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ARGOSY

JULY 24

WEEKLY



*Complete
Novelets by*

**Allan Vaughan Elston
and Richard Sale**

ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

Volume 274

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*Complete
South Seas Novelt*

I

THE Outer Islands Trading Company's lugger worked in through the reef, pulling hard against the rush of the tide. For a little way the sea was like a mill race; then, as the channel widened, the lagoon of Tanawai opened in placid blue enchantment. Gulls circled it lazily. Pelicans skipped with awkward flappings toward the green banners of the beach.

Skipper Bill stood beside Dave

Weston at the rail. "A touch-and-go run in through here," he complained; "and—what burns me up—it never does any good."

"You mean you never get any cargo?" Dave said.

"Not a pinch!" scowled Skipper Bill. "Still, long as we got a company station here, reckon I'll have to call in every trip."

"It'll be different from now on," Dave Weston promised him. He had the confidence of youth and was determined to make good on Tanawai Island. Outer Islands Trading Com-

Copra

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "The Howling Wilderness"



pany, Ltd., expected him to make good, and so did Sylvia Farrel.

Skipper Bill shrugged gloomily. "Todd Welsh had the same idea, young feller, when he come here a year ago. And what happened? He made a rum failure, same as the agents afore him did. Now here you are in his place."

"Maybe the competing station offers better trade goods," suggested Dave.

"It ain't that," Bill protested with conviction. "It's Logan Brothers' agent, 'Red' Ryan. He's got a winning way with the natives. It's a gift, son, this trading calico for copra."

The leaning palms on the shore were close now. Dave could see grass roofs gleaming through them, with a fine sweep of greenery beyond. Bright spots of color on the beach were the tunics of natives assembled there. A chatter of welcome reached Dave. Then canoes shot toward the lugger, swarming alongside as she dropped anchor in nine fathoms.

Most of the welcomers were boys—swarthy, clean-limbed youngsters of pure Polynesian strain. A few were girls with large dark eyes, languid and long-lashed. One of these called gayly

to Dave, "You like maybe come shore?"

Dave laughed. "Do they all speak that good English?" he asked Skipper Bill.

"The run of 'em don't savvy ten words," Bill said. "But a few of these youngsters took a turn at the mission school."

Dave looked down at the one who had called to him. She wore pink satin over a lace petticoat. A leghorn hat trimmed with shells was perched coquettishly on masses of black hair. Her smile flashed boldly. "You like come ashore my boat?" she repeated.

"Give her a play," Skipper Bill advised slyly. "These are supposed to be your customers, so you might as well start making friends."

"Believe I'd rather take a chance with *that* one," grinned Dave. He indicated another girl in the background. This one was younger and by contrast shy.

Skipper Bill chuckled. "You're not a bad picker, son. That's Samona, purty as ever, like sunlight through a fog." He raised his voice. "Come alongside, Samona, and meet our new agent."

THE shy girl, both embarrassed and delighted, paddled her canoe to the lugger's side.

Dave smiled down at her. "I'm Dave Weston," he said, "and I hope we'll be friends."

"We shall make happy friends," she promised. She was slim and gracious, and her soft, cordial voice was like a velvet touch. In a scarlet tunic, with a wreath of hybiscus in her hair, she made an alluring picture against the blue of the lagoon.

"Skipper him to the beach, Samona," boomed Bill. "I'll be along in the

shore boat with all his luggage."

Samona was the envy of her companions as Dave lowered his long, white-clad frame into her canoe. In a moment they were skimming toward the beach.

"You stay long time?" the girl asked hopefully.

She seemed so ingenuous that Dave saw a chance to get first hand and sincere information. He was eager to come to grips with his job, and first of all he wanted to find out why his predecessors had failed on Tanawai Island. Why did the Tanawains take all their copra to the other agent, Red Ryan?

"My company is taking Mr. Welsh away because your people haven't traded with him," he said. "Don't they like him?"

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "Mr. Welsh very nice man."

"Then why don't they take him copra?"

A shadow crossed her face. "Because our head men say it is tabu."

Dave frowned. He knew that innumerable tabus, many of them founded on superstition rather than reason, had always shackled the Polynesian peoples. "That seems stupid, Samona," he protested. "You don't believe in a tabu like that, do you?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No, I think they are not good," she said. Then she added shyly, "I have like tabus of *your* people best."

This mystified him. "What are the tabus of my people?" he asked.

She seemed surprised that he didn't know them. "The good priest have be here long time," she said. "He have die now. But he teach me the ten tabus of your people."

Dave still was puzzled.

"He are make me good Catholic," she explained simply, and looked quick-

ly to see if he approved the idea.

Then, with a shock of humility, he understood what she meant by the ten tabus of his people. It made him look at her with a new interest. She was little more than a child, he realized, and breathlessly beautiful. Her face was a perfect brown oval, the features straight and delicate, her body slim, supple, round. She was fragrant and fresh, like rain on the desert. But what most astonished and impressed Dave Weston was a faith which believed only in those tabus once inscribed by Moses on tablets of stone.

"I guess you've got the right slant on this tabu business, Samona," Dave said as the keel of the canoe grounded on the beach.

Dave stepped ashore and was immediately surrounded by cordial natives. Samona kept close to him and explained to her people that his name was Dave, and that he was her happy friend.

The lugger's shore boat arrived and Skipper Bill's voice broke in gruffly, "Can't understand why Todd Welsh ain't here to meet us."

"Is that our station?" Dave asked, pointing down the beach to a low, rambling structure with a grass roof.

"No, that's the Logan Brothers' lay-out," Bill said. "Red Ryan hangs out there. Sharp as a shark's tooth, that feller. He'll bear watchin'."

To the left Bill indicated the company station, which was entirely of sheet iron badly in need of paint. Except for wide verandas on four sides and a generous shade of coconut palms, the place struck Dave as rather desolate.

"Up there on the hill is where Grenner lives. He's resident governor here, and what he says goes," Bill thumbed toward a white bungalow on a distant eminence. It was nested in flowering

shrubs, with a bower of ferns flanking well-kept terraces.

Three Kanaka sailors from the lugger were now at hand with Dave's luggage. They followed with it as Dave and Skipper Bill walked briskly toward the Outer Islands Company store.

The door of the place was open, its screen hanging on one hinge. On a veranda table stood a half empty beer bottle with flies buzzing about it. As he entered the store Dave saw no sign of life other than cockroaches swarming on the counters. The shelves, though covered with dust, were well stocked. Twist tobacco, bolts of cotton cloth, tins of coal oil, knives, beads, tools, canned meats.

"Ahoy Welsh, look alive!" bawled Skipper Bill. There was no answer.

Bill took a look into the copra room. "Same old story," he reported. "Not a sack o' cargo on hand."

It was fairly clear that Welsh had made few if any trades since Bill's last call. "He's probably out in the jungle shootin' pigs," growled Bill.

But when they went into living quarters at the rear, a shock transfixed them. Agent Welsh lay in bed with a copra knife protruding from his back. The sight paralyzed Dave and even the wind-bitten face of Skipper Bill went bloodless.

After a moment of staring, they backed from the room. "Come along, son," Bill said hoarsely. "We gotta report this to the gov'nor."

II

RESIDENT Grenner was drinking in his office with Red Ryan when Bill and Dave burst in on them. Hugh Grenner was a ruddy New Zealander, shiny bald and round at the waist.

"I've got news!" blurted Skipper

Bill. "Somebody stuck a knife in Todd Welsh."

Grenner blinked small pale eyes at Bill. Then he stared askance at Dave Weston. Dave explained, "I was sent from the Papeete office to relieve Welsh. We found him murdered."

"With a knife," repeated Bill.

Ryan reached for his glass and drained it with a gulp. Over the glass his hard, frosty eyes met Dave's. The Logan Brothers' agent was a huge, barrel-chested man with a shock of flaming hair. His shirt was open and Dave could see that a winged dragon was tattooed on his chest. Ryan's gaze shifted from Dave to Bill. "What kind of a knife?" he asked.

"A copra knife," Bill said.

Ryan grimaced knowingly. "That makes it simple," he said to Grenner. "Welsh must've been philanderin' with some of the local belles and gotten caught at it."

Grenner nodded. "It's happened to many a white man in these islands," the resident said smugly. Grunting, he rose from his chair and they all went down to the Outer Islands station to review the evidence.

Except for that copra knife, no clew whatever was found. A crowd of curious, half-frightened natives had assembled in front of the store and Grenner held impromptu court on the veranda, barking out innumerable and futile questions.

"We might ask Stoney about it," Grenner said finally. "He generally knows what's going on around here. Send for Stoney."

"Who's Stoney?" Dave asked Skipper Bill.

"He's a down-and-out Britisher," Bill explained. "When he beached here fifteen year ago he came into this store and said, 'I'm stoney broke,

brother. Wot about a dram on the cuff?' The agent then was a half-caste who didn't savvy much English. He stood the drink and charged a shilling on the books against Mr. Stoney Broke. So they called him that ever since."

When Stoney slouched into view, Dave saw as disreputable a derelict as ever dug clams on a southern beach.

"I just 'eard about it, gov'nor," Stoney bleated. "Poor old Welshy! Ain't it 'ell the wiy things 'appen?"

"When did you last see him alive?" Grenner demanded.

"Larst night about sundown, gov'nor. 'E stood me a drop o' bitters—best pal I ever 'ad, 'e was." Rheumy tears came to the beachcomber's eyes.

"Very well," Grenner announced with a shrug. "I'll make a report to my government superiors. And rest assured I'll find the criminal."

GRENNER'S investigation struck Dave as a farce. It consisted mainly of heckling natives with questions as to what Tanawain women Welsh had paid attentions. Nothing came of it. Todd Welsh was buried under a breadfruit tree with the guilt of his murder unsolved.

Skipper Bill steamed away in his lugger. Dave remained forlornly alone in a store to which customers never came.

They *must* come, Dave resolved, and set his jaw stubbornly to the task of making good. As a constant reminder that he must, he hung Sylvia Farrel's framed photograph on the wall of his store. Just as soon as he could make a success of the station, she was coming from Papeete to be his wife. As the daughter of a wealthy British planter she had been used to the best and Dave had promised that he would provide it. Sylvia had said she would wait.

"I'll have a cargo of copra ready for

your next call," Dave assured Bill when the lugger hove anchor, "or find out why."

He began his drive for trade by cleaning up the store and re-arranging his stock. Then he took a bag of samples and set off to make a round of the villages. At the first village he presented the head man with a fine meerscham pipe. The head man was delighted and promptly brought forth gifts of his own, consisting of fruit and carved ornaments.

Dave then displayed his samples. But he couldn't make the head man understand until Samona appeared and proceeded to interpret beautifully.

"I take you to all the village," she offered graciously.

In succeeding days she escorted Dave to the various island settlements. Faithfully she translated Dave's plea that the Tanawains bring copra to his station and receive fair trade in return.

"What does the head man say, Samona?"

"He say that he like make you his son, that his house is your house, that he are come bring many present."

The deluge of gifts arrived and Samona helped arrange them in the store. Before Dave knew it she had made herself indispensable. Her laughter drove away loneliness and she brought a guitar to his veranda and sang to him soft, Polynesian love songs. The songs brought other youngsters, and soon Dave's station became the social center of the island. There were dances by moonlight under the palms with Samona as hostess. And when the head men came bearing gifts she received them and thanked them prettily for Dave. And because she was from the highest ranking family on the island, her sponsorship brought him many friends.

Samona brought him everything but copra. If a head man had a few shillings in cash, he came in to spend it recklessly at Dave's counter. But not a single fiber of that staple which makes the wheels of South Seas commerce turn, crossed his threshold.

All copra went to the Logan Brothers' station, where it was bargained for sharply by Red Ryan. And Dave began to realize that he'd have not a sack of cargo ready, when Bill's lugger next appeared in the lagoon.

ONE day he came upon the derelict, Stoney, half asleep with his ragged back to a palm. "See here, Stoney," Dave said to him, "what's going on around here, anyway?"

Stoney blinked. "You mean 'oo done in poor old Welshy?"

"No, I didn't exactly mean that. But who *did* kill him?"

Stoney looked both ways, then lowered his voice. "Yer kin lay to it, matey, it was a white man done it. A nitive 'd 'arve tiken the knife awiy with 'im."

"Are you accusing Grenner and Ryan?" challenged Dave.

"Accusin' ain't provin'," Stoney hedged. "But I seen Welshy the diy afore he was done in, an' 'e told me 'e'd just found out abot why the hillanders wouldn't bring 'im any copra. Said 'e 'ad a full report writ out, an' was gonna send it orf on the next boat."

"Did he mention Grenner or Ryan?"

"Didn't mention no nimes. Close-lipped, 'e was, and looked kinder skeered. But listen, matey, I've been on this beach a long time an' I've 'ad arf an eye open. I was 'ere when Ryan come, and up to then the two stores got a even break on copra. But arfter Ryan come, the nitives quit your store cold."

Dave puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "How do you suppose Ryan manages it, Stoney?"

"'E's got somethin' on Grenner, 'e 'as. If yer find out wot it is, they'll both 'ave to leave. Then yer'll git all the copra on the hiland."

Before Dave could answer, something catapulted from the sky and smashed into the sand close by him. It only missed crushing his skull by inches.

"I almost got a chunk of it right then," he said with a grimace.

"Never worry about them fallin' cocoernuts, matey," Stoney assured him. "Funny thing, but they never hit nobody. I been sleepin' under these trees fer fifteen years. And the nitive villages are allers in cocernut groves, with brown bibies plyin' under 'em alla time, but the cocernuts allers miss 'em."

Dave had often heard the same thing—a tradition in the South Seas that people under cocoanut trees lead charmed lives.

"But never mind that, Stoney. What about Grenner and Ryan? If Ryan can make Grenner jump through a hoop, why should it affect the natives?"

"The nitives pay taxes and fines by workin' on the roads, if they ain't gort cash," Stoney explained. "Grenner, 'e's magistrate, jury, tax assessor an' heverything else 'ere. Ryan likely says to 'im, 'See 'ere, Grenner, if they're my customers, you let 'em orf easy. If they ain't my customers, you stick 'em."

III

WHEN Dave left Stoney, he was indignant and yet not altogether discouraged. He felt sure he could checkmate Grenner by attending

court trials himself and demanding fair play.

But cases were infrequent. The islanders were generally well-behaved, and weeks passed before a native stood before Grenner charged with intoxication, in which state he had broken a *kava* bowl over his host's head.

The defendant being an important customer of Ryan's, Dave watched the proceedings alertly. To his surprise Grenner severely fined the man thirty shillings. In lieu of payment the culprit could spend thirty days washing dishes in the residency kitchen.

A fair judgment, Dave thought. There was no way for him to learn that Grenner later sent one of his constables to inform the man that the fine was remitted.

Day after day the islanders took copra to Ryan. When the Logan Brothers' regular lugger dropped anchor, a full cargo was ready for it. But when Skipper Bill chugged in through the reef, Dave Weston had nothing for him at all.

"It's tabu to trade here," Dave reported gloomily. He went on to recite Stoney's theory about Grenner and Ryan.

Bill poured himself a tall tumbler of rum. On the veranda a group of boys and girls were dancing. Samona was strumming a guitar and the soft notes of her song came pleasantly through the door.

"Looks like tough weather ahead for you, son," Bill said. "Once one of these tabus gets to operatin', it's hard to lick. It gets set, like cement. Grenner may not even have to keep on with any more high-handed taxes and fines."

"I don't see why," Dave protested.

"That's because you don't understand the native mind. Look at it this way: suppose a cocoanut drops on a

native and kills him. His people would think nothin' of it. But if another nut drops from the same tree and kills another native, then the head men'd get together and slap on a tabu. And it'd stick tight for generations. Even if no other cocoanut ever did drop outa that tree, the natives'd always stay away from it."

Dave went to his desk and wrote a discouraged letter to Sylvia Farrel, and Bill took it with him when he went down to the lugger.

When the boat was gone Dave wandered down the beach to find Stoney. Stoney lived with a Tanawain wife in a grass shack well apart from any village. The house was built against a cliff from which spring water dripped, and was banked with banana trees and giant ferns.

Approaching it, Dave heard Stoney cry out from within, "Leave orf, I tell yer. Get outer 'ere an' leave me alone."

There came a whacking sound followed by a scream from Stoney. And Dave entered to see Red Ryan twisting Stoney's wrist. Stoney was on his knees, howling.

"Pay that chit you owe me," Ryan threatened, "or I'll take it out of your hide."

He struck Stoney a blow which sent the slighter man across the room. Stoney's head struck a wall and he collapsed there, unconscious.

Ryan turned to face Dave Weston. "This bum's been mooching rum at my counter for years," he explained with a grin.

"How much does he owe you?" Dave asked quietly.

"Somethin' around two quid ten."

Dave produced his wallet and counted out the money. "Here you are."

Ryan, in surprise, took the money.

"Now come outside and take something else, Ryan."

When they were outside, Dave promptly gave Ryan a stinging slap on the side of the head.

RYAN reddened. He came charging like a buffalo and Dave stepped aside to let him go by. As Ryan whirled, Dave's right caught him neatly on the chin.

Ryan dove for a clinch but Dave shook him off; and his left drove quick punches into the man's stomach. Ryan bellowed, flailing his arms. Dodging, Dave jabbed a right to the head which rocked Ryan back on his heels.

"I'll kill you!" Ryan screamed.

"Like you did Welsh?" said Dave, and again his knuckles stung Ryan on the cheek.

A moment later he put all his weight into a punch that struck Ryan full on the mouth. Ryan went down with blood spouting from his lips. He sprawled there with his back to a palm, his head rolling groggily. His two upper front teeth were gone.

Dave waited for him to get up. When he did not, Dave left him and went home.

Samona was in the store filling a vase with bright blossoms.

"Just had a run-in with Ryan," Dave explained when she noticed a slight cut over his eye.

The girl was instantly distressed. It was not good to fight Ryan, she said. "Always it bring bad luck."

"It won't bring him back those teeth," Dave grinned.

She was bathing his scratch with cocoanut oil when a messenger came summoning Dave to appear before Grenner.

Dave went promptly to the resi-

dency. To his astonishment he found that Ryan had preferred charges of assault and battery. Ryan himself was there as complaining witness.

"This guy got sore because I get all the trade," Ryan testified. "So he jumped me from behind and knocked me down with a club. Then he kicked out my teeth." Ryan opened his mouth to prove it, all the while glaring malignantly at Dave.

"That's a lie," Dave said. "I caught him beating up Stoney, so I took him outside and bashed his face in."

"I didn't touch Stoney," insisted Ryan. "I was just trying to collect a bill."

"A merchant has a right to collect from delinquent customers," Grenner decreed solemnly. "How he does it is no concern of yours, Weston. Moreover I won't countenance any brawling on this island. You yourself admit disfiguring the plaintiff. So I'm fining you ten pounds."

Dave's temper broke leash. "You're a fat-headed crook, Grenner!"

Then eyes clashed.

"Five pounds more for contempt of court," the resident snapped. He turned to his crew of native constables. "Hold this man in custody till he pays his fines."

Dave, biting his lip, counted out fifteen pounds. Payment of the sum would leave him almost penniless.

Walking back to the station he was able to consider the affair soberly, it seemed to him that Ryan had acted entirely out of character. A tough, hairy trader with a dragon tattooed on his chest should not, by the usual precedents, go rushing to a magistrate. On the contrary he would be expected to get himself a copra knife, or a gun, and make murderous assault on the adversary.

And that, reflected Dave, was exactly what had happened in the case of Todd Welsh. Which meant that Ryan had simply been clever enough not to repeat the same type of assault. Two successive competitors found stabbed would have been like finding two men crushed by cocoanuts dropping from the same tree.

Grenner was in it with Ryan—that was clear enough. Between them they controlled this island and every soul on it.

AGAIN the Logan Brothers' boat called and again Ryan had a copra cargo ready for it. Then Skipper Bill called again. Samona canoed Ryan out as the lugger dropped anchor.

"Any cargo?" bawled Bill as Dave and the girl climbed over the rail.

"Not a sack," Dave reported.

Bill handed him two letters. The first, from the company's main office, rebuked Dave sharply for making even less of a showing than previous agents. It announced that hereafter Dave would be put on a strictly commission basis. No trades, no pay.

The second letter was from Sylvia Farrel. A ring fell from it. Dave read:

It's no go, Dave. The entire situation is impossible. I can't bring myself to live on that savage island, where the natives stab traders while they sleep. And frankly I can't quite be reconciled to marrying a failure. This is goodbye—and don't think too hard of me, please.

Dave sat down on a hatch and stared glumly ashore. But the steep, green mountain held no beauty.

"Have a drink, son, and brighten up." Bill sat down by him with a bottle of brandy.

Dave snatched it, knocked the neck off on the rim of the hatch and upturned the bottle to his lips. And Skip-

per Bill, seeing the open letter and the ring, understood.

Bill went to the rail and called down to a score of young Tanawains who were alongside in canoes. "Come aboard, boys and girls," he yelled. "Dave needs cheerin' up."

They came scrambling over the rail. "Strike up a song," Bill said heartily, "and maybe we can pull Dave outa the dumps. He's bluer'n a shark's belly."

All afternoon there there was singing and dancing on the deck, but Dave ignored it. He continued to sit moodily on the hatch, drinking to quench the bitterness in him. By sundown his brain was reeling.

"Don't take it so hard," Bill said. He put a fatherly hand on Dave's shoulder. "What's a woman, anyway? If one quits you, all you gotta do is pick out another'n. Pick one that'll stick by you, next time."

Dave shrugged away from him. He knocked the neck from another bottle and kept on drinking.

"What about that'n over there?" Bill continued slyly. His thumb indicated Samona, who was perched on the rail making guitar music for the dancers. "She's a cute one, Dave, purty as a hummin' bird but not near so flighty. What's more, I've an idear she'd stay with a man."

"She's native," Dave mumbled.

"What of it?" argued Bill. "White or brown makes no never mind down in these islands. What a man wants is loyalty."

Dave took another drink. Then his eyes shifted toward Samona. He saw the warm olive of her skin, the rich redness of her cheeks and lips—her dark, melting eyes. He saw a luxury of shining hair that tumbled to her waist, with flowers wreathing it; bare feet, and hands as shapely as any queen's.

Dave stood up. Two boys were beating drums, and the pounding was like a savage tom-tom in his ears. The deck was spinning, but he managed to cross to Samona.

When he reached her he crushed her in his arms, kissing her lips. He pressed her to his breast.

"Will you marry me, Samona?" he said, gently.

Her head went back and her eyes stared into his for a moment. Wonder and rapture were in her face. Then tears came and made her eyes like stars. "I have love you all the days," she whispered.

Dave called brusquely to Skipper Bill. "You can marry people on your own deck, can't you?"

"As slick as a whistle," Bill asserted.

The young Tanawains applauded gleefully. Bill went below deck and came up with the book. The sight of it sobered Dave a moment. Then he saw Sylvia's letter on the hatch and his jaw set stubbornly. "Get along with it, Bill," he directed.

Bill got along with it. Then followed more drinking, dancing, pounding of drums. Dave couldn't remember when they carried him ashore. It was a pagan festival from which he awoke with a scorched throat, a roaring head—and a Polynesian wife.

IV

HIS reaction was apathetic. Remembering Sylvia's inconstancy, Dave simply didn't care one way or the other. He took Sylvia's framed photograph from his wall and smashed it over the counter. Then he sat sullenly on the veranda, watching Skipper Bill's lugger chug out through the reef.

It was days before Samona could make him laugh. The girl herself was in

heaven. She sang to him, waited on him, washed and pressed his whites, scrubbed the floors and hung garlands everywhere about his house.

And gradually, she melted Dave. Sometimes, when the palm trees whispered in the darkness, he thought that he was happy with her.

"You have no sorrow to be my husband?"

"Why should I, Samona? Only trouble is you're too good for me. You're lovelier than starlight—sweeter'n the milk of a ripe coconut."

But when he watched the islanders trooping to trade copra at Ryan's store, his happiness vanished. The old tabu still held rigidly. No Tanawain would take copra anywhere but to Ryan. Dave was constantly reminded of his own failure. He was penniless—and with no pay in sight.

"Why are you not be happy?" Samona pleaded.

"Because I want to buy you pretties," he explained. "To take you on a happy honeymoon to Papeete. To do that, I must first be successful here."

Little by little she came to understand that it wasn't enough that she should bring him love and laughter. She must also bring him success.

Samona put her mind shrewdly to that end. How could she bring success to the man she loved? She grappled with the problem, willing to sacrifice anything to achieve its solution.

RED RYAN stood before a mirror scowling at his open mouth. The void left by two missing teeth grossly disfigured him and, at the same time, reminded him of his grudge against Dave Weston. "I'll get even with that blighter!" he said fiercely.

A copra cargo was ready for his next ship, but that, for Ryan, wasn't

quite enough. He had to devise a way to score even more cruelly against his rival at the other station.

Looking from his window now, he saw Dave out on the lagoon. He was in a canoe with Samona and they were coming in with a catch of bonita. A sea breeze brought to Ryan their happy laughter.

"That's the ticket!" Ryan muttered with a flash of inspiration. "That's what I gotta do! Take the girl away from him. Make a bum outa him, it would!"

In Ryan's stock were certain gaudy treasures. He took them out—a necklace of brilliant red glass, a sarong of green silk from Java, a pair of gilded slippers from Japan.

Next morning Samona came to a pool near the shore. High tide filled it twice daily, and there was a cliff by it for diving. It had always been a favorite plunge for the young Tanawains.

Samona poised her slim figure on the cliff. She kicked off her sandals. Her tunic slid into a pink circle at her feet. Nude, except for the pareu about her hips, she dived.

With the red glass necklace, the Javanese sarong and the Japanese slippers in hand, Ryan sauntered down to the pool.

"Take a peep, Samona," he grinned. "Pretty cute outfit, what? Just got 'em in with the last stock o' trade goods."

Samona admired the ornaments, as any island girl would.

"Come around some time," Ryan invited slyly, "an' I'll let you try 'em on."

He hardly hoped for an immediate conquest. On the contrary he anticipated many and patient approaches. Her response, therefore, surprised him. "Maybe," Samona smiled, then fixed

her eyes in rapture on the Javanese sarong. "Maybe I come sometime."

Ryan snatched the girl's arm and tried to draw her to him. She pulled away, laughing. But her lips repeated, "Maybe I come some day."

"Listen," Ryan urged ardently, "why don't you leave that chump, Weston, and come live with me? I'll treat you right. Give you anything you want."

She let her lashes drop coyly, backing a step in retreat before Ryan's advance.

"That guy's busted," Ryan argued. "What you need is a head man like me."

Her eyes met Ryan's with a seductive smile. Ego prevented him from guessing that she was playing a game deeper than his own—that those dark, drooping lashes concealed a bold and desperate inspiration.

"I think it over," Samona promised. "I let you know."

She took up her tunic and sandals and scampered away. And Ryan returned in a glow to his store.

SAMONA'S heart was thumping like mad as she made her way through the screen of ferns which obscured the house of Stoney and Makea. Makea was Stoney's plump, middle-aged wife, and had long been an intimate of Samona's. Samona knew that she could trust both Makea and Stoney.

