm afraid I gave that away," said Woodring contritely. "I told him that the Shimalghar deal was to be settled at the Lamasery of the Red Monks tonight."

"In that event," said Inspector Prike, reaching into his pocket for a Trichinopoly cheroot, "the case is settled—unless, Mr. Hubertson, you have some explanation to offer."

Stanley Hubertson had been growing years older with every minute of Inspector Prike's monologue. His narrow shoulders stooped more and more, the furrows of his face deepened, his thin hands hung limply between his knees. His white-thatched head might have been carved in stone. His eyes had lost their glitter as they stared dully into space. Suddenly he began to laugh. It was a low, lifeless chuckle at first. Then it became a mournful croaking, which grew into a louder, faster, hysterical laughter. At last his frail body shook with great uncontrollable guffaws. He stood up, his mouth wide with wild, spasmodic cackling. Then the outburst stopped as suddenly as it began. He turned, stared silently at Prike.

"I'm glad I killed Blenn," he whispered.

His spindly legs collapsed under him, and he fell in a dead faint.

Ruth Ingram rose, took a step toward him, stood looking down. Her eyes were big with mingled emotions—horror and pity, reproach and bewilderment. Then, with a little sob, she buried her face on Woodring's shoulder.

* * *

THE Darjeeling Mail was coasting down the steep slopes of the Outer Himalayas. Night was already drinking in

the color from the mountainside, and the moss and creepers hung from the trees as somberly as a widow's veils. An electric headlight was searching out the curves ahead, while a few furlongs back, the second section of the Mail slid down the incline, a great orange flare licking up the darkness before its locomotive.

Paul Woodring's ears were buzzing with the change in altitude. His fingers were tightly clasped about the small hand of Ruth Ingram, who sat in silence beside him. Neither had spoken for miles. Woodring preferred not to talk for the present. In fact, he was not sure there was a present. He felt himself suspended in time, at an unreal point between the past and the future, between nightmare and the sunlight of awakening. The past—it seemed very far away now—had ended that morning. Hubertson was in custody, Vaznilko was glad to plead guilty to kidnaping, Leda Carmaine was awaiting deportation. And now . . .

The toy train was stopping. The cart road crossed the railway at the station ahead, and the locomotive was panting deferentially while a string of motor lorries rumbled past in seemingly endless succession. The door of the compartment opened and Inspector Prike came in.

"I'm intruding, I know," he said, "but I hope you won't mind too much."

"Not at all," said Woodring. "Perhaps you can tell me where all these lorries are going?"

"They're troop replacements," Prike said. "They're taking over at Jalapahar and Lebong from the regiments that are moving up into Shimalghar."

"Shimalghar?"

"That's one of the provisions of the new treaty," said Prike. "It was drawn up this morning—probably an all-time diplomatic record. The treaty was written and initialed, all in the space of two hours. Of course, the Nawab couldn't very well object to any of our stipulations. And by the way, that's why I stopped by. One of the clauses of the treaty calls for an automatic extension of the Blenn Concession in Shimalghar—in case you people care to go ahead with your development. The new political officer insisted on that provision."

"Who's the new political officer?" Woodring asked.

"He's a rather brilliant young agent of the Foreign Department," said Prike. "Perhaps a bit bibulous for a man in his profession, but he has the saving grace of never losing his head, even when he's in his cups. He did say, however, that he came uncomfortably close to losing his head last night under one blow of a *kukri*, if it hadn't been for you, Woodring."

"Emmet-Tansley!" Woodring exclaimed.

"That's his name," said Prike. "He's been in Darjeeling for the past year, quietly studying the frontier situation while acting as a mathematics professor at some boys' school. At any rate he seemed very grateful to you, Woodring, and asked me to tell you about that concession."

"Well—" said Woodring. "Well, what do you think of that!"

"Good night," said Prike, closing the door.

The last of the lorries rumbled by. The door opened again and Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram put in his head.

"Sahib?" he called.

There was no answer. The Tamil was puzzled, as he stared into the gloom of the compartment, because he was sure Woodring and the *memsahib* were in there. And yet he saw only one person sitting in the corner. He cleared his throat and was about to say something when it occurred to him that he was wrong, that there were really two persons sitting at the end of the seat, but that they appeared as one because they were sitting so close together.

Discreetly Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram withdrew his head. He closed the door softly.

The Darjeeling Mail began to move again, rolling downward to the plains of Bengal, rolling toward the future.

THE END

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

AS IS our somewhat world-weary custom on dark, dreary days when we're finding ourselves a little cramped for space anyway, we're just going to sit back this morning in our not too comfortable easy chair and let you people do all the work.