She burst in upon them with an amazing confidence. "I like make my man big success. I like my people bring all copra to his store."

Stoney cocked an eye at her. "They darsen't do that. It's tabu."

"You help me," Samona pleaded, "we make bigger tabu against Ryan."

Stoney thought it over. Yes, he agreed, it might work out if they could do that. The Tanawains had only one

commercial crop—copra. They had to trade it somewhere. If they couldn't take it to Ryan, they would have to take it to Dave Weston."

"Wot's goin' on in that purty 'ead o' yourn, Samona?"

"You are remember French half-caste family live here once?" she whispered.

"You mean the Brousseau outfit?" prompted Stoney, gaping. "Sure. It was tabu to go anywhere near their plantation."

Makea, too, remembered. No tabu had ever been so fearful or rigid on the island.

Samona, after swearing them to secrecy, unfolded a plan. The boldness of it shocked them. Both Stoney and Makea argued against it. "Dive," asserted Stoney, "'e'd never stand for it."

But Dave mustn't know anything about it, Samona said. Neither must any human on the island except themselves. If the plan succeeded, then her people would take no more copra to Ryan's store. It would all go to Dave for lack of another market.

"All right, go ahead with it," Stoney said finally. "Makea an' me, we'll keep our lips buttoned and 'elp yer all we can."

An hour later Ryan was delighted to see Samona enter his store. He greeted her with effusion. And this time when he displayed his treasures, she put them on. She posed in them in apparent rapture before a mirror.

"Like 'em?" grinned Ryan.

She answered by putting her arms about his neck and kissing his lips. "You be lonesome, maybe," she murmured. "I are not like you be lonesome."

She hid her eyes against his shoulder so he couldn't see the tears starting there. He must not guess that to be

clasped in his arms was like crucifixion.

Ryan held her triumphantly. "You can have anything you want here, sweetheart," he crowed, "just as long as you don't go back to that Weston bum."

When native customers entered the store they found Ryan holding Samona on his knees and caressing her fondly. He winked at the intruders. "Go ask Dave Weston if he ain't lost something," he suggested maliciously.

The news speedily reached Dave and he refused to believe it. But when Samona hadn't come home by late afternoon, he went looking for her. He asked Stoney.

Stoney shook his head dolefully. "I 'eard she's taken up with the bloke Ryan."

Dave stalked into Ryan's store. He saw Samona seated on a counter. Ryan stood by her holding a bottle of beer.

Sight of them paralyzed Dave. He stood choking for a moment, then called angrily, "Get out of here, Samona, and come on home."

"I like best stay here," Samona protested. She averted her eyes from Dave's.

"Go roll your hoop, mister," Ryan jeered. "Can'tcha see she's picked her a new man?"

Dave's fist lashed out for Ryan's chin. Ryan toppled backward and hit the floor in a heap.

"Are you coming, Samona?" Dave demanded with tense finality.

Instead of coming, she jumped to the floor, knelt there and took Ryan's head in her arms. "I not coming," she said bravely.

DAVE went home and, within an hour, he was summoned before Grenner.

"You're charged with entering an-

other man's house and assaulting him. Do you deny it?"

"He stole my wife. I wish I'd killed him."

"Your wife went to him of her own free will," Grenner said coldly. "Since you were the aggressor in the victim's own house, I'm forced to fine you ten pounds."

"And if I don't pay it?" Dave challenged.

"You can go to jail."

Dave laid his gold watch on the table. "Will you accept this till I raise the money?"

Grenner accepted the watch and Dave went angrily out. And, at that same moment, at Ryan's, Samona was seated on the arm of Ryan's chair, rubbing liniment on his bruised chin.

"You're here for keeps, Samona," Ryan grinned. His jaw ached, but aside from that he was feeling immensely satisfied with himself for now his revenge on Weston was complete.

"You mean you like marry me?" Samona asked.

Ryan frowned for a moment. Then his face cleared. This young girl pleased him more and more every minute. Yes, he'd even marry her if she insisted.

"But I are already marry," she said.

"You won't be long," he grinned. "Weston got an eyeful. He'll divorce you soon enough. Then you'll be free. In the meantime—"

"In meantime," she supplied quickly, "I stay here only daytime. I are good Christian, please. I keep your house nice, yes? Night time I go stay with my people."

Ryan argued with her. But it was useless. And he was afraid to press the matter for fear of losing her altogether. The whole island would believe she was living with him, even if, technically, she was not. Dave Weston would be-

lieve it, and that was what Ryan really wanted.

Samona remained with him until the last customer had left for the night. It was dark outside, and Ryan locked the store. Then she kissed him goodbye until morning and ran through the woods to the house of Stoney and Makea.

They were expecting her, and Makea had made a pallet for her. Samona flung herself on it, sobbing, humiliated, aching with each heartbeat. All night she lay there beseeching forgiveness from the God of her faith—the God of the Ten Tabus.

But at daylight she was cooking Ryan's breakfast in his kitchen, and, while he was eating it, she slipped away to bathe in the pool.

Other Tanawains were there and they asked her if it were true she had left Dave for Ryan. Samona made herself admit it brazenly. Ryan was rich and successful, she said, and he had given her many beautiful things.

Weeks passed, and by day Samona rarely left Ryan's store except to bathe in the pool. No one on the island other than herself, Ryan, Stoney and Makea knew that she always slipped away by night.

At his own store, Dave brooded. He grew listless and disheveled, and he drank freely from the trade gin on his shelves. With no one to wash and press his whites, his wardrobe became as disreputable as Stoney's.

He thought of divorcing Samona. But what was the use? That, he reasoned, would be just what they wanted.

With bitterness smoldering in him, he resolved to remain on the island only long enough to fashion a noose for Ryan's neck. Ryan, he felt certain, had murdered Welsh. And for that crime he must be brought to book. "I'll

see him hanged for it," Dave resolved stubbornly.

There should be a way to prove it. Sometimes coldly sober and sometimes sunk deep in his cups, Dave strained his mind implacably toward that end. Over and over he essayed to reconstruct the scene of Todd Welsh's death. Many times he recalled his horrified intrusion upon it with Skipper Bill. He remembered now that some unnatural feature of the scene had seemed to impress him vaguely—a thing which horror had immediately shocked from his recognition. Desperately, but in vain, he tried to resurrect that impression. It was a negative clue, he thought—something which should have been there and wasn't. . . .

V

THE illusion of Samona's unfaithfulness had endured three months when the girl embarked upon a project even more bold and terrifying. Late one night she left Ryan, as usual, and went to Stoney's. There she brought forth a vial containing a milky white stain. Makea had helped her mix it from fruit juices and the sap of a tree.

"The time are come now," Samona announced.

She stripped to the waist, turning her back toward Stoney and Makea. By the eerie light of candlenuts, Makea began staining a white patch on the girl's flesh. It was a circular patch about six inches in diameter, and was stained exactly in the center of Samona's back.

The milky whiteness of it stood out in sickly contrast to the firm brown of her skin.

But Stoney was pessimistic. "Yer won't fool nobody," he predicted. "They could look at yer fice an' see yer as 'ealthy as I am."

"They will believe when I admit it myself," Samona insisted. "They are believe it when they see Brousseau girl, yes?"

"They sure did," Stoney conceded. "That was ten year ago, an' it skeered 'ell outer hevery nitive on the hiland. Somebody seen 'er slip into the woods all by 'erself an' undress. They seen 'er 'old a mirror to look at 'er back. There was a big white spot, all blotchy like, an' it set the nitives tarkin'. First thing yer know they found out the truth. Then the girl an' all 'er blood kin were deported."

In the morning Ryan woke to find Samona, as usual, preparing his breakfast.

And, as was her custom, while he ate, she slipped away to the pool.

A group of boys and girls were bathing there but Samona, seeming to be troubled and embarrassed, conspicuously avoided them. She did not enter the pool. Instead she withdrew to a secluded place down the beach, screening herself behind rocks before dropping off her tunic.

It wasn't like Samona to be so unsociable and the others noticed it. And, after several mornings of such odd conduct, a group of Samona's old bathing comrades went down to see why she had become so exclusive. She let them creep up on her and when they appeared around a corner of the rocks, they found her holding a mirror in her hand—holding it so that, standing in a twisted posture, she could see the round white patch on her back. Her face was contorted with despair.

When her friends came closer, she snatched up her tunic in confusion. But they had all been able to observe the white patch.

"You will not tell the governor, please?" she implored them. "If you

tell governor I will be deported," she pleaded. "I and all my blood kindred. And please, you must not come near me again."

As they began to get a horrified inkling of her condition, they backed farther away and stood whispering. In a little while they ran quickly to the nearest village, where they reported breathlessly to the head man.

Consternation gripped the head man. He hastened to the beach and spoke to Samona from a distance.

"Is it true, my daughter?"

Samona's head bowed in a convincing show of shame. "Do not tell Ryan," she begged. "He will beat me. Then he will tell governor, and I will be sent away."

THE Tanawains were more fearful of deportation than of leprosy itself and, that night at a solemn conclave held by head men from all the villages, it was agreed that on no account must Grenner be told about Samona. The Brousseau experience was reviewed in detail, an affliction resulting in the victim and all her blood kindred being exiled from the island.

In this case the decree went out that every lip must be sealed. Severe penalties would be meted to anyone who told Grenner or Ryan.

"But will not Ryan, who lives with her, see it with his own eyes?" one of the head men questioned.

"She will conceal it from him with fear and shame," another said. "When she can deceive him no longer, she will hurl herself into the sea."

Then the chief head man laid down a rigid tabu. Not one of them must ever again approach Samona. She, and the house where she lived, must be shunned as one shuns untouchable death.

"How's trade, Ryan?" Grenner inquired one evening a week later. They were drinking beer at the residency.

Ryan frowned. "Funny thing about that," he fretted. "I ain't had a sack come in for five or six days."

"They'll be coming along with it," Grenner assured him. "They've got to take it some place, you know."

"But that ain't all," worried Ryan. "There ain't been a native in the store lately, not even for a pinch of nigger-head."

As more days passed, the inexplicable lack of trade continued to mystify Ryan. He made a trip through the villages, presenting a quart of trade gin to each head man. The gifts were accepted politely, and other gifts tendered in return. But still no copra came to the Logan Brothers' station.

One day he tried to hire a couple of boys to repair the station's grass roof. But even an offer of a shilling a day could not induce them to come.

Ryan sweated and swore as he did the work himself.

"See here, Samona," he complained, "what's the matter with everybody? You'd think we had a plague, or something!"

"It are so strange," she murmured. "I are not like to see you not happy." She uncorked a bottle of beer for him and stood fanning away flies while he drank it.

When he slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her, she endured it with a smile. "I are see Dave on beach today," she laughed. "He are more unhappy than you. But I do not care."

Always her surest defense was to remind him of Dave's wretchedness. It would endure in its most bitter pitch, Ryan knew, only so long as Samona seemed to continue living as the mistress of this house. Only by respect-

ing her silly, stubborn scruples could he keep her here. It was the best bargain he could make. In the meantime she was keeping his house spotless and serving him food and drink.

Ryan was more of a drinker than a lover. But most of all he was an egoist and it preened his ego to torment Dave Weston.

ONE day Dave Weston was aroused from a lonely carousal to find a customer in his store. The man had two sacks of copra and offered them in trade.

Dave hurt into ironic laughter at his own expense. "Two measly sacks! All right. When Bill's lugger comes, I can put one in his aft hatch and one forward."

The man wanted twist tobacco. Dave had hardly finished weighing it out when three other Tanawains entered. Each had two sacks of copra. Sight of the merchandise shocked Dave sober.

Other islanders came and by sundown Dave had five tons of copra in his storeroom. He went out and looked toward Ryan's station. The place was deserted.

The same surprising deluge of trade continued the next day. Dave was kept jumping from one customer to another and by night his back ached from the exertion of handling heavy merchandise. He went to bed so tired that for once he fell asleep without brooding about Samona.

While he slept, Red Ryan stormed into the residency. "Look here, Grenner," he raged, "you get busy and do something about this!"

The threat in his eyes frightened Grenner. He was at Ryan's mercy, he knew, and had been for the last twelve years. "I'll do what I can."

What Grenner did was not enough. During weeks which followed, he imposed high-handed penalties against every islander brought before him as magistrate. He hitched up his donkey cart and made a round of the villages, announcing a new road to be built through the jungle which would call for a heavy tax of man power.

But to his chagrin, the Tanawains submitted to both fines and taxes. No copra went to Ryan. All of it went to Weston.

"Look here, Red," Grenner said to Ryan, "I can stick one native and I can stick ten of them. But I can't hang a rap on the whole population. There's a limit, you know."

Ryan cursed him. "There's a limit to the time you'll be out o' jail," he threatened, "if I start talkin'."

When the Logan Brothers' boat called in the lagoon a week later, Ryan had no cargo for it. Captain Jake Hammond, in command, was both astonished and annoyed. His immediate assumption was that Ryan had made himself personally unpopular due to some incident of cheating.

So Hammond took an interpreter and toured the villages. He returned to the station with an apology. "It's not you, Ryan. They say you haven't cheated 'em. It's the station. There's a tabu on it. The head men say they will never trade here again."

"Why?" demanded Ryan.

"They don't say why. But my experience is that when one of these tabus gets plastered on a station, it's likely to stick for good. This is serious, Ryan. I'll steam right over to Apia and report it to the Logans."

As speedily as his boat could make the round trip, Hammond was back from Apia. The decree of Logan Brothers infuriated Ryan. The Logans were

canny Scots, and were taking no chances. So Ryan's straight salary had been stopped; hereafter he must operate on a strictly commission basis.

"That's the way Outer Islands Company handles their man," Hammond said. "So you get an even break."

"You can't put that over on me," Ryan stormed. "I quit."

Hammond's mouth tightened. "Very well. You quit. In that case I'm instructed to abandon the station."

He brought his crew ashore and proceeded to denude the store's stock in trade. All goods from the shelves were transported to the ship.

"You can have passage to Apia if you like," Hammond offered.

Ryan nodded sullenly. "I'm taking a girl with me. That all right?"

"Sure," Hammond grinned. "Fetch her along."

But when Ryan went looking for Samona, she was nowhere to be found. There was no target for his temper except Grenner. "I'll make a bum outa you for letting me down, Grenner," he swore.

He went aboard and the ship slipped out through the reef. Grenner wavered between relief and terror. He tried to bolster a hope that Ryan would think better of it, once he had time to cool off.

Near midnight Grenner heard a strange crackling and popping. He looked out into the dark, and saw that Ryan's empty store was a ball of fire. Some of the Tanawains, he supposed, must have crept up to it with torches. Why? Why had the place been so mysteriously shunned, and why was it now being burned?

Grenner didn't know and didn't much care. His own troubles were enough. With a shrug, he tossed down another drink and went to bed.

VI

WHILE it was still dark Samona came from the fringe of forest and stood by the glowing coals which had been Ryan's store. She dropped upon them one necklace of red glass, one pair of slippers from Japan and one Javanese sarong.

Then tropic dawn brought soft shadows to the island, and the people of the main village were confounded to see Samona appear suddenly among them. Her eyes were shining. She had never been more beautiful, more vibrant with life.

She carried a basket on her arm. The head man stared for a moment, then shrieked a demand that she go instantly away.

Samona laughed joyously. "Do not have fear," she cried. "I am not as you think. Come. I prove it."

She dropped her tunic and stood with her bare back exposed to them. The white spot was still there, and they shrank away.

"But it is only the stain of the fruit," she explained. "I have put it there myself, to drive evil from our land."

From the basket she produced a sponge and a can of oil. Then she pleaded that the head man come to her and be convinced. With his own hands he could scour the spot from her flesh.

At last he approached warily. Then he took the sponge, soaked it in the oil and rubbed it across her back. The spot of white came off. Samona stood brown and clean before them.

When they saw the miracle, the villagers shrieked joyfully. They danced about Samona, embraced her, made her tell them everything. The head man could not control his mirth when she exposed the deception on Ryan. He sent messengers with the good news to all other villages. After commanding

the *kava* bowls to be brought forth, he ordered a great feast and celebration.

Samona slipped away almost immediately. Her ordeal as a living sacrifice was now over, and she could give herself back to the man she loved. So she ran breathlessly to tell Dave. Her heart was pounding tumultuously when she burst in upon him. He didn't see her at first. He was re-arranging his stock, getting ready for another big day of trade.

Shyness overcame Samona when she saw him there. His face was set in stern lines. He seemed years older, and the change in him shocked her.

"I am come back, please," she said softly. Her voice made him whirl about. He stared in surprise and anger. "I am come back," she repeated.

Dave's eyes hardened. "So you came back! Isn't that just too sweet of you! I make a failure and you go to Ryan. Now Ryan fails and you come back to me!"

"I have go to him so you make big happy trades," she pleaded. "I have do no wrong, please. All the time I love you."

"Get out of here!" Dave shouted. His voice lashed her cruelly. She retreated a step. "Get out," he yelled again. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Desperately, in a rush of hysteria, she told him all about it. Dave winced when she told about the white spot. She bared her back, then, to let him see that it was undefiled.

"There's one spot on you that won't come off," he said bitterly. "You lived with Ryan."

When she denied it, he wouldn't believe her. "Clear out!" he said and pushed her from the store.

She ran into the woods and fell there, sobbing. Stoney found her in a little while. "He do not believe me!" Samona mourned.

Stoney hurried to Dave. "See 'ere, Dive, don't be pig-headed. If it 'adn't been fer 'er, yer'd be on the bloomin' beach."

But even when Stoney corroborated Samona's story, Dave refused to believe all of it. "I don't want her at that price," he raged. "Get out!"

ENTIRELY without competition now, Dave continued to do heavy trading in copra. When Skipper Bill came again there was a full cargo ready for him. The lugger's crew came ashore and Stoney told them about Samona's ruse with Ryan. "That yarn'll be all over these islands afore long," Skipper Bill chuckled. "Ryan himself 'll hear it, an' burst into flame."

A few days after the lugger pulled out, a New Zealand gunboat dropped anchor in the lagoon. A tall, gray man came ashore from it. With him came a detail of marines.

The arrivals marched solemnly to the residency. When Grenner saw them his face went white. Ryan, he guessed, had made good his threat.

The tall gray man produced credentials announcing that he was Harrington H. Ash, and that he had arrived to replace Grenner as Resident Governor. Then a sergeant of marines stepped up and arrested Grenner on a charge sworn to by Ryan.

A few hours after the gunboat had steamed away with Grenner, Dave was summoned before the new resident. He found Ash both agreeable and intelligent.

"About that Welsh murder, Weston," he said over cocktails. "Dash it all, it's a disgrace to the service our not clearing it up."

Dave nodded. "Too bad you weren't here when it happened," he said.

"Incidentally," announced Ash, "Welsh's uncle in Sydney has offered

a thousand guinea reward for the murderer's capture, dead or alive."

"Ryan did it, of course," Dave asserted, "but it needs proving."

Ash shook his head. "I rather doubt that," he thought. "Because now that Ryan has told on Grenner, Grenner shouldn't hesitate to tell on Ryan."

"And he doesn't?"

"No. Under severe grilling he insists he knows nothing about the Welsh murder."

"What did Ryan have on Grenner?"

"Ryan paid a sizable fine twelve years ago, when Grenner was a magistrate in the Samoans. Grenner simply kept the fine for his own use."

"I'll help you all I can on the Welsh case," Dave promised.

During days which followed, he was too busy trading in copra to give the matter much thought. By immersing himself in hard work, he hoped that he might in time forget Samona.

But too often he caught sight of her watching him wistfully from the beach. Again and again her adoring face intruded upon his dreams. He missed her laughter and the soft embrace of her arms. He knew now that his only real contentment was when she had shared his life. Then he had had love without success. Now he had success without love—and he liked it least of all.

SKIPPER BILL'S lugger came smoking into the lagoon.

"I can load you to the scuppers," Dave reported.

"Get your gun ready, Dave," Bill cautioned, "and look out for Ryan."

"Ryan?" echoed Dave. "But he's not here any more."

"He's coming back," Bill warned ominously, "and he swears he'll feed you to the sharks."

Samona's leprosy deception, Bill explained, had by now been bandied all

over the South Seas. "Ryan's heard about it, Dave. He's sore as a boiled owl, and he lays it all on you."

"On me?"

"Sure. He figgers you done it. He don't credit the girl with enough savvy to cook up a scheme like that. So he figgers you sent her to him."

Dave flushed angrily. "I send her! Does he think I'd put my own wife on a spot like that?"

"He's judging you by himself, son. You better watch out for him. Last I heard he was tryin' to buy a motor launch in Pepeeete."

"Why a launch?"

"So he can get away alone," Bill explained, "after knocking you over."

Bill loaded his lugger with copra from Dave's storeroom. Then, before weighing anchor, he hunted up Samona and told her about Ryan's threat. "Dave won't take this seriously," Bill said, "so you better keep a lookout for him."

At dawn Samona climbed agilely to the top of a tall palm in front of Dave's station and hid herself there. It was so early that the fronds shielding her were still wet with dew. All day her eyes scanned the sea anxiously. No launch came. When night fell, she slipped to the ground in tired relief.

At the next dawn she climbed again to the palm top. Each day she posted herself there. Dave, busy at the store, had no inkling of her vigilance. Nor of her peril, for there came gales which lashed the palm tree to violent swaying. Days came when torrents poured from the sky, drenching the girl and all but washing her from her perch. But more often she sat there in torrid sunshine with no breath of air stirring. At such times fatigue and lassitude occasionally overcame her, and she found herself dozing. Often she opened her eyes and started with relief to discover that no launch was in sight.

ONE sultry afternoon Dave was relaxing on the stoop of his store. The beach was deserted in both directions. There were no customers today, because the son of a head man was being married at a far village.

Relaxing in body, Dave put his mind determinedly upon the enigma of Welsh's murder. He must think straight. He must remember everything he had seen on that day he had first come here with Skipper Bill.

To review what he had seen mentally and in proper balance, he decided to enter now as he had entered then.

He stood up, mounted the veranda steps. What had he seen? A table, a chair, a half empty beer bottle.

Entering the store, he recalled having seen cockroaches on the counters. He went on to the living quarters and into the bedroom where Welsh had slept. Exactly he forced himself to reconstruct that exhibit of horror: Welsh face down on the bed with a copra knife plunged through him. . . .

Then, in a flash, a detail which had vaguely impressed him at the time came back to him. There had been an *entire absence* of blood. A trained crime detector would have noted it at once. But Dave in his bewildered horror had let the fact be blotted from his mind.

Now he grasped it. It meant that Welsh hadn't been killed here at all. And—if not here, where?

That half finished bottle of beer on the veranda! Welsh would hardly open a beer without finishing it. Death, Dave felt sure, had stricken him as he sat there drinking on the veranda.

Dave hurried forward. The table and chair, he saw, occupied the same spot. A grass rug had been under the table, but so soiled that Dave had long ago thrown it away. Now he saw a small jagged hole in the canvas back of the chair. A bullet hole?

His eyes scanned the sheet iron wall back of it. He found another hole there. He gouged into it with a knife. Passing through sheet iron, the bullet had penetrated only shallowly into the wooden stud beyond. Welsh had been shot, not knifed. Dave retrieved the bullet and weighed it on his palm. A rifle ball, he judged. He sighted from one hole to the other, and the line of his vision pointed directly to Ryan's store.

Ryan, he knew now, had sniped Welsh at long range with a rifle. Between sundown and dark, perhaps, or, possibly by bright moonlight. Hours later, Ryan must have worried because it would look like the crime of a white man. So he had come here, carried the body into the bed, plunged through the course of the bullet hole a native knife.

It was neat, Dave admitted. Very neat, indeed.

Dave, with the death bullet in hand, went in to his counter. There he found a small apothecary scale used for weighing quinine. He weighed the bullet. It scaled exactly two hundred and twenty-seven grains.

Somewhere in a litter on the shelves was an old A. F. Stoeger's gun catalogue and hand-book. He thumbed the pages swiftly. Yes, here it was. Two hundred and twenty-seven grains was the weight of a bullet used in an eight millimeter Mauser carbine.

Elated, Dave sat down and wrote a full report of his findings for Resident Ash. His pen raced energetically across the paper.

When he was done he went out with it. Then, as he stepped from the veranda, a harsh voice startled him. He looked up and saw Ryan ten yards away, aiming a carbine pointblank at his head.

"I come a long way to get you, Weston," Ryan rasped at him.

Beyond him at the shore line, Dave saw a twenty-foot motor launch. No one was in it. Clearly Ryan had arrived alone, so that he could escape safely after the fulfillment of his vengeance. Dave himself was not armed. He faced Ryan grimly, bracing himself for the shock of a bullet.

"TAKE a walk to the launch," Ryan ordered. "I ain't leavin' you here to be found—like they found Welsh."

"See here, Ryan," Dave protested, "you won't gain anything by—"

"Oh, won't I?" jeered Ryan. "Don't make me laugh, mister. You had your turn, now it's mine. Sent' your wife down to make a sucker outa me—while she sneaked back to you every night! You—"

Dave's eyes widened, then a bright light broke over his face. Samona, he knew now, had told him the truth. He had Ryan's own word for it.

"Get movin'," Ryan barked. "You got a date to feed the sharks."

His mouth was ugly in its triumphant smile.

At close quarters in an open boat he might have a chance, Dave decided. "Very well," he agreed with a shrug. "It's your drop."

He raised his hands over his head and started toward the launch. Ryan followed with the carbine trained on Dave's back.

The way led them under a tall palm. As Ryan passed beneath it, his shriek made Dave turn quickly. He saw Ryan topple to the sand. Dave stared in amazement. A thing which *never* happens *had* happened. A seven pound coconut had dropped eighty feet to strike Ryan squarely on the skull. The strange shot from the sky crushed him flat.

As he fell, the carbine flew from his hand.

Dave sprang to the weapon, picked it up and stood with it covering Ryan. But Ryan lay still. Dave, kneeling by him, looked at his eyes and saw that he was dead.

Then Samona came sliding down the palm tree.

Almost directly Dave heard cart wheels grinding on the sand. A donkey cart appeared from the forest, with Resident Governor Ash driving it. Presumably the shriek from Ryan had turned him that way.

Ash compressed his lips sternly at the evidence—Ryan dead, Dave with a carbine in hand, a native girl with big, frightened eyes hovering with her back to the bole of a palm.

Dave astonished him by handing over the carbine, a mushroomed bullet and a written report. "Compare those," Dave said, "and you'll know who killed Welsh."

"Welsh?" gaped Ash. "You're talking about *one* homicide and I'm looking at another." He inclined his head toward Ryan. "Did you kill him?"

Dave shook his head.

"I didn't have a chance to," he said. "He had the drop on me, sir."

"At least not with the carbine," Ash

admitted with a frown. "For I heard no shot." He stooped to examine the wound on Ryan's head. Then he saw the cocoanut nearby, with a reddish stain on its hull.

"This nut didn't fall," he said shrewdly. "It's green, and there's been no wind."

He looked at Dave's heavy boots, then at the bare feet of Samona. "She threw the cocoanut from above, didn't she? You saw her come down from the tree, didn't you?"

When Dave declined to answer, the resident became impatient. "See here, you were a witness. The only witness. Did she or didn't she kill this man with a cocoanut?"

"Where I came from," Dave answered, "the law holds a man can't be asked to testify against his wife."

He took Samona's hand and looked tenderly into the dark wells of her eyes. His other hand slipped back of her head and pulled it to his shoulder.

As he regarded them, severity dissolved from the resident's face. "The same law holds here, young man," he conceded.

"Very well." A hard lump came to Dave's throat as he added gently, "Come, Samona, let's go home."

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Santa Fortuna

By T. T. FLYNN

Author of "High Steel," "Old Hellcat," etc.

CHAPTER I

ON THE BOAT DECK

SENOR ARMANDO MORELES leaned against the starboard rail of the *Santa Fortuna's* promenade deck and chuckled softly at Anthony Blaisdell's question.

"Miss Stoddard? Why do you look for her so late in the trip? In a few

hours we will be docked at New Orleans."

The promenade deck was dimly lighted. Moreles' slim spare figure looked as dapper and handsome as it ever had in the high-ceilinged government offices in Caracas. And Blaisdell liked him no better.

Venezuela under Gomez, the old iron dictator, had never had a slipperier



A
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official than Moreles. True, Gomez had kept the small fry more or less in line. The Caracas dungeons for thirty years had been filled with wretches who displeased the old dictator. But Gomez was dead. Moreles and others like him were out. And now, lacking government authority, Moreles was more than ever smooth, slippery and untrustworthy.

Blaisdell regretted that he had broached the matter. "Miss Stoddard seems to be aboard under some other name. I thought you might know who she was."

Moreles chuckled again as he leaned lazily against the rail. He was a head shorter than Blaisdell; his black mustache was small and fastidious; and now, as in the past, he had the sly manner of knowing forbidden secrets.

"A letter, a message, came aboard at

Pilottown," Moreles guessed. "You, my frien', are with the Delta Corporation. Concessions in South America are your business. Now suddenly, you wish to find Miss Stoddard. The Delta Corporation, perhaps, is interested in the Rancho del Sol holdings?"

"I can't tell you," Blaisdell said slowly, and it was the truth. He had never until this moment heard of the Rancho del Sol.

"Because if you are," Moreles said slyly, "I think it is too late. When Gomez died, the Rancho del Sol was lost. Others have had their eyes on it. Señor Stoddard died three years ago. Only his daughter is left. If Gomez had lived. . . . But he is dead." Moreles shrugged. "She was lucky, perhaps, to get out of Venezuela alive. I have been watching her on board. She is still frightened."

It seemed to Blaisdell that Moreles

relished the thought. "Interesting," he commented carefully. "So she is aboard?"

"On the passenger list she is Miss Reyes," said Moreles.

"Thanks," said Blaisdell, with rather more brusqueness than usual. He left before Moreles pried further into the matter.

MISS REYES was the black-haired girl who had come aboard at Curacao, having changed from one of the smaller boats running from Maracaibo. The erect old fellow with the British cavalryman's mustache had accompanied her. Cunningham was his name. The two had kept more or less to themselves. Uncle and niece, so the report went.

It had seemed peculiar, to say the least; that dour old uncle stamped unmistakably with the Union Jack—and the charming niece with the Spanish name, the fine black hair, and fresh blond cheeks.

No wonder, Blaisdell thought, he hadn't been able to connect the Reyes girl with Sam Haughton's Miss Stoddard.

Miss Anita Stoddard of Venezuela is aboard. Place yourself unreservedly at her disposal.

When the pilot came aboard at Pilot-town, an envelope from Sam Haughton had contained that pithy order. And Haughton, as president of the Delta Corporation, would expect his orders to be carried out.

From the passenger list Blaisdell got the stateroom number of Miss Consuela Reyes, and knocked on her door, late as it was. She was not inside. Blaisdell searched the promenade deck, the salon, and, finally, from a steward he questioned, got track of her.

"Miss Reyes? I think I saw her

going up on the boat deck some time ago, sir."

The boat deck was unlighted, deserted. Most of the passengers had turned in early. The *Santa Fortuna* would be docked by daybreak. The low banks of the Mississippi were dark blurs across the water. The deep smooth sweep of the river had its old magic. Blaisdell breathed deep of the fresh swampy smell of the land. South America, he thought as he walked slowly along the dark deck, had its thrills and satisfactions. The hill-girt bay of Rio, by moonlight, for instance. The great Christ of the Andes, lonely, majestic in the white emptiness of a winter dawn. But this last leg of the trip home was always best.

Blaisdell paused at the corner of a deckhouse and stared toward the dim dark levee bank across the water. And a moment later a slender figure moved hurriedly around the corner of the deck house and stumbled against him. She gasped as Blaisdell caught her. She wrenched away.

Blaisdell sensed her fright as he said, "Sorry—I've been looking for you, Miss Stoddard. I'm Anthony Blaisdell, of the Delta Corporation."

SHE stopped. She was startled, undecided. "How do you know who I am? Why are you looking for me at—at this time of the night?"

Blaisdell explained. "Mr. Haughton sent word aboard at Pilot-town that I was to place myself at your disposal. A chap named Moreles, whom I've done business with at Caracas, told me you were Miss Stoddard. A steward directed me up here. And now," Blaisdell said cheerfully, "I am at your disposal."

She drew a sharp deep breath. Blaisdell could have sworn it was a sigh of

relief. No doubt of it—she had been gripped by panic when she came hurriedly around the corner of the deck house. Her face was all but invisible in the shadows. Tony Blaisdell remembered how striking, how pretty her face was. He had guessed her to be about twenty-one. Small. Slender. And there was a bit of magic in her low voice as she said, "Mr. Haughton must have got my letter. I didn't expect anything like this. And at this time! Could—could you stay here with me for a few minutes?"

"As long as you please."

He saw that she was only giving him part of her attention. Her head was turned; her thoughts seemed to be on that part of the deck from which she had come.

"Something frightened you."

"Yes," she said, and hesitated. "I saw a man who should not be aboard. We checked the passenger list. . . ."

"I see," Tony Blaisdell said, although he didn't at all. "Why should this man frighten you?"

She said slowly, "I think he may try to kill me."

The wind was cool and sweet off the lowlands beyond the deep river. The deck pulsed vaguely under their feet as the ship drove against the sweep of the current. And this slender girl stood motionless beside him on the peaceful deck and spoke calmly of death!

"Where is he? Who is he?"

"He was coming up from the lower deck. I saw him in the light at the top. I'm sure he is up here somewhere looking for me."

"I'll have a look." He left her and walked back aft along the port side, glancing behind each big canvas-covered lifeboat chocked along the rail. Queer, he thought, how a few words could alter the aspect of a night. Now

the dark river seemed lonely, mysterious. The deck was a nest of shadows capable of concealing anything. And yet—it was hard to believe she could be right. Not murder—not here on the *Santa Fortuna* tonight!

Perhaps she had seen some restless passenger coming up for a stroll. A word to the man, a match to a cigarette to reveal his face—

Blaisdell stepped around the bow of the third lifeboat—and a dark form moved in front of him. Suddenly, quickly, threateningly

Blaisdell sensed the coming blow too late; he tried to dodge back—and the fist smashed against the side of his head, drove him reeling against the stern of the next lifeboat. Flashes of light spun in his eyes—the night whirled. . . .

Blaisdell threw up his left arm. A smash on the forearm drove numbness to the shoulder. He lurched to the rail, dizzy, sick, weak. His attacker apparently was using a blackjack. Whatever the weapon was, the goal was murder!

Danger cleared Blaisdell's head. He twisted away from the rail, by luck dodging another clubbed blow—and struck hard at the dark blob of a face.

Lips, a mustache, teeth, ground under his knuckles. He felt the other man go back on his heels. Long arms reached out and caught Blaisdell. Swung him around. Wrestled him against the rail. . . .

Strong, astonishingly strong those arms were. But Blaisdell was taller, and heavier than the other. Against the rail he managed to brace himself to swing the man up and around against the rail. They were both gasping, straining. The man tore loose—and grunted as he struck again while Blaisdell tried to dodge.

CHAPTER II

AND BELOW . . .

TONY BLAISDELL heard a voice say: "He's coming around!" A flashlight was glaring in his face. His head hurt when he moved.

"Take that light away! Help me up!" Hands helped him to his feet as running steps came up. A voice said, "The doctor will be here in a minute, sir!"

The familiar voice of Second Mate Cochrane asked solicitously, "Can you make it on your feet, Mr. Blaisdell?"

The flashlight showed the second mate, two seamen, and the Stoddard girl. The light touched her face. She was pale. Blaisdell's legs were rubbery. One of the seamen was supporting him. He was, he saw, still between the two lifeboats.

"I'm all right," he said with an effort.

Cochrane, tall, blond, taciturn, spoke grimly. "Who was it?"

Anita Stoddard explained. "When you didn't come back, I went to the bridge."

Blaisdell answered her wryly. "Well—I found the fellow. You were right."

"Yes—I knew I was!"

The ship's surgeon, Simpson, hustled up wearing a checked dressing gown and carrying his small black bag. "Well, well, what's this? . . . The head, eh? Let's have a look—just bend over here by the light."

The doctor fussed expertly for a minute or two. "Not a thing to worry about," he announced cheerfully. "You must have a hard head, young man. I can draw the edges of this cut together. Won't even have to stitch it. Not the slightest danger of a fracture, I'm certain. What happened? Fall against the lifeboat?"

"Met a blackjack," Blaisdell replied

shortly, rubbing his numbed, aching arm.

Second mate Cochrane was still grim. "I've sent for the captain. The purser's coming. Here he is now."

Mr. Starbuck, the purser, was a slender, pallid, youngish man who had been on tropical runs for years; but he still looked as if he rarely saw the sunlight. Hastily buttoning the front of his coat, he hurried along in the dark, his eyes peering molelike at them.

"Miss Reyes tells me we have a man aboard who isn't on the passenger list," Cochrane told him. "He must have come aboard at Curacao. He's about five feet four or five. Small black mustache—swarthy skin—looks Spanish, but he's not. Calls himself O'Brian. A powerful fellow with long arms. Do you place him?"

"No-o—No, I'm sure not," Starbuck replied nervously. "I've seen no one who answers that description."

Blaisdell's head still throbbed painfully: but his mind was cleared. "Any chance of him being a stowaway?"

The second mate answered that positively. "We'd have found him by now. We make a routine—and thorough—stowaway search before entering the States."

"That leaves the crew," said Blaisdell.

"No one in the deck department fits him," Cochrane stated flatly.

"The engine room then?"

"I'll have to see the chief engineer about that. He runs things below."

"He assaulted a passenger," Mr. Cochrane growled. "The captain will want to see you, Mr. Blaisdell. You're going to the doctor's office, I suppose?"

Blaisdell said, "Miss Reyes will want to see her uncle about this. I'll take her down. Then I'll come to your office, doctor."

SHE did not protest. Blaisdell guessed she wanted to be alone with him. And when they were out of earshot she said in distress, "I was afraid something like this would happen. I'm sorry you did it. I shouldn't have let you."

"I'd do it again, you know. But I'd take a gun. Who is this O'Brian?"

They were in the faint light at the top of the companion steps. She looked at him, quickly probing. "There's so much behind it—so much I don't know—I'm not sure about. I've heard he calls himself O'Brian. He was pointed out to me in Maracaibo. I was sure he didn't see me—either of us. We were probably being watched all the time."

"By whom?" Blaisdell insisted. "And why did that fellow try to kill me? I was a stranger to him."

She passed over the first two questions—deliberately it seemed—and knit her brows as she said, "He must have known you were looking for him."

"That hardly calls for murder."

"I have been trying to guess why." She looked puzzled—and very lovely, with her pallor, her earnestness. Her quiet voice intrigued him. Her English had the faintest subtle twist, as if the ghost of another tongue lurked behind. She did not use slang; she spoke precisely, as one might who had learned English in another country.

"Hahn't you better tell me all about it?"

"I won't bother you. Tomorrow I must see Mr. Haughton. What he advises, I will do. Thank you for coming down with me."

She offered her hand gravely, plainly expecting him to leave. Tony Blaisdell grinned down at her.

"Perhaps your—uncle will see it differently, now that I've had this much to do with the matter."

She shrugged, and without comment

knocked on the stateroom door. "My uncle," she said, "will feel as I do."

It occurred to Blaisdell as he watched her that they had both hesitated slightly before the word uncle. Her knock on the stateroom door was not answered. She rapped again. And Blaisdell, absently glancing down, saw something which made him frown and quickly reach for the door knob.

The door was not locked. It moved inward to his push.

"Please!" Blaisdell said swiftly. He stepped in front of her and pushed on the door. Something inside, something on the floor, kept the door from opening more than a few inches. Blaisdell was barely able to squeeze inside.

The stateroom was lighted—and he took a lurching step to avoid a body on the floor.

ANTHONY BLAISDELL was no stranger to violence. Out-of-the-way corners of South America, where a junior partner in the Delta Corporation was often sent, offered moments of trouble. But the quiet in this small stateroom held a gruesome threat. It was as if death had slipped in furtively and was still lurking in the corners.

"Who is it?" Swift alarm was in Anita Stoddard's voice. She stood in the doorway a moment later. Her tight frightened whisper cut through the quiet. "*Madre de Dios*—he's dead!" Her small oval face had the frozen immobility of great shock—but not of grief. Her eyes, wide, dark under darker lashes, were filled with fright and horror—but no tears.

She shivered as she looked down.

The old man—old Cunningham, stiff and British—lay there clad in a dressing gown hastily belted over thin pajamas. He lay on one hip, his legs drawn up, his shoulders twisted down on the

rug. His face stared up, his arms were outflung. He must have fallen so, after staggering back a step from the door and collapsing.

The blood seeped from a small hole in the left temple. An ugly smear of crimson stained the cheek below, as if a hand had gone convulsively to the spot. The left hand—the hand on that side—was streaked with crimson.

"They couldn't have done this to him for helping me!"

Pity in Blaisdell went to meet her. They two were suddenly alone; the ship might not have been about them; but death was, bringing them together as nothing else could have done.

Blaisdell said the thing that was in his mind. He had to know. "He isn't your uncle, is he?"

The next moment he jumped to catch her. She had slipped down the edge of the door to the floor. She was light, limp in his arms as he carried her to the bed.

Blaisdell put his lighter to a cigarette. His hand was not steady. He swore softly and turned to the door and pressed the bell for a steward.

Blaisdell met the steward outside the door. "There's a dead man in there. Notify the captain. Get the doctor. I'll wait here."

The steward backed away a step. His face had the unbelieving astonishment of one whose well ordered routine had suddenly crashed about his ears. "Yes, sir!" He backed away another step, and turned hastily and scuttled away.

Anita Stoddard was still unconscious when Dr. Simpson arrived. Captain McRory followed—and the purser, stewards, seamen. The passageway outside the stateroom filled rapidly.

McRory shouldered into the room, stepping gingerly over the body. "What the devil's *this*? Murdered? Who did

it?" He glared from the body to Blaisdell, and stabbed a blunt forefinger at the bed. "What's the matter with *her*? What are you doing in here?"

Blaisdell had sailed with McRory before.

"I brought Miss—Reyes down to see her uncle," Blaisdell explained coolly. "We found him like this. She fainted. I'm afraid it's up to you, Captain."

Dr. Simpson turned from the bed. "I'll have her out of this in a minute."

The Captain chewed his thick lower lip. His broad forehead ridged in a scowl. His eyes under heavy brows that were weathered almost white, stared helplessly at the body, glanced about the stateroom, settled again on Blaisdell.

"Well! Haven't you an idea? After what happened up on the boat deck?"

"Not the slightest idea," said Blaisdell. "Have you found the chap who jumped me?"

"He seems to have shipped aboard at Curacao under the name of Jones," Captain McRory declared. "The chief engineer took him on as a coal passer when one of the regular crew didn't report back to the ship. This fellow—O'Brian or Jones—was waiting on the dock for a job. The ship's being searched from forepeak to shaft alley for him." The captain knelt by the body. "This would have to happen on *my* ship, and on the last night!"

It's queer no one seems to have heard the shot," Blaisdell mused.

Dr. Simpson dissolved a large tablet in a glass of water. He bent over the bed now, murmuring with false cheerfulness, "Drink this."

Anita Stoddard sat up with the doctor's help, dropping her feet to the floor. She drank obediently. She was trembling as if some tropical fever had driven an icy chill to the marrow of her bones.

Captain McRory planted himself by the bed. "Young lady, what do you know about this?"

"I—I don't know who killed him," she stammered.

"You seemed to know that fellow on the boat deck. You will tell me everything you know, please."

She looked past the captain to Blaisdell. Misery was in her look, and a silent appeal.

"You don't have to answer, you know. You haven't done anything. Don't let him bully you." McRory glared. Blaisdell smiled and said, "Miss Stoddard's in no condition to be questioned. Certainly not in here. Doctor, what about it?"

"I think Miss Reyes had better go to her stateroom," Doctor Simpson decided. "I'll take her."

"Very well. I'll see you when you're feeling better," Captain McRory informed her brusquely.

It seemed to Blaisdell that, as she went out, the glance she gave him was grateful. "Anything more?" he asked the captain politely.

McRory gave him an annoyed look. "I'll have questions later. You'll be willing to answer them, I suppose?"

"Naturally."

CHAPTER III

ANCIENT HISTORY

BLAISDELL had to push his way through the shocked and nervously whispering crowd that had gathered outside the door. Starbuck, the purser, more pallid than ever, nervously inquired, "What is it, sir? Another—"

"The captain," said Blaisdell, "will tell you." He brushed past Starbuck. As he came clear of the group about the door, Blaisdell saw dapper little Armando Moreles leaning against the cor-

ridor wall. And Moreles' face wore a furtive, eager look. There was a sly air of tension, of watchful waiting about him that suggested undue interest.

Blaisdell stopped.

"So, my friend—there was trouble after all? She had reason to look frightened!"

"Did she?" Blaisdell said. "What makes you think this had anything to do with her?"

They moved along the passage out of earshot. Moreles showed his teeth. His eyes were bright with sly knowledge. "Your head?" Moreles said. "How is your head? *That*, I suppose, had nothing to do with her?"

"Who knows?" said Blaisdell. "*Quien sabe?* You get about—you kept track of things, Moreles. Venezuela isn't such a big country when you're on the government underground, and foreigners are involved. What d'you know about a fellow named O'Brian?"

Moreles shrugged. "Nothing—I assure you—nothing. So much has happened since Gomez died. Too many of us have been trying to remain alive. There were so many scores to settle. Who is this O'Brian?"

"He was in Maracaibo."

"And I came aboard at La Guaira," said Moreles with another shrug, as if that settled the matter. But it didn't. The furtive eagerness, the sly tension, were still there. "Tell me—they say this old man was shot in the head. For why was it done?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Blaisdell repeated. He noticed that Moreles searched his face as if trying to weigh the amount of truth in the reply.

There were questions Blaisdell wanted to ask; he put them off as Dr. Simpson returned hurriedly along the passage.

"Everything all right?" Blaisdell asked.

"Yes, yes. She's quite calm. Resigned, as it were," the doctor replied. "You're waiting to have your head dressed, eh? I'm afraid I can't get to it right now. A little later." And Simpson bustled toward Cunningham's door.

Blaisdell had forgotten about his head. With mild surprise he realized it was still painful. He left Moreles there; and took with him recollection of the man's sly, knowing amusement. Moreles knew where he was going.

Anita Stoddard opened her stateroom door the moment he knocked. Her eyes were slightly red; she had, Blaisdell guessed, wept. But now she was sober, calm. And as she closed the door, she said, "Thank you for getting me out of there. I was not able to answer many questions."

Blaisdell looked down at her. He wanted to take her hand. Instead he asked, "Feeling better now?"

She read his mind. "You have questions?"

"They'll be asked anyway," Blaisdell reminded her. "And, in a way, it's my duty. You know I've had my orders."

"Such comforting orders. I shall always be grateful to Sam Haughton."

"You know him?"

Surprisingly she said, "I have never seen him. He was a friend of my father's—long ago. I wrote him a letter before I left Rancho del Sol. I was not certain it would get through to him. But it did."

She sat on the bed. Blaisdell took a chair. She accepted the cigarette he offered. Her hand, he noticed, was steady. He liked that. He liked many things about her, including her speech, shadowed so unconsciously by another tongue. "You need help," he said.

She nodded. Her eyes—dark blue

eyes, with long lashes—sought his face with hurt and bewilderment.

"I do not see why he was killed here—killed this last night of the trip. Why was he killed at all? He was going north to Chicago in two days. I would not have seen him again. Because he helped me a little, they killed him!"

"They?" said Blaisdell. "Who?"

"But I do not know, Mr. Blaisdell," she said helplessly.

"The Rancho del Sol—what about it?"

"My estate, left to me by my father."

"And there's trouble over it?"

"My father was a friend of the President Gomez," she said slowly. "He was a young man, my father, when he came to Venezuela. He married a Reyes—my mother. But that was after Gomez had favored him—after Rancho del Sol was started. It grew. Oil was found on some of our land. Taxes were heavy—but there was enough to pay them easily. I was born in Washington. I am an American—but a Venezuelan, too. I stayed on the Rancho del Sol after my father died. There was no trouble until Gomez died. Then, suddenly, what was secure was not secure. Friends of the old President had little protection. Many of them were killed. Others were exiled. But I was an American. It was not so easy. On the Rancho del Sol are cattle, coffee and oil. And only I was there to hold it against those who wanted it. There were new laws, new regulations, heavy fines, taxes. Trouble. Much trouble. My money was tied up in the banks. Some of my people were killed. It was conveyed to me that it would be difficult for me to leave the country—unless the Rancho del Sol was first sold to the new syndicate which held the estates next to us."

"The usual squeeze," said Blaisdell.

He could visualize all that. The Delta Corporation, with its concessions, had often been up against that sort of thing. The old crowd out—a new crowd in, with new pockets to be lined. And Washington a long way off and slow to act—if at all. More than one man had seen a lifetime of work vanish in such chaos. More than one man had stayed and tried to fight back. Some won out—some didn't. Too many who stayed died in one way or another. Accidents happened. . . .

ANITA STODDARD smiled faintly. "Squeeze? Yes—that is a good word! It was a very tight squeeze. Finally there was only one hope. I must get to New Orleans. And I had been told I must not leave the district. Maracaibo was a long way off." She looked at Blaisdell gravely. "One does not laugh at such things back from the coast—when everything is unsettled."

"Right," Blaisdell agreed. "So Cunningham helped you leave."

"He, too, was a friend of my father's," she said soberly. "He knew the danger. I think perhaps better than I, for he had talked with others. He did suggest that I take my mother's name, and travel with him to Maracaibo as his niece, and then on to New Orleans under his protection."

"Did you have any trouble?"

"None. Although in Maracaibo Mr. Cunningham was certain we were being watched. From a second story window he showed me this man O'Brian waiting on the corner. He had seen O'Brian at Merida, drinking with two members of the syndicate who want the Rancho del Sol. O'Brian had much money and was spending it freely. Yes—we were sure then we had been followed. But O'Brian did not come to Curacao on the boat we

took. And when the *Santa Fortuna* left Curacao, I was sure there would be no trouble. O'Brian was not aboard. And then, suddenly, tonight I saw him coming up on the boat deck—and I knew he must have been hidden aboard, and must be looking for me. To me it meant danger! And I was right. But why did he wait until tonight? And why was Mr. Cunningham killed?" she cried.

"Revenge for helping you out of the country?" Blaisdell frowned. "Tell me, you don't intend to go back, do you?"

"But of course," she said positively. Her eyes hardened. "Everything my father left is there! They shall not take it from me! They think, perhaps, I have run away—but I am going back with more money!"

"You're not, by any chance, going to make a deal with the Delta Corporation?" Blaisdell asked. "And go back with Sam Haughton's backing?"

She shook her head. "No—I had not thought of that. I have another way. A better way. I will be able to do it by myself."

"How?"

She stood up, pressed out her cigarette in an ash tray, and looked at him gravely. "Perhaps I am not sure about that myself. I will not talk about it. But you know now what has happened."

Blaisdell stood up. "And I don't know what's going to happen," he said. "If they don't find this O'Brian aboard, then what? He didn't go to all this trouble merely because Cunningham helped you. You don't think this is the end of it?"

"How do I know?" She leaned forward, troubled, urgent. "The police will ask many questions. I do not want to tell them much. It will be bad. Will you remember?"

Blaisdell grinned at her. She was not so helpless after all. She had spunk—backbone—a head that was working. "As far as I'm concerned," he promised, "you haven't told me anything. What you tell anyone else is your own affair. Now hadn't you better get some sleep? And—keep your door locked."

"I will," she promised obediently. "Good night—and thank you, Mr. Blaisdell."

Blaisdell's thoughts were far from optimistic as he closed the door behind him. One murder, he knew, hadn't ended the violence. There *had* to be more of it. Cunningham's death had accomplished nothing final. Cunningham's death had—Blaisdell was certain—only paved the way for something else.

At that moment a door just ahead of him opened. Armando Moreles stepped out into the corridor—and looked both surprised and chagrined to see Blaisdell there. Moreles hesitated as if wishing to step back inside and close his door.

THAT moment of hesitation allowed Blaisdell to come abreast of the door. He saw a woman standing inside, and recognized her. She was a Mrs. Simpson, who had come aboard at Curacao with her husband. A rather leggy young woman with a deeply bronzed fine face and somewhat jaded blond hair, she ran to low-heeled shoes and interminable walks about the deck. Blaisdell recalled that he had seen Anita Stoddard talking to her once or twice. And now Moreles was with her.

Another time it would have meant nothing. But now Blaisdell felt the first surge of sharp, dawning suspicion. He sensed that Moreles was chagrined at having been seen here. And for that there was a reason.

Moreles fell into step beside him,

nervously putting a cigarette between his lips. Blaisdell wanted to look back, but did not, certain Mrs. Simpson was lingering in the doorway, looking after them.

"Tell me, my frien', have they found this man? Do they know any more?"

"Suppose we go and see," Blaisdell suggested casually. And he asked, just as casually, "You haven't any more ideas about it, have you?"

Moreles gave him a quick look. He was, almost visibly, examining the question from all angles.

"I have one idea," he said slyly. "The Delta Corporation will soon have an interest in the Rancho del Sol, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Blaisdell carelessly, and from the corner of his eye he saw that Moreles looked satisfied, and he asked, "Who else is after the estate?"

"Ah!" said Moreles. "How should I know? One hears rumors—but what are they? Rumors do not interest you, Senor Blaisdell."

"They might," said Blaisdell.

Moreles chuckled. "Then I will listen for rumors."

Blaisdell left Moreles and went up to the captain's suite. McRory looked up and nodded tersely.

"I was just going to send for you, Blaisdell. Have a drink. There on the tray."

Blaisdell took the bottle, and unscrewed the cap. "Found any trace of this fellow O'Brian?"

"Still searching," he stated. "He brought a cheap suitcase aboard. It isn't under his bunk in the fireman's fo'c'sle, where he kept it. He was on the four-to-eight watch. He dressed himself after coming off duty and went out on deck. He seems to have disappeared then—until you met him on the boat deck. That was just before midnight."

Blaisdell tossed down the whisky neat.

"This is pretty serious, Blaisdell," McRory said. "You realize that, since Miss Reyes seemed to know O'Brian, it's going to be difficult for her."