So, ladeeez and gennulmun, we have with us here on this cheerless day one reader who finds himself a little dazed upon discovering that the year 1902 was not the beginning of Everything for us; one reader who discerns no merit in Merritt; and one reader, highly prized by us—because we seem to be in a rather jaundiced mood anyhow—who speaks up in a loud firm voice on behalf of all the stories that some of the rest of you have made us think of as friendless orphans.

Overture, maestro . . . Dim the house lights. The curtain rises slowly on

S. FEIGENBAUM

When I picked up the last issue of the ARGOSY, the 55th Year was sort of a surprise. Here I thought I was really an old-time reader, having read the ARGOSY since way back in 1902. Too bad I did not save some of my old copies. It would be too much to even try to remember the names of some of the serials much less the authors.

I am going to give just a sort of an idea of some far back and maybe someone will furnish the names. I wonder if anyone remembers the serial of the little Trireme on a mantel-place that came back to life and took its owner back to the carlocks of an ancient Phoenician fleet, another old-timer was a serial of ancient Constantinople after the fall of Rome, the old Gallic mercenaries and the first use of Greek fire, another not that far back was a serial of a slave in a temple of Carthage during the Punic Wars.

Some of the later stories that stand out are "Tarzan and the Jewels of Ophir," "Tarzan and the Golden Lion," "The Dreamers," "The Face in the Cliff," the adventures of the Boston Bean and his pals in China. That is a group of serials that we have not had for quite a few years. Another group includes the *Mynheermentje* stories, "The Mark of Zorro" and the latest, not very long ago, "Wench Caravan."

"Annapolis Ahoy" is a serial that I should think would be long remembered by your readers. "Revolution with Pictures," too, and the present serial, "War For Sale" is another I know I am going to like. I am going to save both of these for future re-reading.

St. Louis, Mo.

IF S. Feigenbaum isn't careful, he's going to turn out to be Our Favorite Reader. It was a little of a shock but a great big comfort to discover someone whose taste is as varied as our own. If there were only more S. Feigenbaums on this petulant and naughty world, Life (capital *L* please, printer) would be a finer and a gayer thing, and the editorial desk would not seem quite such a musty confusion of unfinished layouts, pastepots that have overflowed onto next week's manuscripts, and accusing calendar pads that sternly remind us of "Ills. to Art Dpt. Jun. 29" and "Last Proof Due Thurs." Thanks a lot, Mr. Feigenbaum. You'll never know how much you did for us this morning.

Here on what is certainly the other hand, a reader who is pretty definite about his likes and dislikes.

H. L. COBB

Please let this offset some of the gruesome cravings of the worshippers of the ghoulish, supernatural, impossible! Give us stories that at least seem possible, that enlarge the scope of normal living. I, for one, am fed up on ghost stories and witch magic! Fantastic? Fooey! Raus mit Merritt et al!

Chicago, Ill.

THE question of pseudo-scientifics has long been a thorn in the editorial side. There is one thing about them, though, people that like them never can get enough of them. And the antis, at least as represented by the last *vox populi,* consider none at all to be a great sufficiency. There seems to be something about a story with filterable viruses, test tubes, and little men from Mars or Saturn in it, that makes readers pretty rabid, one way or the other. We don't quite understand why this should be so, but we're not going to let it get us down.

And now comes the letter from the chap who enters the lion's den of Bruce fans, Adams admirers, and MacIsaac minute-men with trumpets bravely blowing and banners of defiance flying in the wind.

G. W. WILLITTS

I am the man who is always wrong. I am the man who found the oft-berated, story-that-everybody-hated "Z Is for Zombie" a fine piece of flamboyant nonsense, an upgushing of the rococo spirit, a tongue-in-the-cheek prank, and, as such, perfectly elegant fun.

I am also the man who is trying to forget "Annapolis Ahoy" a feat which most of the other readers are apparently never going to be able to accomplish. In fact I would like to live in a world where there was a Theodore Roscoe in every inkwell and where the works of George Bruce were kept where they belonged—in kindergarten primers. More Max Brand and less George Challis. Reams of Joel Townsley Rogers and not one small peep from Fred MacIsaac. Millions for the defense of pixilated penmen, and not one cent for Burroughs.

Gentlemen, and ladies, I give you Roscoe, Rogers, Brand and Blochman. You already seem to have your Bruce and Adams and Burroughs. What is more, you may keep them.

Bend, Oregon.

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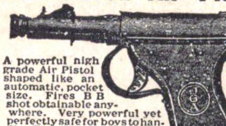

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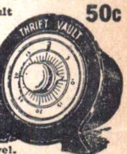

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