"I think her part is simple and easily explained," said Blaisdell. "Cunningham pointed O'Brian out to her in Maracaibo as a suspicious character. When he appeared on the boat deck she was sure he didn't belong there. I happened along. She told me. I went off to look for him—found him—he jumped me. And when I didn't come back, she reported the matter to the bridge."

"Sounds simple," McRory admitted. His bushy white brows knit in a scowl. "But that doesn't explain the murder of Cunningham. Nothing was disturbed in the room."

"I'm not surprised. The man who killed him didn't go inside. He'd have moved the body from the door. Have you located anyone who heard a shot?"

"No," said McRory. "No one." He sighed. "This will be out of my hands when we dock. There'll be more trouble coming when the police come aboard."

"I'm sure of it," said Blaisdell. "I'd better see the doctor and turn in. Good night."

AN insistent rapping awoke Blaisdell in the morning. A steward's voice answered his sleepy response. "The captain wishes you in his suite, sir."

"Coming," Blaisdell yawned; then memory wiped his mind awake and he came to his feet with a rush. The ship's engines were silent. It was as if the life had gone out of the great steel hull—as if the *Santa Fortuna* herself had died.

Blaisdell smiled grimly as he stepped to the port. *Death was on his mind.* His watch showed the hour as seven-

thirty. Through the porthole he made out the gray front of a dock shed. He looked out and saw people moving down there on the dock. But they were not passengers. Inside the dock shed he could see the customs men standing idle. The investigation of Cunningham's death must be holding up everything.

When he went out on deck, two uniformed policemen were standing by the gangway head. The captain's door was open. A voice, not McRory's, answered his knock. "Are you Blaisdell?"

"I am," Blaisdell said, and entered.

Three men were in the captain's room. They were smoking cigarettes. All three of them eyed him with professional estimation.

The nearest one said, "Captain McRory had to leave. Have a seat." He smiled. "I'm Noel Hoffman, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is Mr. Metcalf, and Mr. Dixon, from headquarters."

The two detectives nodded. They were both short. Metcalf was chunky; Dixon was slender and older by some years. Gray was cropping out in his black hair.

Hoffman was the youngest of the three. Younger by a year or so than he himself was, Blaisdell guessed. He was trim, unobtrusive. But once he'd got your attention, you realized that there was a tremendous lot of keen energy and cold, controlled intelligence hidden underneath. Blaisdell respected, liked him at once.

"So the F. B. I. is interested in this," Blaisdell commented, taking the chair.

"The Department has jurisdiction over crimes on the high seas. And while the *Santa Fortuna* was not exactly on the high seas, she had not docked when this man was killed. . . .

Captain McRory tells us you were attacked on the boat deck last night."

"I was," said Blaisdell. "Have they found the man who did it?"

"Not a trace; he apparently vanished."

"Then he went overboard," Blaisdell said. His eyes narrowed at the implication. "He went over the side while the ship was bucking the current at full speed. Which means he had to clear the propeller by a miracle—and then swim to shore. And in the middle of the night, with the current running like it is, with everything from possible alligators and alligator gars to sucks and whirls and logs waiting to drag him under, that calls for another miracle. Once ashore he had to get somewhere in a hurry, which in itself is no small feat so far down the river," Blaisdell leaned forward. "Do you think he left the ship that way—and got ashore?"

"He isn't aboard," said Hoffman. "And a neat guess you've made. The bow lookout remembers a curious light on the east bank about that time. Perhaps a flashlight. It went on and off several times. He forgot it until he was questioned this morning."

"The idiot should have reported it," Blaisdell said. "The road along the river, from Fort Jackson, could have been blocked by radio." Blaisdell went on thoughtfully. "Someone had made careful plans, to the smallest detail—even to the *Santa Fortuna's* passing that particular spot when she did—and the plans clicked perfectly."

"Even to killing Cunningham," Hoffman suggested.

"Yes."

Hoffman was not, apparently, speaking for the two city detectives; but Blaisdell had the feeling the three of them had talked all this over, and had left to Hoffman the task of questioning him.

"Interesting," Hoffman murmured. "How did you happen to be on the boat deck with Miss—er—Reyes, at precisely the time to meet him?"

THEY knew her right name. Blaisdell wondered how much more they knew. "That was a good lead-up. I'm afraid I can't match it. Miss Reyes ran into me in the dark. She had seen O'Brian, couldn't understand how he was aboard, and was upset. She told me. I looked for the fellow—and found him," Blaisdell finished ruefully, touching his sore scalp.

"He tried to kill you?"

"I thought so at the time."

"Yet he left you there on the deck when he could have dumped you over the side."

"That has been puzzling me. I'm also puzzled as to how a shot was fired at Cunningham without anyone hearing it."

Hoffman drummed his fingers lightly on the chair arm. "A Webley air pistol was used; at least we think it was a Webley from the shape of the pellet that was recovered. It's an English make. There would be no sound."

"Could an air pistol have made such a brutal hole?"

"I looked up the ballistics," Hoffman said. "The .22 Webley pellets have a 310 muzzle velocity. At a foot or two it's a wonder more damage wasn't done." Hoffman leaned forward. "What do you know about Miss Reyes?"

The quickly veiled look of interest in Hoffman's eyes wasn't necessary to put Blaisdell on his guard. "Why should I know anything about her? I had never seen her before she came aboard at Curacao. I didn't speak to her before we met on the boat deck last night."

Hoffman's cigarette had died out. He

got to his feet and dropped it in an ash receiver.

"We'd like to know more about her than she seems willing to tell," he stated.

"What did she tell?"

Hoffman's thin smile might have meant anything. "Probably not nearly so much as she's already told you." Blaisdell flushed angrily.

"What makes you think she's confided in me at all?" he demanded. "I've already told you I never saw—"

"Yes, of course. Sorry. Thank you, Mr. Blaisdell. Passengers will be going ashore shortly. By the way, you're with the Delta Corporation, I believe. An executive?"

"One of the juniors—very junior," said Blaisdell, standing up.

"You can be reached at your office, I suppose."

"A telephone call will do," Blaisdell said. "Sorry I can't help you more, gentlemen."

Metcalf, the chunky headquarters detective, spoke for the first time. His voice was a husky drawl. "You did pretty well." The ghost of a satisfied grin was on Metcalf's face.

BLAISDELL carried that memory away. The grin bothered him. He had an annoying impression that he had been on trial, and had made a poor showing. Too late now to do anything about it. He went in search of Anita Stoddard.

Her stateroom door was standing ajar. A woman was speaking inside. "I guess this is all, Arch."

The brisk voice was not Anita Stoddard's. Blaisdell hesitated—and a man opened the door, and looked startled and annoyed to see Blaisdell standing there.

Blaisdell kept his face blank as he

recognized the sun-tanned, well built husband of the leggy Mrs. Simpson. Mrs. Simpson had just spoken beyond the door. On the floor inside were three traveling bags. Anita Stoddard was not in the stateroom.

Simpson said, "You startled me. If you're looking for Miss Reyes, she's gone ashore with the police to inspect some rogue's gallery pictures. She left suddenly and asked Mrs. Simpson to pack her bags."

"Is she under arrest?"

"No, of course not. Why should she be?"

"You never can tell in matters like this," said Blaisdell. "She's coming back, I suppose."

"I don't think so," Simpson said. "She asked us to put her bags through the customs and take them to the Leeland Hotel where we're stopping." Simpson was holding a straight-stemmed brier pipe. He pulled on it a second, and said, "Nasty business, eh? How's your head this morning?"

"Doing nicely, thanks. Miss Reyes is fortunate to have friends to help her."

"We're glad to do what we can," Simpson nodded. "Any message we can deliver?"

"I don't believe so, thanks."

Blaisdell crossed the ship to his own stateroom. He was wondering about the Simpsons. You met their type about the world, polished, competent, restless. You couldn't tell much about them. But because Morales seemed to know them, they would probably be worth keeping an eye on.

Grigsby, the bandy-legged little room steward, squashed out a cigarette as Blaisdell entered his cabin, and smiled sheepishly. "Just catching a bit of rest, sir, and wondering when your bags'd be ready."

"Have them for you in a jiffy."

"So many passengers've been asking when they can go ashore, I got fair tired of answering."

Blaisdell nodded. From the corner of his eye he saw that Grigsby was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. The little steward had something on his mind.

"I suppose the detectives questioned you."

Grigsby shook his head. "Not yet. You wouldn't be knowing, sir, if they're finding who killed the old gentleman?"

"No luck yet, I guess. Why?"

"I was just wondering, sir. . . ."

"Out with it, Grigsby. What's on your mind?"

"I don't like to talk. Indeed I don't, sir. If you hadn't been almost done in by that fellow from the engine room gang, I wouldn't say nothing. But, seeing as you spoke with the police this morning, I thought—"

"Let's have it," said Blaisdell, serious now. "What's worrying you?"

Grigsby swallowed. "I'm not one to put suspicion on an innocent man, Mr. Blaisdell. But I just wondered if the detectives were showing any curiosity about Mr. Moreles."

"What about him?"

But before Grigsby could answer, they were frozen by the sound of a woman's scream that knifed along the passage. She screamed again as Blaisdell swung to the door, jerked it open.

She was running toward him, crying, sobbing—it was one of the stewardesses. She would have fled past Blaisdell if he had not blocked her way, caught her arms, stopped her.

"What is it?" he demanded sharply.

Her eyes were wide with horror; she was almost incoherent as she cried wildly, "There's another one! He's dead! I walked in and didn't know he

was there! He's on the bed! His tongue's sticking out! His eyes are popping! Oh, it's awful!"

Blaisdell shook her. "Steady! Who is it?"

She wailed: "That South American! That man with the little black mustache! I think I'm going to faint. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

LOCK THE BARN DOOR

GRIGSBY, the bandy-legged little steward, stood in the stateroom doorway with a gray pallor of dazed uncertainty on his face. Blaisdell thrust his limp burden into Grigsby's arms. "Here! Take her!"

"What'll I do with her?" Grigsby stammered.

"Put her in your pocket! Throw her out the porthole! Hide her under the bed! What the devil do I care what you do with her!" Blaisdell retorted—and was off down the passage with long strides.

Once in a lifetime a thing like this came along, piling disaster on disaster; a thing that topped the unbelievable with the impossible—that knocked a situation into a cocked hat and scattered the fragments irretrievably.

Cunningham's murder had been bad enough. The stage had been set for it. No one had been expecting it. But this—this last murder—was a slap, a challenge, a dare from fate.

Moreles was dead. Useless to imagine that the stewardess could have meant anyone else.

The little South American had a stateroom near the end of the passageway. And that Moreles could afford the price of a good cabin was as good a pointer as any to the devious channels of graft he had explored while serving the old dictator.

The door was closed. Terrified, hysterical, the stewardess had slammed it as she fled, but she had left her key in the spring lock. Blaisdell opened the door and stopped. Moreles' body was there on the bed, in boldly striped blue silk pajamas. It was lying at an angle across the bed. His eyes were bulging, popping; his tongue was black; his face congested, and he was dead—dead for hours.

Blaisdell knew it was death before he reached the bed and touched the stiff cold wrist. Armando Moreles had not died pleasantly. A white silk handkerchief, twisted tightly, encircled his swollen throat like a savage mockery of other handkerchiefs worn in the late afternoon tennis games to which Moreles had been always hurrying from his Curacao office. White teeth clamped on the dark swollen tongue, as if in death the dapper little man was biting back the secrets which had lurked in the crooked channels of his mind. One pallid lid was half down over a bulging eye, giving the effect of a macabre wink, as if in dying Moreles knew he was taking with him one last secret—his greatest secret—the secret of his death.

Two bags had been opened. The contents were scattered recklessly on the floor. Locker drawers were open. The pillow cases were off. The mattress had been lifted up, dropped carelessly back, so that it overhung at the head of the bed.

"Holy cow!" That was Mendenhall, a fleshy broker who had boarded the *Santa Fortuna* at Rio de Janeiro. Mendenhall looked slightly ill as he regarded the body on the bed. "And I've been next to *that* ever since I got up!" he gulped.

"That's right—you have the next cabin, haven't you?" Blaisdell said

crisply. "You didn't hear any sounds in here three or four hours ago, did you?"

Mendenhall was passing a handkerchief over his pudgy face. He shook his head silently.

A crowd was gathering in the passage. Breathless exclamations, shuffling feet, questions back and forth, were growing louder by the moment. Through that came the burly broad-shouldered figure of one of the two patrolmen who had been guarding the head of the gangway.

"Dead, huh? *Who's* dead? They could have heard that woman yelling clear to Canal Street. . . . Who did *that*?"

"Try guessing. You may get an answer. Where are those detectives who were up in the captain's quarters?"

"They'll be here! The whole ship'll be here! Say— who're you anyway, mister?"

Blaisdell was suddenly angry, irritated. This second killing was bad enough. But here he was, for the second time one of the first persons at the scene of murder.

A booming voice of authority rang along the passage as Captain McRory ordered the people out of the way. Then McRory was there; and Hoffman, the Department of Justice man, and Metcalf, the short chunky headquarters detective, with his partner Dixon.

McRory, red-faced and bull-like, took one look at the bed and blew up. "Another one! What kind of a jinx has hit this ship?"

"A two-legged jinx!" said Blaisdell grimly. "And if you ask me, he had strong hands."

"What? *You* here, Blaisdell? Are you tangled up in this one, too?"

The beefy patrolman said, "Ha!" He fixed a suspicious stare on Blaisdell, and said, "He was in here when I got

here! Giving orders like he was running the place!"

"Rats!" said Blaisdell. "My stateroom is down the passage. I heard the stewardess scream. She told me what she found. I came to see."

Metcalf hunched his chunky shoulders and grinned again as he had grinned up in the captain's quarters—a knowing grin. Going over to the bed, he touched the face, lifted the head slightly, felt underneath the neck, testing the white silk handkerchief. "Knotted in the back," he said. "And a sweet job."

Noel Hoffman, calm, trim, had gone to the bed. He lifted one of Moreles' arms an inch or so and dropped it. He grasped an ankle next and lifted it. The leg seemed to come up more loosely, to fall more loosely, with a certain limpness.

"Rigor hasn't worked down into the lower extremities yet," said Hoffman. "I make it three to six hours, Dixon. How about it?"

Dixon tried the leg. He nodded. "About that. A little before the boat docked, eh? I'd put it before day-break."

HOFFMAN spoke to the two head-quarters men. "Well, boys, this one's in your front yard—and I'll be darned if I know myself whether any of it belongs to me." Hoffman looked about the stateroom. "Robbery," he said. "It could be that and nothing else. That is, if someone had reason to believe Moreles was keeping valuables in here instead of in the ship's safe. Who is he, anyway, captain? Could he have had anything in here worth stealing?"

Captain McRory looked baffled, angry, harassed. "How do I know what he had with him? The purser might be able to tell you something. I think this

fellow came aboard at La Guaira. That's the port for Caracas. And that's all I know!"

"Caracas?" said Hoffman. "And the other fellow who was killed last night came from Maracaibo! Blaisdell, how about this? D'you think the same fellow who killed Cunningham might have got at this man?"

"I don't think," said Blaisdell. "In the captain's cabin a little while ago you assured me there wasn't a chance of that man being aboard. All the signs indicated he had jumped overboard last night while we were coming up the river."

Hoffman's stare was cold, level for a moment. He nodded. "That's right. Just the same—it makes one wonder. Two murders—both of the victims coming out of Venezuela. It's an astonishing coincidence, to say the least."

"You can't hang a man on a coincidence."

"Yeh? Maybe not," said Metcalf. "But you can catch him on the coincidence and hang him later. The guy who did this must still be aboard. Unless this ship was running a swimming marathon all night last night."

Captain McRory looked startled. "Still aboard! I forgot!" he exclaimed with chagrin. "You gave the word to let the passengers go ashore. The gangway's open."

Metcalf leaped for the door. "Hey, you!" he blared at the broad-backed patrolman outside. "Are the passengers going ashore?"

"Sure, an' I thought you knew it. They was going ashore when the lady first yelled."

"Stop them, you lunk! You ought've had better sense than to let 'em keep going after you heard a woman scream!"

"We had our orders. What else do you expect?"

Metcalf slammed the door.

Dixon had rolled the body half over. With difficulty he was unticing the knots in the handkerchief. He swore before he was through; finally he turned, untwisting the handkerchief. It was a large one—a man's.

Metcalf stooped, and from the scattered contents of the traveling bags picked up another large silk handkerchief. The letters A.M. were embroidered in one corner. He compared them with similar letters on the handkerchief he had untied, and sighed disgustedly. "Killed him with his own handkerchief! I thought for a minute we had something! I might have known better."

Dixon stood for a moment scowling, and spoke to Metcalf. "Call headquarters. Tell the boys to come back and photograph and fingerprint this room. Ask for a half dozen men. We can't hold these passengers all day." Dixon looked at Blaisdell. "Nothing you can tell us about this?"

"Nothing," said Blaisdell. He wanted to think; he wanted to question Grigsby, the bandy-legged little steward, who had had Moreles' name on his lips when the stewardess screamed.

"I guess that's all then. We'll call you later if there's anything."

BLAISDELL was not surprised to find Grigsby waiting in the stateroom, behind the closed door. The air inside was blue with cigarette smoke. Grigsby was pacing nervously back and forth. His face, as Blaisdell entered, mirrored anxiety and apprehension.

"He's dead?" said Grigsby.

"Garroted with a silk handkerchief. What happened to the stewardess?"

"I give her to two of the crew an'

told them to take her to the doctor," said Grigsby.

Blaisdell had closed the door and lighted a cigarette. "What were you going to tell me—about Moreles?"

Grigsby gulped. "I'm a fair one for getting into trouble! I wish I'd kept my mouth shut, sir. It wasn't nothing much. It didn't have anything to do with this."

"Let's have it anyway."

"Well, sir, it's this way: it was kind of on my mind, sir, last night." Grigsby glanced at the open port and lowered his voice. "Last night near eleven—maybe it was a little before or after—I turned into the port passage and this South American fellow was standing before Mr. Cunningham's door. Just standing there, with a cigarette in his mouth, kind of like he'd just lighted it. I didn't think nothing of it at the time."

"That may have been all he did stop for," said Blaisdell.

Grigsby nodded. He seemed to snatch at the suggestion with quick hope. "That's what I think, sir. I do now, sir, thinkin' back. But it did set on my mind a little. You see, sir, he was facing a little toward the door—like he might have been knocking on it"

"Why didn't you report it?"

Grigsby sighed. "The company wouldn't thank me for putting suspicion on a passenger. If I talked out of turn an' was wrong, I'd be in a fix, wouldn't I? With the company an' with the police. Jobs are hard to get now, sir. I'm steady-like an' don't like to be out of work. And the law fair scares me, it does. I've never had nothing to do with the law, sir. But it was on my mind—and seeing as you had a little something to do with that other matter, sir, I thought I'd mention Mr. Moreles to you this morning. I didn't have no idea he was already dead! What'll I do, sir?"

"That," said Blaisdell, "is up to you, Grigsby. You don't know anything about his death. You didn't see much last night. As you say, Moreles merely paused to light a cigarette."

"That's right, sir," said Grigsby eagerly. "That's all I saw."

"If you get into this you may be held as the material witness. You may not even be questioned. It's up to you."

Grigsby digested that. His face cleared. He looked relieved, as if he had come to a decision. "Thank you, sir; I'll bear that in mind. And I'll be leaving this ship, sir, I will indeed. I'll be back for your bags when you're ready to go ashore."

Blaisdell had not yet packed. After Grigsby had left, Blaisdell finished his cigarette thoughtfully. He tried to value Grigsby's information. It was startling in view of what he himself knew about Moreles. But to the police it would probably mean nothing. Could Moreles, Blaisdell wondered, have killed Cunningham? Then what about O'Brian, the vanished coal-passer? O'Brian had been guilty of something. He wouldn't have been up on the boat deck ready to fight if cornered, if he hadn't. He wouldn't have vanished.

Even granting that Moreles had killed Cunningham—who had killed Moreles? And why? Moreles had been friendly with the Simpsons—and they were friendly with Anita Stoddard.

Well, Anita Stoddard's traveling companion and Moreles both were dead! And it made a meaningless puzzle, complicated by the air of furtive knowledge Moreles had borne toward Anita Stoddard.

A knock drew Blaisdell to the door. A group of brisk-looking and determined young men were crowding the passage outside.

"Will you make a statement for the press, Mr. Blaisdell?"

"What happened on the boat deck last night, Mr. Blaisdell?"

"Do you know anything about this business down the hall?"

"Hold it, Tony!"

Flash. . .

BLAISDELL blinked as a flash bulb went off. The lens of a camera which had appeared suddenly over a shoulder caught his annoyed frown. The grinning photographer was Benny Hyde, who had been a Tulane man in Blaisdell's class.

"Loosen up, Tony," Benny said. "You'll have to give sooner or later. You can't dodge this story."

Blaisdell's smile was rueful. "Evidently not, with you leading the pack, Benny. Come in, gentlemen."

Blaisdell had forgotten the press; he might, he thought, have known this was coming. The newspaper men had been kept off the ship until now. They were being barred from the Moreles cabin for the moment. They made up for the delay by a furious barrage of questions. And when they had gotten all Blaisdell would tell them, they bolted out to catch the next edition.

Benny Hyde, thin and bubbling with cheerfulness, promised as he went out, "I'll see you at the office later, Tony. If you get anything, save it for me. This ship's turning into a charnel house. So long, fella."

Blaisdell finished his packing and then there was another knock on the door. Tony jerked around, eased his jumping nerves, took a breath and called out a "Come in," that sounded reasonably cool.

"I say, old man, I've been looking for you." Simpson was grave. He looked concerned. "Bad business, this, eh?" Simpson pulled his briar pipe out of his pocket and fingered it nervously.

His eyes, gray and steady, lingered on Blaisdell's face for a moment and dropped to the pipe.

"Something happened last night," said Simpson. "I didn't think much of it at the time. But you seemed to know this chap Moreles—and I wonder if it'd mean anything to you."

"I knew him only slightly."

"Yes, of course. And so did we—only slightly," said Simpson hastily. "He scraped up an acquaintance with Mrs. Simpson and myself for some reason or other. We still don't know exactly why." Simpson looked straightforward enough—and yet he was wandering around the point and doing a clumsy best to create assurance. Blaisdell waited. Simpson shook his head, frowned, and went on.

"For some reason or other Moreles came to our stateroom last night after poor Cunningham's body was found. He seemed to want to talk about it—talk about Cunningham and Miss-Reyes."

"Stoddard, you mean, don't you?"

Simpson stared at him. "Er—yes, of course. Well—Moreles ambled on and suddenly looked at us like a sharp little rat and asked if Royal 709½ meant anything to us. It didn't. I was rather curt with him. He took the hint and left—met you outside the door I noticed—and the next thing we heard was the news this morning that he had been murdered."

"Royal 709½?"

"Yes. You seemed friendly with him—you were one of the first at his body this morning, weren't you?—and I was wondering if the number meant anything to you." Simpson's manner was disarmingly innocent.

"He didn't mention it to me," said Blaisdell.

Simpson shook his head. "I didn't

think much of it last night—but since he's dead, I've been puzzling over his question. There's a Royal Street, of course, in the French Quarter. I was wondering if it wasn't an address there. And why he asked us if we knew anything about it."

"What do the detectives think?"

Simpson shrugged. "I haven't mentioned it. Matter of fact, neither Mrs. Simpson nor myself want to get messed up in the business. One thing and another, it'd mean we'd have to bring Anita Stoddard into it. She's got enough to shoulder as it is."

"Thoughtful of you."

"Not at all, not at all. We like her no end. And we're considering ourselves also."

"How long have you known her?"

Simpson gave him a stare. "Some years," he said briefly, and it was plain he didn't care to go into the matter further. He slipped the pipe back into his pocket. "If you don't know anything, you don't," he said.

"Just a minute," Blaisdell stopped him. "Are you going to report this?"

"Not until after we see Miss Stoddard," Simpson said stiffly. He nodded and walked away.

Blaisdell stared at the man's straight back. Queer. Some purpose there. The yarn didn't ring true. It might be a clumsy attempt to explain Moreles' visit last night. But 709½ Royal . . . might be a lead to something. . . .

CHAPTER V

ROYAL STREET

BLAISDELL left the ship as soon as possible. He spoke briefly to Hoffman before going ashore and received leave to disembark. He boarded a taxi that dropped him on Royal Street—old Royal Street, narrow,

grimy, shabby with generations and centuries of living and dying under the French, the Spanish and the Americans.

The proud old days were gone; ghosts only were left; ghosts of the past lingering in the handwrought iron balconies overhanging the sidewalks, the damp old houses, shadowy and crumbling, the mossy courtyards back out of sight where vivid memories of the past hid and sulked from the noisy clamor of the present.

Blaisdell had always liked the French Quarter—and now as he paused on the sidewalk opposite, he saw with a tingling rise in his pulses that there was a 709½. Somehow he hadn't been sure there would be. He patted the small automatic he'd put inside his coat before coming ashore, and then renewed his inspection of Number 709½.

It was one of the older houses, two stories high, with a courtyard reached by a carriage entrance through a vaulted archway bisecting the front of the house. Solid wooden gates on huge iron hinges barred the carriage entrance, and there was a house door to the right and a door to the left. The windows were shuttered and the house seemed deserted.

Next door, from a smaller, narrower house, a fat woman emerged and began sweeping the sidewalk. Blaisdell crossed over and spoke to her.

"Who lives in that house next door?"

She had more than a trace of a black mustache on which tiny droplets of perspiration clung, and she stopped sweeping, and looked at him suspiciously.

"Whassa matter you as' me?" she demanded.

"Sorry," said Blaisdell. "I'm merely curious."

"Tha's wha' one young lady as' me—an' I tella her the same; I don' know.

Two—t'ree day someone there. She knock—she go-a in. She's-a in there now. Maybe you try, eh?"

"Young lady?" said Blaisdell quickly. "What did she look like?"

"Ah—so!" He received a knowing look. "Blacka dress, blacka hair, an' she's-a look like an angel—so high."

"Thanks," he said.

So Anita Stoddard also knew about the number. Blaisdell walked to the next door, beside the carriage entrance, and knocked. The fat lady leaned on her broom and watched him.

Twice he had to knock—then a youngish woman opened the door. Red-headed, pretty in a flamboyant way, her lips were too bold and red, and an unconscious challenge was in her look. This, certainly, was not a face like an angel's.

"I'm looking for the young lady who came in here a little while ago," Blaisdell said.

She was chewing gum, estimating him. "What young lady?" she countered.

"The one in black. Will you tell her Blaisdell is here?"

"Oh! You're with her?"

"Just give her my name, please."

Instead she smiled and stepped back. "Come in. I'll tell her." Blaisdell entered and she closed the door. The shuttered windows cut off most of the light. The room had a damp musty smell, the odor of a place little lived in. The few pieces of furniture looked old, worn.

And the red-headed girl paused and said, "Anyone else with you?"

"I'm alone," said Blaisdell.

He thought she looked relieved.

"Well, you ain't now. Sit down here. I'll go get her. Funny she didn't say anything about you. Maybe I oughta open the shutters. I'll do it when I come back. Just sit there."

She disappeared through a door at the back of the room, behind Blaisdell's chair. With the closing of the door, silence fell. Street sounds were so muted that Blaisdell had the feeling he was far from the outside world. The silence had a quality almost ominous. Blaisdell suddenly realized the back of his neck was tight and cold with an unaccountable feeling of danger.

HE sat for a moment restlessly, and then yielded to his itching desire to rove about. He moved silently to the door, listened a moment, opened it gently. Beyond was a short passage dimly lighted by a half-open door at the other end; and when he reached the door he saw an enclosed stairway leading up, and through the door before him the mossy bricks of a patio pavement and a tall graceful clump of bamboo at the back of the patio.

Hand in his pocket, Blaisdell stepped into the doorway—and stopped suddenly as he saw two men in the middle of the patio, coming toward him. The red-headed girl was following them. One of the men was about Blaisdell's height, with dark stubble on his thin face. The other had a swarthy skin, powerful shoulders, long arms, and carried a revolver.

The mustache had been shaved, Blaisdell saw as he jerked the automatic from his pocket, but the lips looked swollen, and he knew instantly this must be O'Brian, the man he had battled with on the *Santa Fortuna's* boat deck, the man he suspected of killing Cunningham!

O'Brian saw him the same instant—and fired as he saw Blaisdell's automatic come out. The crashing shot spewed splinters against Blaisdell's right cheek and eye as the bullet smashed the door beside his head. A

splinter struck his right eyeball, blinding him, and he dodged back and slammed the door.

The second man had also drawn a gun. Blaisdell backed along the passage, dabbing at his eye and trying to see with the other the opening of the door.

But the door did not open. An automobile engine filled the patio with the rush of its exhaust. Blaisdell realized the car had been standing in the carriage-way through the building, and now was leaving. He turned and stumbled into the front room. A door there led into the carriage-way. It was locked. By that time Blaisdell discovered that, the automobile had gone over the sidewalk into the street.

Still half blinded with tears, Blaisdell ran to the front door, and found it also locked. The red-headed girl had turned a key and removed it while she stood there and directed him to a chair.

Swearing under his breath, Blaisdell ran back to the patio door. His eyes were clearing. The splinter had not penetrated the eyeball and the tears had washed it away. Mopping his eyes with a handkerchief, he opened the door and stood flat against the wall for an instant, and then ducked out into the patio ready to shoot.

The patio was empty. The automobile had been no ruse to bring him out into the open. The great wooden doors at the other end of the carriage-way stood open now to the sidewalk and the street, and there were black drops of oil on the old bricks at his left where the car had stood.

Sick with apprehension, Blaisdell started for the sidewalk. Then, suddenly, the sweetest sound he had ever heard came out of the patio behind him.

"Mr. Blaisdell!"

Anita Stoddard was there, running toward him from the back of the patio,

lovely and stunning in the slim sheath of a black dress. And as Blaisdell went to meet her he thought the delicate fairness of her features had all the breathtaking contrast of a fragile white orchid against a black velvet background.

She was laughing—and close to tears—as they met. "You—Anthony Blaisdell! How can you be here? How *could* you be here in time?"

"They got away," Blaisdell said. "How many were there?"

"Three—two men and a girl."

"They're all gone then. If I'd known one of them was O'Brian I'd not have been such a stupid idiot as to let it happen!" Blaisdell groaned. "What brought you here?"

"Vera Simpson told me this man Moreles—"

"Simpson told *me*!" Blaisdell broke in.

"I had to see what he meant."

"You should have told me and let me come."

She said, "I could not wait. As soon as I could get away from the police, I went to see Mr. Haughton, and then because he was so busy for a little, I came here. And the girl answered the door, and I said that Mr. Moreles had sent me, and she was astonished and asked me to come in. And when I was in—suddenly there was this man O'Brian in the room—and they asked me questions, and finally took me to an old empty room at the back there and locked me in. There were no windows. I do not know what they were going to do next."

"What did they ask you?"

"What happened on the ship later last night," she said.

"O'Brian didn't know?"

"No. He seemed to know nothing after his fight with you."

"Then he swam ashore," said Blaisdell. "The fellow must be like an otter in the water. What else?"

"He wanted to know why I was in New Orleans—and what I would do if I went back to Venezuela. And I told him that when I went back I would keep the Rancho del Sol—and he sneered at me and said I was too sure."

"Then this is all about your estate?"

She shrugged. "So it seems."

"Did he say what Moreles had to do with it?"

"So queer," she said, wrinkling her forehead. "He did not seem to know about this man Moreles. He asked me questions—he seemed startled that Moreles would know this house number. He did not see how it was possible. He seemed to think I was not telling the truth—and I think they wanted to leave quickly because they did not know the answer to Moreles. They sent the girl to watch the front door to see if anyone was coming."

"Perhaps," said Blaisdell grimly, "Moreles didn't know."

"But Vera Simpson told me—"

"Who are the Simpsons? How long have you known them?"

"Why—why, Vera is an old friend. I have known her several years. Her husband is a chemist. They travel much. I met them by chance in Maracaibo this time. They were going to Curacao also, and then on to New Orleans. It was so nice having Vera on the same boat."

"What were they doing in Maracaibo?"

"It was some business. Vera said something about oil. Why do you ask these questions?" Still wide-eyed, she protested impulsively, "You can't think Vera and her husband. . .?"

"I don't know—I don't know what to think," Blaisdell confessed with a scowl. "The Simpsons were talking

with Moreles last night—and this morning my steward told me he surprised Moreles outside Cunningham's door last night, standing there pretending to light a cigarette—and this morning the Simpsons have a cock-and-bull story for both of us about a remark Moreles dropped to them last night. A story which draws us both here to a trap—and yet by the evidence of O'Brian himself he doesn't seem to know Moreles. What's the answer? It's the Simpsons, isn't it? They—not Moreles—got us here where O'Brian is waiting."

"No—no! Not Vera! We will find this man Moreles and see what he has to say."

"He's dead," Blaisdell told her. "Moreles was murdered this morning some time before daybreak. Garroted in his own stateroom."

She was stunned, sick, horrified. And bewildered.

"Why should *he* have been murdered?" she cried.

"*Quien sabe?*" said Blaisdell.

"This is so terrible! What is happening? What can we do?" she cried in distress.

"We can get a police alarm out about O'Brian," said Blaisdell. "Did you find any trace of him at headquarters? Or get a good look at the car they had here? Or notice the license number?"

"No. At headquarters I looked at so many pictures I was dizzy, and none of them I could recognize. And I think the automobile was a dark color—perhaps black. That is all I saw when they took me through the patio. Must we tell the police? They are gone. We cannot catch them. I do not want to be in the newspapers any more, or explain to the police any more today. I must go into the country this evening. I asked Mr. Haughton if you could come to Desirée

Plantation while I was there, and he said you were to come."

"What is Desirée Plantation?" Blaisdell asked.

"It is mine. I must go there quickly. Can we not forget—this for a little while anyway? The Simpsons are coming to Desirée also."

She was anxious, pleading, coaxing—but it was the matter of the Simpsons that decided him. To go to the police now about this latest episode, would make confusion, delay, publicity—and probably accomplish little. But if there was another meeting with the Simpsons ahead, something might be accomplished.

"Stand here," Blaisdell said. "Scream if you see anything to alarm you."

Obediently she stood there while, gun in hand, he looked hastily around the place. Many doors were locked; everything he was able to see bore out the fat woman's statement that this old house had not been lived in except for sketchy use the last day or so.

Blaisdell came back to Anita Stoddard and said: "It's taking a long chance—a foolish chance of trouble with the police—and perhaps more trouble ahead for you. But if we can get out of this neighborhood without having to explain, we'll forget it for a little."

She smiled then—and it was like the clouds parting and the warm tingling sunshine descending. Blaisdell thought. And if he was a bit giddy with such thoughts, he was aware of it and didn't care.

CHAPTER VI

SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY

THEY walked out between the great open doors into the sunlight washing shabby Royal Street. The fat wom-

an was gone and no one paid any attention to them. Blaisdell closed the doors. They left the old musty house brooding there and walked a block before Blaisdell hailed a passing taxicab.

"Canal and Carondelet," he said, for want of anything better, because that was the nearest the Delta Corporation's offices; and when the cab moved on with them, he asked, "Now what about Desirée Plantation?"

"It was a property of my father's. I must go there quickly. Please now, will you drop me at my hotel? I will send directions to your hotel about Desirée."

"Why not let me drive you there in my car?"

"But an automobile is coming for me. And you will not be ready so soon. Mr. Haughton assured me of that."

Blaisdell grinned ruefully and told the driver to go to the Leeland Hotel.

"By the way, who's going to take you to the plantation? And how far is it?"

"Seventy miles," she said. "Jack Carnochan is coming. The Carnochans live on the place. They were relatives. I have never seen them. I radioed them I was coming, and I telephoned them from Mr. Haughton's office."

The taxi pulled to the curb in front of the Leeland. Blaisdell watched her quick light steps go up to the entrance; and then he hurried to the fifth floor suite of offices which the Delta Corporation occupied just off Canal Street.

Sam Haughton was waiting for him. The Old Man's roar of welcome echoed down the hall as Blaisdell walked into Haughton's inner office.

"I've been wondering when you'd get here! Police swarming all over the place asking questions about you! The newspapers yammering at the door for your life history! And Miss Stoddard telling me what a comfort you are and pleading for your further services! Sit

down! Do some fast talking! There's a lot of ground to cover in a hurry! I've got to catch the plane to New York today!"

The Old Man's hair was white, upstanding in a belligerent shock, and his eyebrows were bushy and challenging. Sixty, perhaps, he looked under fifty; and he was tall, spare, powerful. Age had not changed the spirit which had run a small grubstake into a tiny gold mine in the Idaho Rockies, and levered that mine into a Chilean copper concession, and then into more concessions, and finally into the Delta Corporation, which at one time or another in the past thirty years had possessed interests in every republic from the Rio Grande to the Strait of Magellan. And his voice was quiet now when Blaisdell paused.

"Who is Armando Moreles?"

"He was in Caracas; I had to deal with him on that La Paz matter last year. He was coming north for his political health, I thought."

"It's a regrettable mess!" Sam Haughton grunted. "And I don't know whether or not you did right in not calling the police at once about this Royal Street matter. It's done now, however." The inter-office telephone buzzed; the Old Man switched it on and said, "Yes?"

Miss Luchs' voice, from the reception room, said: "Mr. Shannon and Mr. Darnford are here."

"Two minutes," said the Old Man, and cut the connection and spoke regretfully to Blaisdell. "I'll have to see them. Get your reports in shape, look at your mail, and we'll have a conference on your trip as soon as possible."

Blaisdell found his desk stacked with mail. Before ringing for a secretary, he glanced in the telephone book, called a number. A woman's voice said, "The Rapp Agency."

"Mr. Rapp, please."

And in a moment a cautious voice said, "Mr. Rapp speaking."

"This is Blaisdell, Rapp, The Delta Corporation."

Mr. Rapp lost his caution. "Delighted—a pleasure! How are you, Mr. Blaisdell?"

"I've a job for you, Rapp. I want the same service you always give us. A couple named Simpson are landing from the *Santa Fortuna* this morning. They intended to register at the Leeland. Put a man on them—two men—as many as you need. I want to know anything you can find out about them, and everything they do. Keep me personally posted. And there's an empty house at 709½ Royal I want investigated. I want to know who owns it, who has been there in the last few days, and who comes there, if anyone, in the next few days, and what they do. If anyone but the police come, don't lose sight of them. I'm going out of town, I believe. I'll call you later and tell you where I'll be."

"It will help to know what my men are looking for, Mr. Blaisdell."

"I don't know myself. Spend all the money you need to."

"That," cried Mr. Rapp with quick enthusiasm, "is the way a client should talk! I'll have men on all this at once!"

THERE were stacks of mail. Blaisdell was throwing machine-gun dictation in alternate bursts to two secretaries when he had to tear himself away and spend an hour and a half with the Old Man and three of the Delta officials, covering the results of his trip.

By that time he had been subpoenaed to the inquest of Cunningham's death at one-thirty P.M. There was barely time for a quick lunch—and then he found himself once more aboard the

Santa Fortuna, where a double inquest was being held in the empty cavern of the lounge.

Sam Haughton was there with Anita Stoddard, Hoffman, Hecalf and Dixon were there. The Simpsons were not. And as he sat down beside Anita Stoddard, Blaisdell looked over and met Hoffman's cool stare. He realized suddenly that Hoffman must have thought he was lying when, in the captain's cabin, he had denied any knowledge of Anita Stoddard's affairs. Hoffman may have known then that she was going to the Delta offices.

The coroner rapped for order and opened the inquest. He was a dry, quiet little man who droned perfunctory questions. Quickly it became apparent to Blaisdell that little more than a basis of homicide was being established. He suspected that no evidence was being presented which was not already public property.

Hoffman came over and spoke to him.

"I see," the Department of Justice man commented dryly, "you were well acquainted with Miss Stoddard after all. She has business with your company, I gather."

"She is a friend of Mr. Haughton's," Blaisdell said noncommittally.

Hoffman's reply and smile told him little. "Nice she has friends. He's already gone to hat for her, I hear, to save her all possible annoyance."

No—you couldn't tell what Hoffman was thinking—but Blaisdell decided as he hurried back to the office that Hoffman was not passing an idle day. The Simpsons, it was noticeable, were entirely easy about concealing the Royal Street episode.

Late in the afternoon, Rapp called. "The Simpsons registered at the Leeland all right," he declared. "I'm send-

ing over a detailed coverage. None of it looks important. They shopped with a Miss Stoddard, for whom they had engaged a room—the Miss Stoddard, by the way, who's splashed all over the newspapers this afternoon." Rapp's voice grew reproachful. "Why didn't you tell us what the hook-up was?"

"Because it was none of your business," Blaisdell told him curtly. "What about the Royal Street house?"

"Funny there," Rapp said. "Nobody's around. The woman next door described two people that sound like you and this Miss Stoddard, whom she said went in there this morning. Several people have been in there for a day or so. . . . She's not sure when they came. She thought they'd rented the place. But the place ain't for rent. It belongs to some people named Carnochan—"

"What?" Blaisdell cried. "Carnochan! Are you certain of that?"

"You bet!" Rapp declared positively. "They've owned it from away back. They don't live in town, it seems. We haven't located 'em yet. All the old timers are out of that neighborhood. Lot of Italians have moved in. But it's still known as the old Carnochan house." Rapp paused. "Does that mean anything to you, Mr. Blaisdell?"

"I've heard the name," said Blaisdell. "Never mind trying to locate them. Watch the house. See if you can find out who was there."

"Sure—sure, if you can't see your way clear to telling us any more," Rapp said reproachfully. "Oh, yes, another thing—the cops were around there about noon. Just poking around. Almost caught one of our men in there. He'd found the front gate unlocked an' walked in."

"What did the police do?"

"Looked around. A fingerprint man went in. They chased our man away when he stalled around and tried to see what was going on. And they've got a coupla men planted inside now. Our man counted those who went in an' came out."

"Keep on watching the place," Blaisdell directed.

He hung up with acute misgivings. What was coming now? What had brought the police there at noon? Hoffman must have known about the Royal Street house at the inquest; yet he had given no sign of it.

Blaisdell reached for the telephone and called the Leeland. "Miss Stoddard."

"Miss Stoddard has checked out."

Scowling, Blaisdell lighted a cigarette and thought hard. The Carnochans! The people on Desirée plantation. It was too late to stop her, to warn her. But abruptly Blaisdell decided to follow to the plantation as quickly as possible. His alarm was mounting. . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Pot-Valiant

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

Author of "Red Snow at Darjeeling," the "O'Reilly Sahib" Stories, etc.

BILL HUDSON wasn't really a drunkard at heart. Before Tanner was killed, he didn't take a dozen drinks a month, which is remarkably few for a man stuck away in the deep interior of China, where alcohol is a recognized specific for loneliness. Not that Hudson had any scruples against tipping; it was just that he didn't like the taste of the stuff. When he did take a snort, he gulped it and made a face. That's why I always said it wasn't Bill Hudson's fault that he started hitting the bottle.

Of course, the Reverend David Prentiss would say it was Bill Hudson's fault; that it was the direct result of weakness of character and lack of moral stamina. Maybe. But to my way of thinking, if anybody was to blame it was the Number One Taipan in the Shanghai office of the Greater Cathay Petroleum Co., Ltd. After Tanner's ghastly end, he should have sent Hudson home on leave, or at least pulled him in to Shanghai for a few months—or to Hongkong, or Tientsin, where he could see white faces and hear music and laugh a little with girls of his own race. Anywhere would have been all right, just so Bill didn't have to live with the nightmare of Tanner being cut to pieces.

But, no. To the Shanghai office, Bill Hudson was just a pin stuck in the sales map of China, instead of a tall,



slender, sandy-haired young man with serious blue eyes and a shy, boyish smile. To the Shanghai office, it would be wasteful and inefficient to transfer a man who had learned enough of the local dialect to keep his Comprador from squeezing the outlying agents too hard. Moreover, the *taipan* considered he was rewarding Hudson with a promotion that meant six hundred a year. So Hudson was boosted into Tanner's place as manager of the district, and I was sent up to Chiang-Shan as his assistant.

I'd been in Chiang-Shan for about six weeks without either of us mentioning Tanner's name. I knew the bare outline of the story, and I thought I understood how Hudson felt about it; so I didn't want to be the one to bring up the subject. Then one night—we were both a little tight—Hudson broke out with all the gory details.

THE prime cause of the whole business was a little Chinese general named Ko-tsao. Hudson, who knew something about brush writing, said that his name was really K'o-tsao and meant "Morning Without Dew," but that if you wrote it with another set of characters and changed the pronunciation by just one apostrophe, it meant "The Flea." This is how the people in Chiang-Shan pronounced the name, because Ko-tsao had been hopping all over Central China for years, living off the blood and substance of the people. He was smart, and had studied in America as a Boxer Indemnity Scholar. He had no ambitions to be a political *tuchun*, but maintained his private army merely to accumulate sufficient personal fortune to allow him to retire to a life of leisure and collecting Twelfth Century paintings on silk.

Well, Ko-tsao had descended on the old walled town of Chiang-Shan, and settled there long enough to gobble up the revenues of the Salt Gabelle, appropriate the *li-kis* duties, impose a few extra taxes of his own, and dig up thousands of acres of ginger fields in order to plant poppies for his own private opium monopoly. Then Nationalist troops from Nanking arrived to drive him out.

As bad luck would have it, the Nationalists arrived during the Chinese New Year celebration. New Year being a sort of settling day for Chinese busi-

ness men, all the agents of Greater Cathay Petroleum had been bringing in their outstanding accounts, and there were a good many thousand dollars in cash in the oil company compound when the battle started.

It wasn't much of a battle, really. Ko-tsao had got about all he wanted out of the city anyhow, and he wasn't going to risk having his army wiped out by the Nationalists. He put up just enough of a rear-guard action to give his men a chance to do a little last-minute looting. And about a hundred picked looters made for the oil company compound, which was on a hill, a few hundred yards outside the walls of the town.

Tanner and Hudson didn't have much warning. They'd noticed smoke drifting over the gray-tiled rooftops of the walled city, but that was natural for New Year, because everybody was burning strings of imitation shoe-money made out of silver paper. And it was another hour before they finally made out the popping of rifles above the crepitation of New Year fire-crackers.

There were six armed Gurkha guards at the compound, but Tanner knew they couldn't hold out long against an army of looters who had smelled cash. The only chance of saving the money would be for one of the two Europeans to make a break for the company launch, moored in a creek a mile away, and then try to sneak through to the nearest Consulate, which was a fifty-mile sneak. Tanner tossed a Yuan dollar to see which one of the two would take the chance. Bill Hudson lost.

Hudson got to the foot of the hill before he saw the first stragglers of Ko-tsao's army. For nearly half an hour he ducked in and out of a grove of

richi trees. Between him and the creek was a paddy field pimpled with grave mounds and strewn with matting-covered coffins waiting for some geomancer to announce a lucky day for burial. When he thought the coast was clear, Hudson started across the field. He was half way across when another bunch of soldiers began shooting at him.

He dropped to cover behind a temporary tomb of whitened brick and thanked his lucky stars—at least he thought then they were lucky—for the burial customs of the Chinese. The tomb afforded ample protection because it was as long as a man, and a roof of gray tiles added to its height. Furthermore, there was a rectangular aperture at one end to allow the spirit of the departed to come and go at will until final interment. Hudson opened the satchel he was carrying and began feverishly stuffing the money it contained through the opening into the tomb. He got rid of the last handful thirty seconds before the soldiers in gray padded uniforms closed in on him.

HUDSON put up no resistance. In the first place a fight was futile because there were more armed men surrounding him than there were cartridges in the magazine of his automatic. And in the second place he was anxious to lead the soldiers away from his impromptu cache. So he allowed himself to be disarmed.

"*Shum-mah!*" asked Hudson.

The fat, moon-faced soldier who had taken his automatic grinned. At first Hudson thought he was grinning at his accent, which was closer to Mandarin than to the local dialect. Then he realized that the Chinese had recognized him and was grinning with satisfaction at his own inspiration.

"You are number two foreign-devil from the Hill of Oil," said the soldier. "You will go with us to the *hong*."

Whereupon Hudson was marched back up the hill with twenty rifles aimed at his immediate rear. He was the human shield for the raiders, but he didn't mind, because he had saved the company's bankroll. When he reached the compound he saw that his captors had no need of a human shield, because another and larger band of enterprising looters had swarmed up the hill from the other side and had the situation well in hand.

The first thing he saw was a Gurkha guard—dead. Then he saw the rest of the Gurkhas, herded into a corner. But before he saw anything at all, he heard— But I'll let Hudson tell it:

"Half way up the hill, I could hear Tanner screaming," he said, "but I didn't know what it was. It didn't sound like a man. It was more like a dog howling. The howling got fainter as I got closer, and just as I came into the compound, it stopped with a kind of a whimper.

"Then I saw Tanner, and the sight turned me inside out. They had strung him up by his thumbs from the under side of the big moon gate. His feet were tied together and hanging six inches off the sticky red flagstones. They hadn't believed him when he told them there was no money in the place, and they were torturing him to make him tell where the cash was hidden. They were working on him with long knives, hacking off small pieces of flesh between questions, taking care not to cut too deep, not to kill him too soon!

"I yelled at them to stop, that I'd take them to where the bankroll was. I even told them exactly where I'd hidden it. But they wouldn't believe me.

They thought I was trying to trick them into leaving the compound.

"Tanner was too far gone to speak. At least he didn't say anything with his lips. But his eyes . . . ! Mitch, I can still see the helpless, hopeless agony of his eyes, pleading with me to do something, anything, to put him out of his misery!

"Then a Nationalist plane came swooping over the hill and sprayed machine-gun bullets into the compound. That settled it. Ko-tsao's men saw they were about to be hemmed in, and they ran.

"I cut Tanner down, wondering if I'd have the guts to do what he wanted me to. But while I was carrying him into the house, I discovered I wouldn't have to. A machine-gun bullet had ricocheted off the flag-stones and done a merciful job."

Bill Hudson paused, poured himself half a tumblerful of straight Scotch, downed it at one gulp without tasting it. He made an awful face as he caught his breath. He asked, "Now do you know why I'm always a little plastered, Mitch?"

"I never blamed you," I told him.

He looked at me for a minute, then shook his head. He laughed—the kind of a laugh that always gave me the creeps, because it wasn't funny.

"You don't know a thing about it," he said. "It's not Tanner I'm trying to get away from. It's me. I'm afraid, Mitch. I'm afraid of being afraid. If I didn't keep tanked up with Dutch courage, I'd run away, skip the country. And I can't do that, Mitch. I don't want to be a coward. At least I don't want to act like one—when Ko-tsao comes back."

"Forget it," I told him. "You're not a coward. And anyhow Ko-tsao won't be back." I reached for the bottle, too.

"He'll come back," said Hudson. And Ko-tsao did.

A DISAGREEABLE summer was crawling into its nastiest months. The *lichis* nuts had ripened to bright red clusters glistening like drops of fresh blood when the hot, sticky rains beat down on the grove at the foot of the oil company's hill. The twisting cobbled streets of intramural Chiang-Shan, converted into gloomy corridors by the matting sun-strips that joined the shop fronts, stank of fish and sweat and ordure. The annual outbreak of cholera had begun. Coffin-makers' shops were piled deep with fresh wood shavings, and geomancers were swamped with requests for lucky burial days. Missionaries whose home boards' concern for pagan souls was matched by their generosity, left for the summer colony at Kuling. Bill Hudson and I were afire with prickly heat and irascible from muggy, sleepless nights, so we snarled at each other over warm, sickening drinks. At least, whiskey-*tansan* was sickening to me, without ice. It didn't matter to Hudson because he was still tossing it off neat without *tansan*. He was tossing it off at such a rate, too, that we were down to our last two quarts, which had to last us until our next batch of supplies came up from the company's regular monthly shipment. And the shipment was late.

It was a rather complicated business, getting supplies to Chiang-Shan. They came up seven hundred miles from Shanghai by river steamer. Then they finally reached us overland by coolie back, wheelbarrow—and by coolie-drawn barges, when there was enough water in the creek. They all had to be handled and rehandled like that: thousands of gallons of kerosene and gasoline, paraffine candles, lamps by the

gross . . . and our own quota of cigarettes and tinned food and several cases of whiskey and maybe one of gin. So a few days' delay was not unusual. When the delay lengthened to a week, however, both of us knew something was wrong. Both of us had a pretty good idea what was wrong, too, but neither of us said anything. Then one day at tiffin the Comprador came in with the news he had picked up in the reeking streets of Chiang-Shan: Ko-tsao was moving up from the river valley.

General Ko-tsao, it seemed, was now calling himself Marshal Ko-tsao. He had spent a profitable spring and summer foraging through Szechuan province, and had taxed and looted his treasury into an enviable state of plenitude. He could afford to buy himself a squadron of American fighting planes, a fleet of small boats to consolidate his *li-kin* ports on the great river, and two divisions—complete with generals and artillery—of ex-Nationalist troops. The last purchase, universally considered legitimate and wise tactics in Chinese warfare, was perhaps his most valuable acquisition, for not only did it augment his army with well-trained officers and well-equipped troops, but it simultaneously removed the most important obstacle to his reconquest of Chiang-Shan. And Chiang-Shan, the Comprador assured me, would fall within forty-eight hours.

"The Marshal has requisitioned the Greater Cathay supply train," said the Comprador. But he didn't have to tell us, because we'd both guessed it already.

THAT afternoon we saw the first signs of Ko-tsao's advance. A big tri-motored biplane wheeled ominously over Chiang-Shan, dropping leaflets in-

side of bombs, and thereby indicating that Ko-tsao was planning to buy over a few more regiments of the city's defenders before making his triumphal entry.

Toward sundown the terrified peasants started streaming into the city. The narrow flagged trails were clogged with whole families and their household possessions. Men, women and children pushed and shuffled along with their crescent-horned water-buffalos and their herds of pigs whose grunting mingled with the shrill complaint of ungreased wheel-barrows and the falsetto chant of coolies maneuvering heavy loads on their shoulder-poles. The confusion was the greatest where the central gate pierced the city wall. Here the crowd poured through the gloomy tunnel under the bright-pink drum tower with its multiple tiers of sweeping, curled-up roofs of green tile. Watching them through a pair of binoculars, I wondered at the peculiar trust of the Chinese in their thousand-year-old walls, despite the eloquent drone of the modern bombing plane which proclaimed the uselessness of such ancient fortifications. I decided that in another thousand years the Chinese would still have their strange instinct for shutting themselves up behind walls, for huddling together like sheep when danger threatened.

Then the Reverend David Prentiss arrived at the Greater Cathay compound, and I realized that the instinct was not peculiar to the Chinese.

The Reverend Prentiss was a well-fed, rosy-cheeked individual whose white hair and gold-rimmed spectacles gave him a sanctimonious, almost austere air, despite his rotund contours. He was the dean of the missionary colony at Chiang-Shan, which kept very much to itself on the far side of

the city. As in all Chinese cities, there was no love lost between the missionaries and the representatives of Western commerce, because the Men of Commerce usually comported themselves in direct contradiction to the ideas which the Men of God were trying to instill into their Chinese proselytes. But today—

"I have come to ask you to give shelter to our mission families during the period of the impending crisis," said the Reverend Prentiss. "I believe you will agree with me that at a time like this, it is only fitting that all of us foreigners should band together for mutual protection."

"Of course," I said. The "of course" meant that I knew very well that the "mutual protection" would consist of the advantageous defensive position of our hill-top compound, together with the fact that since Tanner's murder, our Shanghai office had sent us two machine-guns and doubled the number of our Gurkha guard. I didn't mention this to the Reverend Prentiss, however. I just said, "I'm sure Mr. Hudson will give his permission."

The missionary's mouth shirred up, as though he'd just bitten into a green persimmon. He asked, "Is Mr. Hudson . . . er . . . sober enough to make a reasonable decision?"

"He's the boss around here," I said.

I went off to find Bill Hudson. He wasn't sober by a long shot, but he was sympathetic enough. "Tell them we'll take care of 'em," he said, "if they bring their own food—in case of a long siege."

SO BY dinner time the missionaries had moved in on us. There were five families of them, and a few unattached, serious-faced, pimply young men. They moved in with their dowdy,

bespectacled wives, their shrill-voiced children, two new-born babes, their *amahs* and household servants, their cooking utensils and their emergency rations. They also brought their Bibles, their hymn books, and a portable harmonium. After dinner they set up the harmonium on the flags of the courtyard and went right to work, under the heat-blurred stars, praying for our mutual safety.

They sang their heads off, those missionaries. Half of them were singing off key, and the rest sang more like crows than canaries. Still, I couldn't laugh at them. There was a touching fervor in that discordant chorus, a simple gusto that did something to me as I sat inside with Bill Hudson, working on our last bottle of Scotch. Then one of our outlying agents came in panting, and the whole performance suddenly seemed silly and childish.

The goggle-eyed agent said that Kotsao's army had camped for the night at Li-tzu, which was just five miles from the city, and that the Nationalist garrison at Chiang-Shan was preparing for a hasty strategic retreat.

When he left, we did a lot of damage to that last bottle, most of it being done by Hudson. There were just about three drinks left when we went to bed.

The next day was a scorcher. By breakfast time the sun was already so hot that it made the hair curl on my arms. I could almost see the smells drifting up out of the streets of Chaing-Shan in waves. And I *could* see the waves of gray uniforms come snaking through the haze that covered the fields. There were thousands of them—how many I couldn't estimate, because they were raising their own dust clouds that hung low with the morning mist, and the ranks disappeared long before I saw the end.

When Hudson saw the sun glinting on the bayonets of the advancing tide, he skipped breakfast and finished up what was left in the bottle. Then he called out the Gurkhas and posted them like a real strategist. He planted the two machine-guns at the ends of the compound, where they could each command two slopes in case of a flanking movement, put his rifles in all the front windows to meet a direct attack, and then he and I climbed to the roof of the *go-down*, where our reserve stock was stored with binoculars and our own rifles. Then we lay down to wait and roast on the corrugated iron roof, while the harmonium in the courtyard got into action again.

And we didn't have long to wait before we saw a platoon coming up the hill in what looked to be a column of files. Hudson yelled an order to the captain of the Gurkhas, while I watched the platoon through the binoculars. After a minute, I said:

"Whoa Bill. Tell 'em to hold everything! The attacking party packs a white flag."

"Maybe it's a trick," said Hudson.

But it wasn't a trick. It was Marshall Ko-tsao himself, paying us a visit. Pretty soon we could see the red and gold of his sedan chair coming up the hill on the shoulders of four men. We could see the out-runners coming on ahead, waving automatics; the flag of truce fluttering above a thicket of bayonets, and a lot of gold-braided staff officers bringing up in the rear. When we could hear the *ho, hey! ho, hey!* of the chair carriers, we got down off the burning roof.

A FEW minutes later we were sitting around the dining room table with Ko-tsao and his staff. The Reverend Prentiss insisted on sitting in, as

representative of the mission community. We let him sit, as long as he understood that Bill Hudson was boss and had full say. Bill Hudson was boss, too. He had enough liquor in him to make his lower jaw stick out half an inch, and when he talked to Ko-tsao, he sounded plenty tough.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, as soon as Ko-tsao sat down.

The marshal leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar six inches long. He was a jaunty little man, with the gold-braided visor of his *képi* pulled down over one eye at a rakish angle. If it hadn't been for his narrow, almost-lidless eyes, he could have passed for an Occidental—particularly when he began to talk. He'd picked up a strong American accent and some choice American slang during his Boxer Scholarship in the States. He winked at us through the cigar smoke.

"I want the works," he said. "And quick."

"Meaning what?" Hudson asked.

"Gasoline," said Ko-tsao. "Petrol."

"You hijacked our supply train a couple of days ago," Hudson came back at him. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"It's n. g.," said the marshal. "Low-grade distillate and kerosene. I've got an air force now, and those big crates sure eat up the gas. I need high-octane stuff that I can feed the planes, and you've got a couple of thousand drums of it in your *go-down*. I want it."

"It's going to be hard to steal," said Hudson.

Ko-tsao laughed and slapped the table with the flat of his pudgy hand. "But I pay cash," he said. "I'm even going to lay it on the line for that punk distillate."

He turned and uttered a few monosyllables to one of his staff. The officer undid a cloth-tied, squarish package.

A dozen fat bundles of crisp new banknotes fell out on the table. They were so new that I could smell the fresh printer's-ink.

Hudson glanced at them and said, "We do business on a strict silver basis. You'll have to pay in Hai-kwan taels, or Shanghai or Hankow currency—not with cigar coupons."

Ko-tsao scowled. He said, "My currency is legal tender in all territory my troops occupy. Anybody who won't accept it, gets shot."

"I won't accept it," said Hudson. His jaw stuck out another quarter-inch. He stared at the marshal and the marshal stared back. There was a long silence, until Hudson figured he'd stared the marshal down. Then he went on, "Furthermore, there's some stuff in that supply train you hijacked that's not for sale. There's half a dozen cases of Scotch—"

"Sure, I know," said Ko-tsao. "I wanted to compliment you on your taste in whisky. It's swell stuff."

"I'll need it today," said Hudson.

"Sorry," said Ko-tsao, "but it's hard to get decent stuff around this neck of the woods. I'm keeping it. Now, about that gasoline—"

"It's no deal," said Hudson. "I don't like your credit rating."

"You'd better sell it to me," said Ko-tsao. "If you don't sell, I'll take it anyhow."

"Try," said Hudson.

Marshal Ko-tsao stood up. "I'll give you time to think it over," he said. "I'll give you until sundown. If I don't hear from you by sundown, you'll hear from me—and plenty."

"I'll be waiting with all the snappy answers," said Hudson. "And now you'd better clear out of here before I forget to honor that flag of truce, and do the people of China a great big

favor. If all the vermin like you were exterminated, this country—"

"Please, please, Mr. Hudson," the Reverend Prentiss broke in. "Can't you gentlemen come to some agreement? Can't—"

"Don't start an argument, Prentiss!" Hudson cut him off. "The *tuckson* is in an awful hurry. Goodbye, General Flea."

Ko-tsao gave another order, and his staff backed toward the door, hands on their side arms. For a minute I thought Hudson's Dutch courage had gone a little too far, that we were in for it. I grabbed my own automatic under the table. But nothing happened except Ko-tsao's farewell speech in the doorway.

"So long, gents," said the marshal. "I'll be seeing you—at sundown, if not before."

Then he left.

AS SOON as he'd gone, I grabbed Hudson's hand and pumped it. "That's standing up to 'em, Bill," I said.

The Reverend David Prentiss came over and stood in front of Hudson. The corners of his mouth curved down, partly in distaste for the flavor of Hudson's whisky breath, partly in pity and contempt.

"Pot-valiant!" said the missionary. "Drunken bravado! Why didn't you let him have his gasoline? Then he wouldn't have molested us. . . ."

"Wouldn't he, though!" snapped Hudson. "I thought you knew the Oriental mind better than that, Prentiss. I thought you understood face pidgin. If I'd have backed down to Ko-tsao, I'd have lost face. To lose face is a sign of weakness. Weakness is a signal for everybody to jump on the man who's down. The only way to

keep Ko-tsao out of this compound is to speak to him in his own language."

"But what can you hope to do?" protested the Reverend Prentiss. "What can you do against a whole army?"

"I can call their bluff," Hudson replied. "They still think I'm bluffing. When they find out I mean business, they'll go away and let us alone. And by the way, Prentiss, suppose you let me take care of the practical details of this, and I'll let you take care of all the praying."

The Reverend Prentiss bowed his head. "Thank you," he murmured, "for reminding me of my vow of humility. For a moment I was almost bold enough to oppose the will of God. You are right. Our only salvation lies in prayer." He went out.

As soon as he left the room, Bill Hudson began to tremble. He sat down, as though his knees wouldn't hold him any longer. He ran his shaking hand across his pale, perspiring forehead.

"It's wearing off, Mitch," he said. "I need a drink. I need lots of drinks—enough to get me through the day, and probably the night. Can you get it for me, Mitch?"

"I can try," I told him.

"Get anything," he said. "Even that Chinese rot-gut that smells like mouldy straw. I won't taste it anyhow. I've got to face this, Mitch—and I can't unless you get me enough bottled courage to pull me through."

"I'll get it," I said. I dug up the number one houseboy, who was as resourceful as all number one boys in China are supposed to be. I gave him some money and told him to try to find some *sam-shui* shop that was still outside of Ko-tsao's lines.

"Bring back three bottles of *Ng-ka-pay*," I told him. "Six bottles if you

can get them and can carry them."

"Can do," was his reply. It always was.

I WENT inside to the office and tried to work. I went over a stack of accounts, but they didn't seem to make much sense. I found myself watching the flies swarming in the glare of the court yard, listening to that strange muted sound of an army moving, the collective tread of ten thousand feet, the vague, inexorable rumble, like the distant sound of the sea. After a while I quit pretending to work and went to one of the front windows where I could watch the troop concentration. Too fast, I thought, for their own good. A squadron of Nationalist bombers could do terrific damage. But there was no sign of Nationalist opposition of any kind—only Ko-tsao's gray-uniformed hordes, coming on and on. They hadn't made any attempt on our hill-top as yet, but they were moving up between me and the city walls, so that we were completely cut off. I wondered if the number one boy had been able to get through before the encircling movement was complete. I was still wondering when the Reverend David Prentiss came in.

"I must ask you," said the missionary, "to maintain better discipline among your servants."

"Meaning what?" I wanted to know.

"I just caught your number one boy attempting to smuggle liquor into the compound," said the Reverend Prentiss.

"You did—what?"

"I destroyed it, of course," said the Reverend Prentiss. "Six bottles of some vile Chinese intoxicant. I smashed them all."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I was stunned by the realization of what

the Reverend Prentiss had done, without knowing it, to Bill Hudson—and to himself.

"I hope you understand, Mr. Mitchell," the Reverend Prentiss went on, "that this is no time for drink-fuddled minds and shaky nerves. We must meet this situation with clear, sane eyes, Mr. Mitchell. We cannot trust our lives to drunkards."

"Sure," I said. "Of course."

I went off to find Hudson, who had shut himself up in his room. He greeted me eagerly with, "Did you bring it?"

I shook my head. "The boy couldn't get through," I lied. "We're completely cut off."

Hudson groaned. He flopped on his bed, lay looking up at the ceiling for a long time. At last he said: "Why am I such a coward, Mitch?" His voice was like a little boy's.

"You're no more coward than I am," I told him. "Not as much. I wouldn't have had the guts to go through the Tanner business without going crazy."

"I can't go through it again," he said.

"You'll be all right when you get a little sleep. I told him. "You catch a few winks of *tang-hsia*, I'll wake you up if anything pops."

"I can't sleep, Mitch," he said hopelessly. "I couldn't sleep last night, even with all that booze I killed. I'm finished."

"Maybe you better go down and give the Gurkhas their orders, then," I said.

"You go, Mitch."

"They won't listen to me. You know the Gurkhas. They'll take orders from the number one boss."

"Tell 'em I'm sick," said Hudson listlessly.

WELL, I never went through such a long afternoon. It got hotter and hotter as the sun went lower. I suppose it was because the flagstones and the masonry walls of the compound heated up and turned the courtyards into fireless cookers. The corrugated-iron roof of the *go-downs* shimmered and danced in its own heat waves. And I—well, I stewed in my own juice.

The Gurkhas were squatting in the shade in front of their own quarters, smoking and gambling for coppers. When I told the captain he had better take his post, he merely looked at me.

"Where is the Master?" he asked.

I told him that Hudson was ill; a touch of the sun. He gave me a funny grin, then lit a cigarette.

"We will wait," he said, "until the Master is well enough to give the orders."

That was the answer I expected. They're spunky soldiers, these Gurkhas, and great fighters. But they were, after all, only mercenaries. They didn't mind the risk of getting their vitals riddled with lead if the white man who paid them took the same chance. But if there was any shirking going on, the Gurkhas would just as soon smoke and gamble for coppers. There was only one thing left for me to do.

The sun sank into a dirty smother of haze along the western hills. The refraction effect through the murk made it seem to flatten and twist itself into a grotesque elongated shape, like a great Oriental eye—a red, glaring eye. . . . In one of the courtyards the missionaries were gathered about the harmonium, swelling their rapturous voices in a heart-felt if not quite musical chorus . . .

When I went into Bill Hudson's room, he jumped off the bed as though

he were going to pounce on me. "Can't you stop that caterwauling?" he yelled. "Those psalm-singers are driving me mad."

"Be yourself, Bill," I told him. "We all need something to put heart into us and stiffen our spines. They've got their hymns. You've got your fire-water."

"I haven't got it, though."

"I have," I said, taking a bottle from my hip-pocket. "Here's a quart I've had stuck away for emergencies. I didn't bring it out before, because I was saving it for when you needed it most. I guess this is the time."

Hudson came over with slow, suspicious steps, stared through the thick dusk at the bottle. Then he grabbed it, poured out half a tumblerful of dark, amber fluid, downed it in two breathless gulps. Even in the gloom I could see the face he made as he gasped. I tried to take back the bottle.

"One more, Mitch," he pleaded.

"Go easy," I said. "It's all there is."

I poured him another inch and put the cork back in the bottle. I watched him rub his breast bone with great tenderness, as though savoring the strength that came to him from the burning sensation in his gullet. His shoulders squared back.

"All right," he said. "Let's go to work, Mitch."

We were hurrying across the courtyard when the Reverend Prentiss grabbed Hudson. "The sun is setting, Mr. Hudson," the missionary said. "You know of course that I intend to do my part. What shall I do?"

"Pray!" yelled Bill Hudson without stopping. "Pray, Mr. Prentiss!"

WE'D hardly got the Gurkhas stationed at the front windows before Ko-tsao started coming for his

gasoline. There was the familiar staccato stutter of machine guns and the dust spurted in a snaky line along the slope about a hundred yards in front of us. Hudson had me straddle the tripod of one of our own machine guns, and then ordered the Gurkhas to hold their fire until he gave the word.

For ten minutes we all suffered from itching trigger fingers. The Chinese machine gunner at the base of the hill kept up his tattoo in intermittent bursts. He got the range after the first few minutes, and we could hear the lead spatter against the thick masonry walls of the compound. A few bullets splintered through our wooden shutters, ripped off the tiles of our roof, went screaming off into the fading twilight. After a while the machine-gun fire stopped, and we could barely see the first line of skirmishers start up the hill. The flashes of their rifles gave us the range if we wanted to open fire, but Hudson wasn't ready yet. The crackle of rifles grew louder and the room I was in was full of dust and sound of breaking things as an occasional bullet found its way in. The rifles were flickering about a hundred yards away when Hudson said, "Give it to 'em!"

The tripod seat jumped and bucked under me as my machine gun began to yammer. I'd loosened the swivel and swept the leaping muzzle back and forth through the full arc of the sector Bill Hudson assigned me. The other machine gun was chattering and spitting death from the opposite side of the compound, and in between the rifles of the Gurkhas were jerking and barking across the window sills as fast as the little brown men could work the breechbolts. My ears rang with the deafening clamor and my nostrils smarted with the acrid smell of burned

powder. I don't know how long the din kept up before Hudson yelled: "Hold it."

The sudden silence hit my eardrums with the same impact as a loud noise. It was several seconds before I could distinguish any sounds outside in the hot night—the sound of rapid footsteps, panic-stricken feet running back down the hill; the long drawn-out wail of some poor devil who had stopped a slug out there in the darkness. The rout, apparently, was complete.

"Maybe that'll teach General Flea I wasn't bluffing," said Hudson. "Hand me that bottle, Mitch."

But General Flea was not easily convinced. Seven more waves of riflemen came surging up the hill during the next few hours. And each time they got the same reception. At regular intervals we made flares of cotton waste soaked in gasoline, weighted them, and tossed them, flaming, down the slope. The flares prevented surprise, but they didn't prevent the repeated attacks of the soldiers of the persistent Ko-tsao. And Hudson's tactics were always the same. Hold fire until the raiders were within deadly range, then blast them into panic. And if you've never seen Chinese soldiers in panic, you've never seen a panic.

It was nasty business, all in all, because a lot of Ko-tsao's dollar-a-month soldiers got taken down with an overdose of lead. But Bill Hudson carried on with a sort of grim relish. Between attacks he'd come over for a pull on my bottle, and his lower jaw never lost that pugnacious line of inspired, hard-boiled courage that was such a contrast with his usual shy, boyish smile. I could tell he was thinking hard about Tanner, so as not to feel too sorry for the Chinese that kept charging up the hill, time after time.

WE had a few casualties ourselves. All of us were more or less cut and scratched by splinters and flying bits of masonry, and four of our Gurkhas had stopped bullets, three of them enough to need first-aid from one of the lady missionaries who knew how to wrap bandages. Three of the young men missionaries volunteered to take the rifles of the wounded Gurkhas. The rest of them piously manned the harmonium, and the chords of the wheezy little organ pealing above their thin, reedy voices, made a weird, mystical background for the rattle of gunfire and the cries of men in pain.

It was nearly midnight before Ko-tsao realized the futility of direct attack—at least without artillery or grenades or air bombs, which would risk destroying our *godown* full of gasoline and thus defeat his own purpose. He finally managed to sneak a machine-gun crew up the north slope of the hill, just out of range of our flares. We didn't know the gun was there until it started raking our right flank.

Bill Hudson didn't hesitate. He knew he had to act quickly, because our ammunition was running low, and our position would soon become untenable if we had to split up our meagre defending forces. He took my bottle, up-ended it, drained the last drop, wiped his mouth. Then he picked three Gurkhas, told them to leave their rifles and carry only their *kukris*—those heavy, curved knives they love to use for close fighting. Then he said, "Mitch, don't pay any attention to the new riveter who's just moved in on us from the north. Keep hammering straight at the front, when they start up the hill again."

Then he and the three Gurkhas crossed the compound to the gate back

of the *go-down*. I waited nervously.

And a few minutes later the eighth attack began. By the smoky orange light of our improvised flares, I could see that there were twice as many men charging up the hill this time. Under cover of the advance skirmish line, a second wave was bearing off to our right, obviously to complete the flank attack started by that lone machine gun. I ignored it, according to Hudson's orders, and opened fire dead ahead.

By this time my ears were deaf to the din. I could feel, rather than hear, the hammering of my machine gun as I rode the kicking, jiggling tripod. The barrel was so hot that I burned the skin off my knuckles reloading, and the water was boiling and steaming in the cooling jacket.

Suddenly the ranks in front of us wavered, then broke. The flanking detachment came pouring back along the north slope in full flight, stumbling, flinging away their rifles, yelling with surprise and pain. Their own machine gun had turned against them, was spraying them with a hail of steel-jacketed death. And before I'd fully realized what had happened, the eighth attack was over.

A little later two of the Gurkhas came back to the compound, packing the captured machine gun. The third Gurkha followed, packing Bill Hudson, who must have weighed fifty pounds more than he did.

Bill's face was white as his teeth, which were clenched in agony. One leg of his trousers was crimson. The missionaries put him to bed, while I stayed on the job at the front windows. The Gurkhas would take orders from me now . . .

There were no more orders to give, however. We sat by our guns all night,

but Ko-tsao was at last convinced that Bill Hudson wasn't bluffing.

A LITTLE after dawn seven Nationalist planes flew over in a V formation. I expected to see a dog fight, but none of Ko-tsao's fliers appeared. He must have really needed that gasoline he didn't get, because he was already moving on to get it elsewhere. His rear guard was two miles away by ten o'clock, when the first of the Nationalist column, reinforced by the garrisons at Pao-tung and Peiming-fu, reentered the city.

When it finally looked safe to lay down our fowling pieces, I went in to see Hudson. He was awake, lying there all bandaged and smelling of antiseptic. Either his leg wasn't hurting him as much, or he was getting used to the pain, because he looked relaxed.

"Nice work last night, Bill," I told him. "And you can't kid yourself any more that you're a coward."

He gave me a wan smile.

"Pot-valiant!" he said. "Dutch courage. Or was it Scotch?"

"Scotch, my eye!" I said. "It was your own private brand of courage—the guts you were born with."

"That bottle—" he started to say.

"That bottle," I cut him off, "was full of boiled water, colored with soy sauce, and flavored with ginger and a dash of Worcestershire to make it burn. It was a fraud—but I won't apologize."

Hudson looked at me for a minute, perfectly blank. Then he began to laugh. It was the kind of laugh I'd been wanting to hear from him for months—hearty, full-spirited, genuine, and infectious. He laughed so long and so loud that the Reverend David Prentiss came in. The missionaries were going home—all but Mrs.

Prentiss who would stay and take care of Bill—and they wanted to shake hands with Mr. Hudson.

As they filed past Bill's bed, the Reverend Prentiss said to me: "We have given thanks to the Lord for this new manifestation of Divine goodness, of the virtue of prayer. We have all been saved by our faith."

The Reverend Prentiss was right. I won't say for sure that it was his kind of faith that saved us, because that's something I don't know anything about. Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. It's outside my province and beyond my ken. But I will say that Bill

Hudson was saved by faith—faith in himself, that he'd lost, and found again.

A couple of months later the *taipan* from our Shanghai office came through on a tour of inspection. At dinner, he proposed a toast to Bill Hudson. In acknowledgement, Bill drank one swallow to be polite, then put down his glass.

"What's the matter, Hudson?" the *taipan* asked. "Gone teetotaler on us, have you?"

Bill made a face and pushed his glass away. "I never did like the taste of the stuff," he said.

Down to the Sea in Ovens

PINKIES, like the Great Auk, have for so long been non-existent that when Henry Ford looked around for one to put in his museum he couldn't find one. A pinky is neither a bird nor a flower, but a boat. And at Millbridge on the Maine coast, one is now being built for Howard I. Chappelle, a marine architect and historian of early shipbuilding.

Pinkies were noted for their comfort and seaworthiness, and Mr. Chappelle notes that as long as they were used on the Grand Banks' fisheries, loss of life was comparatively small. They were two-masted schooners carrying mainsail, foresail, one fore-staysail on a high bowsprit, and sometimes one topsail. They were double-enders, pointed fore and aft, and their chief characteristic was the pair of wide gunwales that formed bulwarks the entire length of the ship and swept up in a curve to meet in a stern overhang.

A Pinky's cabin, called a "cuddy" was located under a raised section of the deck forward. And in some cuddies there were open fireplaces, a few with brick chimneys. Supposedly, finnan haddie was discovered when a haddock was hung in a pinky cuddy to dry. It became smoked. Down East fishermen still call sailing boats with cabins "smoke boats."

—Boris Vronsky

MEN OF DARING



**Capt.
Lehmann**

NEITHER THE FIRE OF
WAR NOR PEACETIME DISASTERS
ROBBED HIM OF HIS FAITH IN AIRSHIPS.



SKIPPER

GERMANY LOST A
TREMENDOUS HERO WHEN THIS DARING
BLOUDBROOD, WHO REFUSED TO JUMP
UNTIL HIS CLOTHES WERE BURNED
FROM HIS BODY, DIED IN A JERSEY HOSPITAL.

AT THE START OF THE WORLD WAR
LIEUT. ERNST LEHMANN OF THE IMPERIAL NAVY
JOINED OLD COUNT ZEPPELIN'S PUNY AIRSHIP
FORCE. "ZEPS" WEREN'T TAKEN SERIOUSLY AT
FIRST. THREE HAD JUST BEEN LOST. THERE
WEREN'T EVEN ANY BOMBS FOR AIRSHIPS.
LEHMANN DESIGNED HIS OWN BOMBS, AND
THE CABLE CAR, WHICH WAS LOWERED BELOW THE
CLOUDS TO SPOT HITS. THEN HE PERSUADED THE
HIGH COMMAND TO GIVE THEM A REAL CHANCE
TO ATTACK CITIES AND AMMUNITION
CENTERS. IT WAS HE WHO CON-
CEIVED THE IDEA OF STRAFING
LONDON!



IN 1919 HE WAS IN CHARGE OF ALL
CONSTRUCTION WORK ON ALL WAR ZEPS.
SECOND ONLY TO ZEPPELIN AS A DESIGNER.
TEN YEARS AFTER THE WAR, HE WAS
IN CHARGE OF THE GRAT. MADE 100
TRIPS BETWEEN GERMANY AND SOUTH
AMERICA. IN '35 TOOK OVER THE
HINDENBURG. DR. ECKENER,
RECENTLY SAID: "HE WAS THE
FINEST OF ALL AIRCRAFT PILOTS.
GERMANY WILL NEVER REPLACE HIM."

JUST BEFORE HE DIED THE
BRIGHT EYED, COURTEOUS LITTLE
CAPTAIN SUMMONED HIS NURSES
AND THANKED THEM FOR TRYING
TO SAVE HIS LIFE.



HIS FIRST COM-
MAND WAS THE SASHEN
CARRYING 1800 LBS. OF
BOMBS. FOR LONDON! HIS OBJECTIVE
WAS TO DESTROY THE BANK OF
ENGLAND. IN THE BELIEF THAT IF IT
WERE DESTROYED IT WOULD RUIN THE
MORALE OF ENGLAND. HIS MAPS WERE
DOTTED WITH PLACES THE KAISER DIDN'T
WANT HIT EVEN BY ACCIDENT. WEST-
MINSTER ABBEY, ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL
AND BUCKINGHAM PALACE. LEHMANN,
WEARER OF THE IRON CROSS, MADE
1015 FLIGHTS THROUGH WAR-TORN
SKIES AND WAS SOON A COMMANDER.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Hell and High Water

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "China Station," etc.

A Complete Novelet

I

PERRY HILTON, staff photographer for the conservative *Chicago Chronicle*, was a long way from home. Not so far when you measured the distance from Chicago, because it is only a few hundred miles down the state from Chicago to Burbank. He was far from home because he couldn't get out of Burbank. He was marooned there.

Burbank, a thriving little river city, sits out on a point where the Wabash and the Ohio Rivers converge. Most

of the year, it is a beautiful location. Across the Ohio, you can see Kentucky. Across the Wabash is the Indiana shore. The scenery is wonderful in the fall; the weather is marvelous in the summer and bracing in the winter. Burbank's fame as a lovely vacation spot had gone out long before and many had built homes in Cheoke Valley and upon the knolls above the metropolis.

But the night Perry Hilton sat in a ramshackle chair with a broken leg on its right side and its wicker seat half fallen through, was not a nice night for Burbank. The season was neither summer, autumn nor winter. This was late

spring, and terror rode the chilling winds which swept down the great Mississippi and across the southern tip of Illinois.

The thaw had begun a week previous and the rivers of the midwest, swollen, rampant and fierce, had backwatered and flooded their banks when they reached the hundreds of twisting curves in their respective courses. The whole belt saw water—brown angry water.

Perry Hilton sighed and stamped his right foot several times. He realized suddenly that he was stiff and that it had gotten much colder and that his big toe ached.

He was sitting in the city room of the *Burbank Evening Standard*. A number of other men, all newshawks, were there in the same room. The newshawks for the most part belonged to the staffs of the *Evening Standard* and the *Morning Call*, both Burbank papers. They were working together, striving with desperation to publish some sort of newspaper for the benefit of readers who would probably never see a copy.

The merger was an emergency measure. At the moment the *Morning Call's* offices were inundated, filled with filthy river and black slime and everything else which the Wabash had picked up in its turbulent path. The *Call* had been situated downtown in the business district. Unfortunately, the business district lay between the Wabash and the Ohio. And when the water rose, the business district had been the first to know submersion.

Perry Hilton gritted his teeth as a chill ate through him. He stamped his right foot several times and moved his arms to keep warm. It was dark and gloomy in that city room. The electric power had faded twenty-four hours

previous. The place looked as though some one had stuck pinpoints of light all over it, hanging them right on the blackness itself. But these were the tallow candles, amber, more or less cheerful, and smelling to high heaven. The room boasted the luxury of a kerosene lamp too, but that was over on the city editor's desk where two men—one from the morning paper and one from the evening—were handling the assignments and worrying about getting the copy uptown to the printer's.

Perry didn't give a hoot about the Burbank papers. He was there because Mr. Blaine, managing editor of the *Chicago Chronicle*, had told him to make the place his headquarters so that he could be reached. He wasn't the only photographer from a Chicago paper to be sitting there with the Wabash and Ohio Rivers six feet deep in the street outside.

There were a couple of association men whom he knew slightly. There was also Mr. Spudsy Gill of the *Clarion*, a sheet which did everything in the crucifixion but drive the nails. It was a scandal rag, full of daring, dirty, and bad pictures. It had the largest circulation in the midwest.

Spudsy was a funny guy, Perry reflected. The man, built short and squat with long arms so that he resembled an ape, had the instincts of a gangster. He would have done anything to take a picture. He *had* done anything in the past. There was the time he took a picture of Joe Hooker, world's champ, when Hooker was out with a dizzy chorine at the Black Hawk one night. Hooker hadn't liked the idea much and he'd gone after Spudsy. He broke Spudsy's camera and was trying to break Spudsy's nose. That was all right. But when he tried to break the exposed plate, Spudsy blew up and let

Hooker have one with a sap. It all but fractured the champ's skull and Spudsy nearly spent time in a hoosegow for the job. But he saved his picture. He was *that* way.

PERRY glanced over at Spudsy Gill who was asleep in a chair, his head down under his overcoat like a bird's head under a wing. The trouble with Spudsy, Perry Hilton thought, was that he had no ethics in photography at all. And the same went for Max Ferron, a gangling thin man with specs, who worked for the *Star-Call*. Max was picking his teeth between drags on a cigarette. And also Lou Drake, of the *Dispatch*, a hairless man who chewed constantly on a dead cigar.

Perry frowned. They were all rough-necks at best. No wonder news photographers had such a bad reputation. You couldn't blame a man like J. P. Morgan for carrying a bodyguard around with him to take care of fotogs like Spudsy Gill. News fotogs needed ethics. That was the hitch—no decency.

Over at the city desk, the telephone rang. It sounded shrill and noisy in the silence of the room, and everyone stirred expectantly at its voice. Spudsy Gill woke up and yawned broadly. He asked: "Who's it for, chief?"

Perry straightened in his chair and stretched the muscles of his back. They were cramped and cold. He hadn't changed his clothes in two days now and he felt disreputable. He knew he shouldn't mind. There was no way of getting back to the hotel which was now underwater up to the second floor downtown. And after all, they said at the Circle of Confusion Club in Chicago, that Spudsy Gill actually slept in his clothes all the time with his camera and his flash bulbs right at hand so that he could rip out on a beat at a mo-

ment's notice. Wearing the same clothes for two days was small beer compared to *that*.

Still, Perry thought, it was inelegant. He'd always prided himself upon his dressing immaculately. Now his shoes were soaking wet and covered with slime, and his trouser legs would never be clean again. His tie was ruined and his coat spotted and his gloves were a mess. It really was distasteful.

Of course, there was a flood in the vicinity and if a man had gone out in plain shorts he'd probably been given a medal for good common sense. But to Perry Hilton that made no difference.

The man at the city desk said: "Chicago calling Perry Hilton!"

Perry got up, grunting a little because he was stiff, and walked over to the city desk with its luxurious kerosene lamp. Spudsy Gill, grinning owlishly and showing his gold tooth which caught the light of the candles eerily, sauntered after him.

Perry picked up the phone and stared at Spudsy who was trying to get his ear as close as possible to the receiver. "The man said it was for me, Spudsy."

Spudsy looked pained. "Aw, now, Duke," he said, "ain't it ethical for me to drop an ear in?" And he grinned.

Perry shrugged and said hello. It was Mr. Blaine. "Hello, Perry," Blaine said. His voice was miles distant and the wire crackled as though it would burn up.

"I can't hear you," Perry said.

"I said hello," Mr. Blaine replied in a louder voice. "It's the connection, very bad! Wonder I can reach you at all. . . . Listen, Perry!"

"Okay now," Perry said.

"You'll have to figure a new way of shooting any more pictures up," Mr. Blaine said. "Phil just got in with the

last batch and says he can't get through again. He can't get back. We've had word from the C. C. C. & St. Louis that the right of way has washed out ten miles north of Burbank. No more trains going in there."

"No more trains?" Perry snapped. "And the roads are gone! How are we fixed, Mr. Blaine?"

"You're absolutely cut off," Mr. Blaine said. "The last AP flash said that the Wabash had gone across the valley north of Burbank and has met the Ohio on the other side. Burbank is out on a limb. The levees are holding and that's the only thing that's saving the city and Cheoke Valley. Red Cross trying to get supplies in but may have to drop 'em by plane when the weather lets up."

"But how about film?" Perry asked, worried. "I've only got about two dozen negatives left. Film packs. That's no film for this setup. I need more and I can't get it!"

"We'll get supplies to you as soon as we can. Why don't you try the stores there? Any open? . . . No? Well, do your best, Perry. Make your negatives count. It's a jam, we can't do anything on either side. We're lucky the wires are still up. They'll probably go before dawn. Perry! Wait a second! Wait a second! Just got a flash!"

Perry held the phone and took a couple of breaths. Spudsy Gill snickered and shook his head. "You're down to a pair of film packs, Duke," he said. "Max Ferron is down to five negatives. And Lou Drake and me, we're out altogether. And you should kick."

"Burbank's cut off from the rest of Illinois," Perry told him. "This town is in a tough spot."

"Hello, hello, Perry," Mr. Blaine cut in. "Get this now: Another AP flash. Army engineers fear that the Wabash's

crest may endanger the whole city down there. If worst comes to worst, they'll dynamite the levees in the east and divert the Wabash into Cheoke Valley. They're putting it on the air now to warn the citizens in the valley to go up for higher grounds. And here's an assignment! I've just been tipped off that Old Man Beard—you know—Jonathan Beard, the steel man—"

"You mean the millionaire?" Perry asked.

"One and the same. He's at his country place in the Cheoke Valley. He went there two weeks ago for seclusion with his six-year-old grand-daughter after the kid was threatened with kidnapping. He's still there! Listen, Perry, you've got a chance for a beautiful job. Get down into the valley and see Jonathan Beard and the kid and get me some pictures. Get me some—"

MR. BLAINE suddenly stopped speaking. Perry hammered the telephone hook and said hello three times. No answer. Then a terrific crackling, car-splitting in its din, took over the wires, followed by a metallic explosion.

Spudsy Gill shook his dirty face and stopped grinning. He said: "That wire is shot, Perry. I'll bet you five fish we don't get any more outside calls."

"But he was just talking—" Perry began, but the operator cut him off with: "I'm sorry. Your party has been disconnected. The trunk lines are down. You can still make local calls."

"Never mind," said Perry. "Call it a night." And he hung up.

"I heard the crack from here," said Spudsy. "Ain't this a nice pickle. Marooned in a marooned burg, no outside phone, no railroad, the weather too dirty for flying and swell for ducks,

only there ain't no ducks. What are you going to do, Perry?" Spudsy grinned broadly then. "I mean, what is the ethical thing to do, Duke?"

"I've got to get out of here," Perry said. "What time is it anyhow?"

"Four G. M.," said Spudsy Gill. He yawned and stretched his arms. He reminded Perry of a picture of a gorilla he had once seen, its arms strung up on poles, making the dead figure look as though it were alive and stretching. Only, the gorilla had had a better looking face than Spudsy's mashed one.

Perry went back to his chair but he didn't sit down. He opened his black oblong equipment case and had a look.

His precious Speed Graphic was in there with its Kalart Speedgun attached and synchronized to the shutter. A number two photoflash bulb was sitting tightly in the Speedgun socket, all ready to burst into its three thousand lumens of light. There were two cartons of photoflash bulbs beside, each carton carrying six bulbs. That meant twelve possible pictures in blackness. There were the two film packs, enough negative for twenty-four pictures. There was a tripod which he hadn't been able to use at all. And there was—he didn't know why on earth it was there—some Velox printing paper, sensitized paper for contact printing, making the actual picture from a negative in a darkroom after the negative had been developed and dried.

He checked through it all, then slung the case on his shoulder and put on his gloves. Spudsy Gill watched him sharply. Max Ferron stared at him and said: "What's up?"

"Don't ask him," Lou Drake said. "That guy is ethical. He wouldn't tip off a couple of his fotog pals if he lost an arm. Besides it's a lousy night and not worth the trouble. And negatives

are low and if I take any more shots of this high water, it'll be by day."

"I'll see you all later," Perry said.

Spudsy Gill, rubbing his chin, followed Perry to the window past the city desk. "Look, my ethical chum," he clowned, "the water outside that window is about ten feet deep. You can't get out of this shebang without a boat."

"I know," Perry said. "I'm hoping somebody goes by."

"I can do better than that."

"What do you mean, Spudsy?"

"Look, Duke," Spudsy said seriously. "You're a funny guy. You think a guy can be a news photographer and still be polite. I've been in the racket for twelve years, see? And I know you gotta be a roughneck to deliver the goods. Never trust another guy. Cut his throat before he cuts yours. That's the way to get pictures."

Perry said, "Well?"

"Well . . ." Spudsy stopped to light a cigarette. "Here's one spot your ethics don't work. I can get a boat. You need a boat. You got to get to Cheoke Valley. I could take you there. You don't know the way—"

"How did you—?"

"I heard Blaine on the phone," Spudsy said. "I got a big ear, Duke, when it comes to exclusiveness. So how about it?"

"About what?"

"I'll get the boat and ferry you to Cheoke Valley. And you split that film pack with me. I ain't got a negative left in the camera. No negatives for Spudsy, no boat for the Duke."

Perry hesitated. The tip from Blaine was exclusive. But even an exclusive wasn't worth anything if you didn't get to the subject to shoot it. What were the ethics here? Spudsy's proposition was fair enough, not that he trusted Spudsy farther than he could

throw a piano. "I'll give you half a dozen negatives," Perry said. "And it's a deal."

"Sure," said Spudsy. "A good man like me don't need more than six gelatins. Only a guy with ethics—an amacheer so to speak—needs a reserve." He stopped grinning. "Let's lam. We've got a trip."

II

THE night was filled with a deafening roar and the weight of a river gone mad. The flying scud, thick and sooty and wet, whipped down on them as Perry Hilton and Spudsy Gill clambered from the *Evening Standard* building to the top of a theatre marquee, deserted and dark. The wind was roaring almost as much as the running waters which flooded the street and carried its cargo of twisted wreckage and—sometimes—human bodies to and fro in a swirling aimlessness. . . .

It was a dark dead city. Burbank. No electric lights to stud the Stygian gloom. No moon, no stars, no sign of life. Only the wind-whipped waters and the stinging bullets of rain which splattered down with fecundity, drenching the drowning metropolis.

From the top of the marquee—the foul waters barely washing the last letters of its dead electric sign: *Double Feature Today*—Perry peered through the mists which clung to his eyes. He tried to look down town, to see the city which had so busily fought to strengthen its levees and keep its thriving centers free from high water. That had been days before.

Now the place was a raucous tomb, the megaphone of many voices, the lapping waters and crying wind and thudding wreckage.

He could see nothing downtown,

southward. All of it was gone, swallowed alive by the rapacious night.

Spudsy hit his shoulder and yelled: "They got twenty-two feet of water down there! And still rising!"

Perry shuddered. "Blaine said the army might dynamite the levees and let the Wabash go through Cheoke!" he yelled back. "That would ease the pressure at the fork and let the waters recede some. It might keep the crest from breaking over the levees!"

"They'll have to do it!" Spudsy cried. "They'll have to do it or the crest of the Wabash will wash right in and you won't ever see this burg again."

"Where's the boat?"

"Right here on the marquee! I'll show you!"

Spudsy Gill, his dirty trench coat thrust between his legs by the battering wind, stumbled across the marquee to the opposite side. Perry followed, fighting to keep his balance as the gale caught his equipment case behind his shoulder and tried to spin it around. When he reached Spudsy, Spudsy was kneeling down. Perry knelt too.

It was the corner of the marquee and there was some slight respite from the needle-like rain. "Right here," said Spudsy hoarsely. "Right under this tarpaulin."

"Your own!" Perry gasped.

"Paid a guy a hundred bucks for it day before yesterday," Spudsy said. "Five sawbucks for a scow like this! I hope it floats. I locked it to the marquee cables here. *Duck!*" A tin pail came flying by them and crashed into the theatre front with a terrific smash. It fell into the eddying water below, wrong side up, and immediately sank from sight.

Spudsy Gill sighed. "I danno. I think we're nuts. No rag is worth shooting pictures for on a night like

this. We're crazy. We oughta go back to the office and keep our tootsies warm."

"I can't," Perry said soberly. "Mr. Blaine asked me to get these pictures if humanly possible."

Spudsy looked disgusted. "You and your ethics," he snapped. "It's all right for your Mr. Blaine to ask for pictures. He don't have to risk his neck for a couple of shots of a millionaire and his granddaughter which won't be remembered more than a day if you get them at all. Old Johnathan Beard'll pose for you, maybe, and you'll take a shot. Then Blaine will caption it: *Millionaire Evacuating Home in Flood Area*. And that'll be that. . . . Remember, Perry, the readers ain't gonna see this skiff and this wind and rain, and this hell and high water, and you getting your gams wet and catching cold and damn near drowning."

Perry smiled. "I thought you were the hard-boiled guy, Spudsy, who got the foto at any price."

"I am," Spudsy snarled. "But I also got brains enough to know when to stop trying! If I weren't afraid that you might catch something big and show me up—" He cursed underbreath. "All right, let's launch the *Queen Mary* here and get under way."

"Right."

They pulled the tarpaulin off the boat. It was a small job and Perry felt a little colder when he saw it, and his stomach got very numb. It couldn't have taken more than two people, being no more than eight feet long. It was flat-bottomed, low-sided and had a pair of oars which were badly splintered on the blades. It needed a paint job badly and Perry wondered at the moment how long it would float.

Spudsy Gill unlocked the chain which fastened the craft to the marquee

cable and fixed an open hitch. "You row, Duke," he said. "You got the old mausele. Me, I ain't been living right." He coughed in a bad imitation. "Besides you were the guy who crewed at collich, no?"

"Okay," Perry said grimly. "Let's get the scow in the water and make a try."

EACH took an end. Spudsy got the bow, which was lighter, and they slid the skiff up over the marquee edge. "Careful when you drop her," Perry snapped. "We don't want any water in her. She's bad enough as is."

"Right."

"All together—drop!"

They let go. The skiff fell about three feet and when it struck the water it made a hollow plop and pushed two combs of water out on either side of the beam.

"Come on," Spudsy yelled, leaping from the marquee. He landed in the stern and for a second, Perry wondered whether or not the bottom might fall out of the dory from the shock. There was a swish of water again from under the hull and Spudsy quickly fell down to the seat, dragging his covered camera with him. "Throw me my bulbs."

Perry tossed down Spudsy's half-a-dozen flash bulbs, then lowered his own gleaming wet equipment case into the bottom and stepped down from the marquee to the rower's thwart. Spudsy cast loose the chain. Perry picked up the right oar, braced it against the marquee, and shoved them out into the inundated street. Then he got both oars in the locks and steadied the skiff in the current, mindful of the sodden thuds against the sides of the boat where jetsam struck now and then.

"Which way?" he yelled at Spudsy

on the rear thwart. Out in the street, the current was swift and the wind got in its work and sound and carried his voice back into his throat as he faced its stiffness and slanting rain. "Which way, Spudsy?"

Spudsy leaned forward, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Head the way she stands now! North! I can see torches way up there—must be on dry ground—or even wet ground in this rain! Up on the hill where the water hasn't reached yet! Torches! Can you make it?"

Perry didn't know the answer to that one. He began to row, aware that his trousers were definitely ruined. He glanced at the soaked and grimy legs in regret and wondered whether or not Mr. Kennebunk, in the bookkeeping department, would allow him a new suit on the expense account. It seemed the ethical thing to do for him; after all, he had spoiled this one on behalf of the *Chronicle*.

He rowed in long, strong, sweeping pulls, feathering his oars on the thrust and clicking the blades over vertically when he dipped them. The little boat jerked ahead rhythmically with his strokes, Spudsy's head rocking on his shoulders with each quick spurt. Spudsy kept saying: "Little to the right . . . hold it . . . straight ahead, my fine tar, anchors aweigh . . . hold it . . . to the left . . . big oil barrel . . . watch it . . . heave ho my hearty . . . come on, you lazy salt, give it the works . . ."

Perry let the little ape rave on. The sound of Spudsy Gill's voice made the night seem less tangible, gave the skiff something of the air of a backroom. Spudsy was taut enough in the gloom to sound soberly tight, even if he hadn't had a drink in two days.

They moved northward with startling speed, and Perry knew his

prowess at the oars was hardly responsible. It was something like having a tail wind in a plane, and a lucky break. They could see barrels and wagons float by now and then, and once they hit the submerged top of a stranded car. Perry felt the hair rise on his neck as the bow went up, then slid off.

"Whew!" Spudsy whistled. "Close but no *cee-gar*! Take it easy, Duke. We're almost there! I can see high ground! And men—soldiers up there—keep on a-rowing, tar, keep on a-row-in'!"

Perry gritted his teeth. His arms were aching a little and he felt cold. He flexed his fingers a little and kept straining. His face hurt where the spears of rain lanced against his cheeks and sometimes stung his eyes beneath the brim of his dismal hat. All this for a snapshot—that's what it would amount to—of a millionaire who probably wouldn't be found.

Oh, well. . . .

IT TOOK a long time. An awfully long time. Perry was panting when they finally grounded. The crunch of the boat's bow against the gritty wet dirt—ground above water—was the sweetest music his ears had ever heard.

"Hop out!" Spudsy called. "Out and beach her!"

Perry picked up his equipment case and put it out on the ground and then raised up the bow and pulled the boat far up on land. In the stern, Spudsy began to let go a display of verbal fireworks. He came out of that boat like an athlete, clinging to his camera and flash bulbs.

"You dirty so and so," he told Perry. "You raised her nose up so high, you let water in over the back seat and wet my fanny! A fine thing! People will think I'm in my second childhood or

something. Look, here comes the Army!"

They plodded up the knoll to meet the two soldiers who ran down to see them. There were bright torches on the hill and a sign across the road, blocking it. Perry saw one of the soldiers was a lieutenant. The other, who carried a rifle, was a private. The lieutenant called to them.

"You men!" he said. "Did you come up from the city?"

"We're news cameramen," Perry Hilton explained. "Yes, we just came up from Vine Street in the boat."

The lieutenant frowned. "Bad down there?"

"It ain't good exactly," said Spudsy. "Water's getting higher uptown all the time. I guess most of the people are out, huh?"

The lieutenant nodded. "All gone up to the hotel on Pike Hill over there. That'll probably be the only dry spot around here for a day or two. This is a helluva thing. We need more men in here but they can't get through now. You didn't see any looting?"

"Brother," said Spudsy, "there's nothing to loot. It's all under water. If I'd found a film store, I'd have looted it and damned your wet bullets—I need film that bad. No, mister, the rivers have the situation well in hand downtown . . ."

"Look," Perry said. "Which way to Cheoke Valley?"

"Straight ahead," said the lieutenant. "It begins after Pike Hill there. You can look down into the valley from the hill. . . . Hey, you guys aren't going down into Cheoke Valley, are you? Why, I've got my men down in there now evacuating the place. We're going to dynamite the north levee at six this morning and fill that valley with the Wabash River. You keep out."

"Wait a second," Perry said. "You don't understand this. We've got to go down into the valley. We'll get out of it before six. This is an assignment for our papers. We understand your warning and we'll get out in time."

"Yeah," Spudsy said fervently. "You don't have to worry about that none, mister."

"You're both crazy," said the soldier. "Don't know when you're well off. Well, go ahead. But don't say I didn't tell you. Up she goes at six bells and that valley will be a river faster'n' Johnstown became wet. On your way."

They left the lieutenant and his rifleman and plodded up the muddy road toward Pike Hill. The road was lighted by torches along the way every now and then and it wasn't so bad. The lightning began to scissor the sky now too, sheet lightning, glary, flaring across heaven without the benefit of thunder. When it detonated soundlessly, they could see the white skin of the hotel on the crest of the hill, with its leafless trees standing out against the horizon like black skeletons besecching the sky.

The rain stopped its intensified fall and changed to a mizzling curtain, like opaque fog. It felt a little better but just about killed visibility. When they reached the summit of Pike Hill, they avoided the turn into the hotel grounds and started on down the other side into Cheoke Valley itself.

"This," Spudsy Gill grunted as they plodded on, "is just like stepping down into your own grave and knowing exactly what you're doing."

"Don't lose your nerve," Perry said. "We'll get out of here before six."

"Lose my nerve?" Spudsy laughed harshly. "I never lost my nerve in my life." He laughed again. "It wouldn't be ethical for a fotog to lose his nerve,

would it, Duke? But I don't have to like this setup one bit. And, brother rat, I don't."

ANOTHER soldier loomed up out of the scud and Perry choked back an ejaculation of surprise. The fellow came out of the gloom like a risen corpse and looked very white when he bumped into them, being just as scared.

"Hey, you guys!" he gasped. "Get outa here. Get'n the hell outa here!"

"So we were told previously," Perry said. "We'll get out in time, soldier. How is the evacuation going?"

"Bad," said the soldier. "Boy, you try finding houses in this soup and telling people to scam. They just won't do it. They just won't believe we're really gonna blast."

"But you are," Spudsy said, making it a query.

"Doggone right we are," said the soldier. "You newguys? Thought so. Well, get this. I was up on the north levee about two this morning when it was pouring cats and dogs. And there was Major Renot of the 34th Engineers. Says he, 'If we don't blast this levee soon, the Wabash is gonna meet the Ohio and back right up to Lake Michigan and you won't save a soul. If we do blast, we'll ease the pressure and save the city.' So another guy—a shavetail—he says: 'But, Major, what about the people in the valley?' And the Major just spits once and says, 'There's thirty thousand people in that city and there's maybe a thousand in the valley. Evacuate the valley and we'll blow this levee out at dawn.'" The soldier paused and drew long breaths. "But the doggone fools just won't get out. They'll drown sure."

"Look," said Perry. "Which way to the Jonathan Beard estate, soldier?"

"That the big castle down there?" asked the soldier.

"Doubtless," Spudsy remarked. "Doubtless, General."

"Funny guy, huh? Anyway, you go down this road until you come to a sign. Says Millstone Turnpike. Then go left. The castle is up on the other side of the hill, ain't in the valley floor. It's up a little higher than most. You'll find it."

"Thanks," Perry said.

"And remember, six bells and ham!"

"How," asked Spudsy with a sigh, "could we forget?"

They left the soldier and plodded on. The farther they went, the darker it got. But the sheet lightning showed them the road intermittently and the going wasn't hard at all. As they progressed into the valley hollow, the ground began to get soft and marshy.

Finally they reached the signpost—Millstone Turnpike. They kept to the left and started across the valley floor itself. It began to rain again. First in sweeping gusts, and then in a sudden and breathtaking downpour which soaked through their coats and drenched them to the skin with its cold penetration.

The wind wasn't strong down here though. Perry Hilton, in the lead, suddenly stopped walking and snapped: "Wait a second."

"For cryin' out loud," said Spudsy, gasping. "don't do that! My nerves aren't so hot. And this hole is a banshee stamping ground if it's anything at all."

"Keep quiet," Perry said. "I heard something."

"Wh-what?"

"Listen."

They stood stockstill, listening. At first there was nothing except the silence of many noises: the falling rain,

the whistling wind, the faint distant ranting of the angry rivers, and the remote grumbling of faraway thunder.

Spudsy Gill shivered and swung his free arm, flexing his fingers. "I hear plenty and I don't hear nothing."

"Listen."

They both heard it then, as the wind dropped for a second. The cry, weak and tremulous, reached them on its faintest volume, barely audible above the conglomeration of other sounds. The word was "*Help*—" It sent an electric tingle coursing down Perry's back so that he twitched sharply as though from a violent chill.

"Spudsy!" he said sharply. "Come on! It's over here! It came from this way!"

"I heard it," Spudsy replied. "Go ahead. I'll follow you."

They ran as fast as they could in the dark. Presently they stopped. Perry called: "Hello! Anybody there?"

"Yes!" replied a voice in the gloom. "Right here! Hurry please! Straight ahead—I think I can see you. Please hurry!"

They ran. They hadn't gone twenty feet when Spudsy fell flat on his face, cussed like a trooper, then fell strangely still for a few seconds, and finally screeched: "*Perry!*"

Perry went back to him. "Where are you, Spudsy?"

"Right at your f-f-feet," Spudsy choked. "Duke—listen—I tripped on something—I think—"

"What?"

"I—uh—I think it's a stiff," Spudsy chattered. "You got a light?"

"Your own matches," Perry said. "How about them?"

"Soaking wet."

Perry heard Spudsy's teeth chattering. "I've got my storm lighter," he said. "Wait a second." He reached into

his wet clothes and pulled the lighter out. He stooped down beside Spudsy and spun the flint wheel. The lighter ignited on the first try.

"Gawd!" Spudsy breathed in horror.

In the xanthic light, they saw a corpse; it was a soldier, a non-com with a rifle strung across his back and a .45 caliber Colt pistol in his hand. His tin hat was next to his head, its turtle-back down so that it looked like a rain bowl. There was a bullet hole in the soldier's head, and there were blood stains all over his rain-drenched chest. He had blue eyes which were wide open, like his mouth.

"Gawd!" Spudsy said again. "Somebody bumped him!"

"Please, please . . ." the helpless voice cried again, so close now that Perry Hilton and Spudsy both spun around.

The lighter illumined the owner of the voice. It was a girl, young and good-looking. She was lying on her back, her head raised up to spot them. She wasn't more than ten feet from the soldier's corpse. She looked scared.

III

THE cigarette lighter was weakening. Perry walked over to the girl and knelt down beside her. "What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong? This lighter's fading."

"My foot," she gasped. "I was running. I stepped in a hole—can't get my foot out."

"Ankle sprained, do you think?"

"No. At least, the foot doesn't hurt. I think it's just stuck. If you could dig around—"

Perry got a better look. It was a fox hole. The foot was wedged in tightly and there wasn't much the girl could do about it. Perry found a thin

sharp rock and began to pound the earth around the hole until it finally gave away. Still, the shoe remained wedged. He had to yank on her leg before she made it.

The lighter went out. The girl didn't get right up. She waited a minute, while circulation went back into the foot. She said briefly, "Thanks loads. I'll be all right in a second," and then fell silent. Perry heard Spudsy rummaging in the equipment case.

"What's on your mind?"

"I gotta get a foto of that stiff," Spudsy said. "Gimme the film you promised."

"Wait a second." Perry reached in and pulled out one of the packs and handed it to Spudsy. "Only six of those. That was the deal."

"Did I say no?"

"And look," Perry said. "Load my Graphic and grab me a shot too, will you? I've got to help this girl."

"Sure, Duke," said Spudsy with unnatural spontaneity. "Anything for an ethical pal."

Perry went back and knelt beside her. It was dark, of course, and he couldn't see her face, but he could remember its soft white oval and the clean trim features, flanked by wet brown hair. Her eyes had been blue, he recalled. Blue and big. "Are you better now?" he asked. "I'm Perry Hilton, news photographer for the *Chicago Chronicle*. The anthropoid with me is named Spudsy Gill."

He felt her hand grasp his arm in the dark as she got to her feet. "My name is Sherwood," she said quietly. "Ann Sherwood. It's coincidental, but I'm a newspaperwoman."

"Ann Sherwood," said Perry. "Of course you are. You're on the *New York Planet*. I've seen your stuff—a good colyum."

"Thanks." He saw her smiling wryly as one of Spudsy's flashes went off, painting the dead man in its blue-white light which came and went at one-fiftieth of a second. "I've got to find a telegraph office."

"Nerts," Spudsy called over in the dark. "There ain't no wire service outa Burbank now, lady. What you want is a radio. That's the only connection." There was another flash. "And there's your picture, Perry, and I hope it ain't as good as mine." A pause. "I'll stick your camera back in the case."

"Thanks," Perry said. He found the girl in the dark. "I think you'd better come along with us, Miss Sherwood. We're trying to reach the Jonathan Beard estate. We've got to get out of this valley soon. You knew they were going to dynamite the levee and flood all this, didn't you?"

"Good lord—no!" She gasped. "I might have been—well—it's all right now. If you hadn't come along though—"

"Come on," Spudsy said. "I don't hanker to get wetted down with the Wabash. Let's go."

They went back to the road and across the valley. They talked. "What about that dead man?" Perry asked her.

"Sorry," Ann Sherwood replied. "That's my story."

"That's what I like," said Spudsy dryly. "Gratitude . . ."

"Shut up," Perry said. "She's right. It is her yarn. She covered it and it's hers. That's ethical."

"The devil it is. You saved her life, didn't you? She wouldn't report anything if you hadn't heard her. Then she chisels you out of a yarn—ethics! Besides she might have bumped that guy herself. How do we know?"

"Don't mind him," Perry said. "He

wants the yarn for his own paper at my expense."

"No," she said suddenly. "He's right, Mr. Hilton."

"Perry, I'll call you Ann. Saves time."

"Right. But I'll talk. You two—well, it's not so exclusive at that. Rogue Donaven killed that soldier. But that isn't new. Rogue Donaven's killed three men in the last twelve hours."

"Rogue Donaven!" Perry exclaimed. "Did you hear that, Spudsy?"

"Rogue Donaven!" Spudsy sounded awed. "But he broke prison at Crown Hill, Indiana, last week. That was before we even came down to this under-water town!"

"**T**HAT'S right," Ann Sherwood said. "He kept undercover until Thursday. Then a pair of Federal men recognized him and he's been on the lam ever since. When my managing editor sent me on here to cover the flood, I came into a nice tip from one of the G-men up at Roseville, ten miles north. He said Rogue Donaven was in that section, hiding out. Yesterday they flushed him and he came south. I—my friend tipped me again and I came too. Donaven left a red trail behind him all the way to Burbank. Killed three policemen—"

"Burbank!" cried Spudsy. "As if a flood wasn't bad enough, we have to have a nice cold killer loose at the same time! I know. I took a picture of that rat once when he was nabbed in Chi. He just looked at me and said: 'I croak guys who take pictures of me.' And he meant it. What happened tonight?"

"They trailed him into Cheoke Valley around midnight but the fog came down then and they lost him for awhile. About two hours ago, they ran into him down at the turnpike. There

was a gunfight. They all chased him into the dark and I came along in the rear. That soldier—I guess he heard the shots and came to have a look. Anyway, Rogue Donaven doubled back on his own trail and ran right into the soldier—his name was Dugan—and me. He shot Dugan three times and I ran and he fired once at me just after I fell. I kept quiet and he went off."

"Gosh!" Spudsy said.

"Which way did he go?" asked Perry.

Her voice was steady. "This way. The way we're going."

Simultaneously, in the quick radium-like luminescence of a brilliant sheet of lightning, the castle of Jonathan Beard formed itself out of the fog and night. The thunder spoke more abruptly and more boldly now, and the rain came down in sheeted torrents. "I'd offer you my coat," Perry said to Ann Sherwood, "but it's as dry as a piece of seaweed and would only weigh you down."

She laughed and touched his arm. "Thanks, Perry. But I couldn't be any wetter. Is that the place?"

"Looks like it," Perry replied, squinting through the rain. "I don't see any lights at all, do you?"

"I think—" Spudsy started to say.

The earth shook under their feet. A curious lull followed during which they all stood transfixed. The wind seemed to have died and they did not feel the rain. Then they heard the sound, so much slower, finally reaching them across the valley. Boom! Hollow and yet heavy, with a peculiar cadence and concussion. Twice more then that shudder and the awful booms.

Ann clung to Perry's arm while Spudsy shouted: "For God's sake, you don't think—"

"From the north!" Perry yelled. "The north levee!"

Instinctively they looked back the way they had come. Slate dawn, dirty, wet with the falling rain, was slowly tiptoeing across the footbridge of the east, long delayed, and very reluctant.

From the north levee a voice began to speak, first in an ominous mutter which reached their ears plainly, then rising up into a fierce roar and finally reaching a thunderous crescendo of unabated fury which shamed the honest thunder of the storm.

"Gawd!" Spudsy screamed. "*They've dynamited the levee!*"

Perry yelled: "They can't have! It isn't time! What time is it anyway? We couldn't have made such a mistake!"

The lightning flared and Ann Sherwood saw her watch. She said shrilly: "It's five o'clock! It's only five o'clock!"

"Daylight saving!" Spudsy shrieked. "Don't you see? Those soldiers are from Fort Monmouth and they're on daylight saving time! They're going by their own watches on the whole thing and we're an hour out of the way!"

Perry heard the panic in Spudsy Gill's voice and he fought it down in his own heart. "All right," he said. "Let's get going. We can't make it back to Pike Hill. Only thing to do is take refuge in Jonathan Beard's castle up on the hill there and pray to God the water doesn't go higher than the towers. Come on!"

IV

THE front door of the great stone house of Jonathan Beard was wide open. None of them—Perry, Ann, Spudsy—stopped to question why.

They dashed in, Spudsy Gill slamming the door hard behind him and thinking at the same time that it would hold back the muddy waters for a few minutes and give him some time. He never considered the windows.

In the center hall of the mansion, where it was black as pitch when the lightnings died, they came to a halt. "Halloo!" Perry called. "Anybody here?"

"Upstairs," came a voice, gruff and excited. "For heaven's sake, don't stand down there! Come up stairs and hurry!"

They skipped up the stairs, Spudsy taking a quick lead, and Perry pushing Ann Sherwood along. They couldn't see a thing and the sky remained dark without flashes for a long time. They reached the top of the stairs and stood on the landing.

"Can't see," Spudsy said hoarsely.

Perry tried the lighter. It wouldn't work. He said: "Try a photoflash, Spudsy. It'll give us bearings."

Spudsy stuck a bulb in his Speedgun and flashed. The lighter flared and died quickly, but Perry spotted the next staircase and dragged them over to it. They climbed again.

And now, outside the house, the earth was gripped in a roaring rush of mad water. They could not see it but they could feel it, feel its vibrations through the stone of the house, charging the air itself and filling them up with a tense expectancy.

"Gotta get a shot," Spudsy groaned. "Half the Wabash river tearing through this valley. . . . Gotta get a picture. . . . Hurry up, hurry up!"

There were lights at the top of the second landing. They rushed toward them and reached a circular room in the north tower of the huge house. The light was the emanation of four

long tallow candles mounted on a table in sterling silver candelabras.

There were two people in the tower room: an elderly white-haired man of about sixty-five; a six-year-old girl with a pretty moon face and short blonde curls. Perry recognized them both. The man was Jonathan Beard, worth forty-two million dollars, retired steel magnate, as grizzled an old warrior as industry had ever spawned. The child was Cynthia Beard, heir apparent to the forty-two million dollars, less income tax.

She sat in her grandfather's lap, not very frightened really, her eyes wide with surprise as she stared out the window into the maelstrom which had eaten up Cheoke Valley. In her left arm she had clenched a duck. It was apparent that his name was Donald and that he was the progeny of a Mr. Disney. He was dressed like a sailor and had his head cocked to one side as if to say: "Iz zat so?" In her other hand, Cynthia Beard was clenching a big, old-fashioned Brownie camera, an Eastman-Kodak product, vintage of 1910, taking a 127 roll film. It was a battered job; Perry could see that it had put thousands of snapshots behind its fixed lens. He smiled. The child looked so small for such a big box camera and he wondered why—of all her toys—she had chosen to save the Brownie along with Donald Duck.

"Hello!" Jonathan Beard said in a husky voice. "Glad you made it. You did, just about, you know. We watched you from the window here, saw you come across the field. There was another man too. Where is he?"

Perry said: "No. There wasn't anyone else. Not as far as we know."

"Oh, but there was," said Beard earnestly. "Perhaps—I presume he didn't make it. Who are you?"

"MY name is Hilton," Perry said. "This is Gill. We're press photographers. Had an assignment to get out here and take some pictures of you but we got caught short. This is Miss Sherwood, a New York newspaper-woman covering the flood."

Beard smiled. "The flood seems to have the upper hand with you, Miss Sherwood. Do sit down. You gentlemen are saying you came all the way from Burbank, risking your lives for pictures of me?"

"With the granddaughter!" Spudsy said. "Look pretty, now." And he flashed a bulb and startled the child; Perry wheeled on him and snapped: "What's the matter with you anyhow? Can't you wait until Mr. Beard says all right?"

"Not me, Duke!" Spudsy snarled. "I'm a fotog, see? I don't have ethics. But I get the pictures. Go lay an egg."

"Never mind, Hilton," Beard said, frowning at Spudsy. "Go ahead and take your picture. It seems little enough after your trip here."

"But, sir," Perry asked, "why on earth are you still here? Didn't you get a warning? Weren't you asked to go to higher ground at Pike's Hill?"

"The servants are all gone," Beard explained quietly. "All in panic. I'm an elderly man, Mr. Hilton, not built for running around at night in such a storm. And this child—as a matter of fact, I thought, and still think, that the house here is the safest place this side of the valley. The water will reach the house, yes, but I don't think it will ever inundate the place to any extent. And this house will easily withstand the rush of water. It was built to withstand anything."

"Yeah?" Spudsy Gill was at the other window. He'd leveled his Speed Graphic and left the lens open on time.

A lightning flash had made a picture for him and he closed the lens. "Listen, mister. It may have been built right but it wouldn't withstand that stuff if the water gets high enough. Take a look when the lightning breaks."

They all crowded to the windows. The lightning flared. They saw the valley below them, saw it all in every bit of its terrifying aspect; they saw the huge wall of filthy black water which came down the valley like an express train, cushioning itself up on the slopes on either side and sweeping everything in its path; they saw four white clapboard houses, one upside down, being hurled down the torrent with splintering, crushing force; they saw the three empty tank cars, the empty tanks having made the steel cars buoyant, floating down on the wash like little corks, their road insignias quite plain: *CS&W Lines*.

They saw all that and the room grew still as they watched the water crawl up and up the slope, reaching out its watery fringe for the Beard estate and nearing the level of the house's base all the time. Once—in a flash—they saw the big hotel atop Pike Hill across the valley. It looked so safe. No river could ever reach it.

Perry broke the grim silence. "Perhaps I'd better get my pictures now—if you don't mind, Mr. Beard. And I really shouldn't miss that torrent, although it will never reproduce as it is, with its sound."

"That's what is frightening," Ann Sherwood whispered. "The uproar and the madness of it all. . ."

Spudsy had been taking quite a few pictures. And Perry suddenly recalled that he had given only six negatives to the little ape-man with the gold tooth. His face clouded. Spudsy saw the look and began to fade into the

shadows. Perry crossed the room and went for his equipment case. Before he reached it, he was stopped.

"Hold it, you muggs," said the voice. "We got to get a couple of things straight. Hold it."

IT was not a nice voice. It was sharp, coarse, dangerous. Perry turned slowly and saw the man in the doorway. The candles illumined his features very plainly. It was a harsh gaunt face with a long purplish scar, quite colorful from the cold rain on it, down the side of the man's right cheek. No hat, no tie, his clothes a complete wreck, the stranger stood in the doorway, motionless as a statue, a glistening nickel-plated revolver in his right hand.

"Gawd!" Spudsy Gill said sharply, the first to break the cold spell. "It's him—*Rogue Donaven*!"

Rogue Donaven's scar jerked and he snapped his head and gun around. Spudsy meanwhile, had instinctively sighted his Graphic and he pressed the release which flashed the bulb and took the picture.

Rogue Donaven's eyes disappeared under his brows. He said briefly: "I croak guys what take pictures of me." And he raised the revolver and fired once.

The slug went clean through the Graphic's valuable lens, punctured the film in the back of the camera, broke through the back itself and pinked into Spudsy Gill's chest, knocking the camera from his hands and thrusting him down to the floor on his knees, from where he fell headlong to his face.

Perry took two quick steps toward Donaven but stopped when the gun hit a line with his stomach. "You want some too?" Rogue Donaven asked.

"Perry!" Ann Sherwood gasped.

"For God's sake, Perry, don't—"

"The lady's right, Hilton," said Jonathan Beard. "Don't be foolish." Cynthia Beard, startled by the ear-splitting crack of the gun and the flame which had jumped at Spudsy, was crying. Beard tried to comfort her.

Perry halted, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. This certainly, he figured, was the hour for ethics. He asked quietly: "Have you any objection to my examining my friend?"

Rogue Donaven laughed. "Not me, buddy. Your friend'll never be deader. Go have a look. . . ." And as Perry walked over and knelt down beside Spudsy, Donaven turned back and pointed a finger and said: "You, there—you're Old Man Beard, ain't you?" Never mind lyin'. I know you are, the guy with all the bucks." He laughed. "But you're gonna pay out some of them millions soon, mister. To me. You'll buy back a little package I'm gonna hold for you."

Ann Sherwood put her hand to her mouth. "He's going to take the child—"

"Sure he is," Rogue Donaven said evenly. "Sure he is. And why not, huh? I've had bulls on my tail for the last week. Bulls and G-heat and I'm sick o' it. I'm gettin' myself protection. This flood was a break for me. It killed my trail and it led me right into an insurance policy. . . . Sure, I'm takin' that kid, see? And you can tell the Gs that she gets bumped if a single one of 'em makes a pass at me from now on."

Beard groaned: "You—you wouldn't be that low—"

"Keep your shirt on, grandpop," Rogue Donaven snapped. "You'll get your innin's later on. When I get clear, with the kid, you can buy her back. . . . Now send her over here. And if you,

don't, I put the slug on her where she stands."

Perry meanwhile had been examining Spudsy who was alive and breathing hard, unconscious. The camera was a wreck. So were the negatives. The Speedgun was okay. Perry lifted it off, screwed a fresh bulb into the socket while the Rogue talked. Spudsy's wound didn't bleed much but he looked sick. Perry reached in Spudsy's pocket for a handkerchief and found the blackjack.

He should have remembered. Spudsy always had carried the blackjack for protection when a guy got nasty about a picture.

Perry slipped the blackjack into his right hand and took up the Speedgun in his left.

He faced Rogue Donaven, not ten feet away.

"Come on," Donaven growled. "Send the little brat over here. If I go get her myself, I slap you silly—"

"Wait a minute, Rogue," Perry said.

Rogue Donaven had taken a step or two forward. He halted abruptly and faced Perry with the leveled gun. "You're askin' for it, big boy. Don't say I didn't—"

"Wait a minute," Perry said quietly.

BOTH were poised. The one with the gun, the other with the Speedgun. Both men were taut, wound up.

Perry said slowly: "You see this bulb in this socket?"

Rogue Donaven's eyes flicked down to the bulb. Perry's eyes watched. The split second when Donaven's focused on the photo-flash, he pressed the button. Eight feet from Rogue Donaven's face and squarely in his eyes, the bulb flashed brilliantly as Perry stepped aside. The revolver crashed and missed.

Perry stepped outside the gun muzzle, swinging the blackjack in his right hand with everything he had.

Rogue Donaven couldn't see anything but black bursting circles. Three thousand lumens of light against a wide open iris did that sort of thing. It took the better part of half a minute for the irises to readjust themselves too.

Perry only needed two seconds. The blackjack crashed across Rogue Donaven's forehead. Perry felt the bone give under the impact of the lead frankfurter. Donaven pitched forward on his face without a sound and laid still.

"No pictures!" Spudsy Gill whispered. "Damn it—he—he broke—that camera—no pictures—of a scene—like that—"

"Spudsy!" Perry exclaimed.

"I—I feel pretty good," said Spudsy, fluttering his eyes. "Don't hurt much—and I—I ain't weak so much. Don't hurt none—to breathe—so I guess the slug—didn't hit—my lung. . . . Listen, Duke, was—was it ethical—to fracture that mugg's—skull? 'Cause I think you did."

Ann Sherwood ran from the window. "The water's rising," she said. "I'm afraid we'll have to leave—"

Jonathan Beard's face was white. "But we can't leave," he replied with grim finality. "Look down. The crest is already over our entrance."

"Duke," whispered Spudsy, "I gotta tell you something."

"Yes?" Perry said.

"I played you dirt. No—no ethics. Me all over."

"Don't get you, Spudsy."

"When they dynamited—lost my nerve—dropped my camera back there . . . When we got here, I lifted your camera, stole your film—"

"You don't know what you're saying, Spudsy."

"Sure I do. I figured you were a nice guy but that a scoop in pix was a scoop. I lifted your camera and your film. Rogue busted your camera. Mine is down in the valley. Sorry, Duke. That's—the game—"

"Listen, you sawed-off ape," Perry said. "You're spilling this because you're afraid you'll die. But you won't. And when you're well again, I'm going to give you a going over."

Spudsy sighed. "And I won't blame you a bit, pal."

Perry Hilton stood up. All this struggling, all this risk, plodding and running and rowing through hell and high water to get a picture—and when he got there, the cupboard was bare.

He went to the equipment case and opened it. Spudsy had told the truth. There was no camera inside. There were flash bulbs and the half gross of sensitized Velox printing paper, four inches by five, glossy normal.

"Wait a second!" Perry said, half-aloud.

He stared at the child in Jonathan Beard's lap, the child who still clung to the 1910 Kodak Brownie. An idea hit him. He smiled thinly and whispered: "Oh, Spudsy, I'm going to show you. . . . I'm going to show you what a fotog misses and what a technician doesn't . . ."

The great stone house was trembling. Perry went to the window and put his arm around Ann and said: "Don't be frightened."

"But look," she said softly. "The walls won't stand that. They're crumbling below. Look down."

He did. He could see but faintly, yet he saw enough. Three CS&W crude oil cars had been caught in a water trap under their window and were pound-

ing their steel tonnage against the side of the house, aided and abetted by the terrific force of the maelstrom in the valley. Their blows struck shivers through the house.

Jonathan Beard nodded, looking older and more haggard. "They smashed the garage like tinder," he said hollowly, "and it was made of granite stone."

Perry nodded. He turned Ann around. "Whatever happens," he said, "don't be afraid. I think we can live through this, but not in this house. In any case—" he suddenly bent down and kissed her. "I wanted to do that later," he said. "But perhaps there might not be the chance."

She clung to him without speaking.

A FEW seconds later, he disengaged himself and said: "Wait."

He went to the child, Cynthia, and knelt down beside her. "Hello, honey," he said. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"No," she replied. "Not with my granddaddy."

"Look, honey," he said, "I take pictures and my camera is broken. Would you loan me yours until I get another one? I promise to take good care of it."

Cynthia thought it over and then looked at her grandfather. "I'd like to lend it to the man, Granddaddy."

"It's quite all right, dear," said Beard gently. "Of course, you must help Mr. Hilton. He is helping you."

She gave Perry the old Brownie. No film in it, of course, as he had expected. Perry thanked her gravely and stood up. It was dawn now, yet the sky remained dark. He asked Ann what time it was and she said six-ten. He took a reading with his Weston meter and found he couldn't get the light value needle to move. That was good.

Now he took out his pen knife and cut a thin slit in the top of the Brownie at the back. He opened the box of sensitized paper, praying that it was as dark as it looked so that the paper would not fog. He loaded the Speed-gun he had salvaged from the camera wreckage and then set the Brownie on time. He sighted Jonathan Beard and the child in the reflex view finder, opened the shutter, flashed the bulb, after having thrust a four-by-five contact printing paper down in the slit where film would normally have been. The picture taken, he withdrew the paper and quickly placed it in the black envelope which came with the paper.

It seemed to work, Perry thought. He loaded again, slipping sensitized paper into the camera, flashing a bulb. This time he shot Rogué Donaven on the floor, along with Spudsy wounded.

"You so and so! *Making paper negatives!* You're scooping me on my own shooting! Oh, you dog! This is tragic irony if I ever heard the words! And it'll work, it'll work!"

"How can it work?" Ann cried.

"He's making a negative image on paper instead of a positive," Spudsy explained. "That's what comes of being ethical and smart instead of just smart, like me. . . ."

The house trembled as the tank cars walloped the stones and churned them into powder.

Perry said: "Can we have rope, Mr. Beard?"

"Yes," he said. "In the closets. Why?"

"We're all roping together," Perry said. "We're leaving here. I don't think the house will stand. We're going to have a wild ride, everybody. We're going to have a tank car for a bronco. It'll float right side up because of the weighted bottom."

"The trucks?"

"They must have dropped off long ago," said Perry. "But those tankers still float upright. It'll be a matter of hanging on and hoping we don't hit anything. We've got to do it—"

"I can't," said Beard hopelessly. "I'm an old man."

"Hell," Spudsy said. "I can and I'm shot. So you can."

Perry went for the rope.

V

THAT was a wild ride. They saw Cheoke Valley in all its muddy, horror-filled, wreckage filled, water-filled desolation as they shot down the valley, five of them, all roped together astride the top of a floating tank car, roped too to the band grabs atop the tanker's twin-valved dome and to the handrailing around the plump body of the car. They were lucky. The car they had been fortunate enough to make was bigger than the others, a sixteen thousand gallon job which floated high and was big enough to be a protection if they hit anything. But they didn't hit anything.

Down the valley, they bobbed and tossed that morning, and Perry took thirty-eight of the most wonderful flood pictures that the *Chicago Chronicle* was ever to publish; some he took by the numerous lightning flashes which shot down the valley; some he took of closer scenes with the Kalart Speedgun.

But finally the sky began to lose its black-lead hue and really took on a sooty gray color as it started to lighten. And Perry knew that his picture taking was nearly over.

He had one paper left in the camera and he sought frantically for something to shoot. And it occurred to him

that he had missed the most dramatic picture of them all: five people, a millionaire, a child, a woman, a wounded man, himself, riding a storm-tossed tank car down a flooded valley toward the Ohio River.

Since he took the picture, there were only four in it. He could not put himself before the camera on a tank car. But he did take it with a flash bulb. And when he saw their faces in the momentary glare of the bulb, he knew he had taken something priceless.

That was the last paper negative he could make. It stopped raining and in half an hour, a weak sun thrust itself out through a veil of mist below the sodden clouds.

At eleven o'clock, tired from clinging to the battered tank car, they all noticed suddenly that the terrible pitching and rolling had stopped. They found themselves floating with breathless speed in a broad waterway which looked as though it were a mile across and might have been at that.

They clung in toward shore through no fault of their own. Perry said: I think we're in the Ohio River! We must have gone clean through the valley and out into the river the way the army engineers wanted the Wabash to go. That means the pressure must have eased up on Burbank."

Spudsy groaned. "And where will we wind up? In New Orleans. I could be seasick."

"You sound pretty good," Perry said.

"I can't understand it," said Spudsy. "And me shot."

"It's only a flesh wound," said Perry. "I looked you over when you fell. The bullet must have lost all its umph after going through the camera. It hit your breastbone and ricocheted out again. You've really got two holes

in you but they don't mean anything. We'll get you fixed up soon. The slug never did get in more than an inch."

"Pal," said Spudsy, gulping, "you relieve my mind."

At noon, the tank car, caught in a whirlpool of floating wreckage, was forced into a river bank and jammed hard into the mud there. It clung. "Quick," Perry said. "Ropes off! Get ashore before this thing loses its grip and goes off again."

He untied himself and leaped to the river bank. Beard passed him the child first and he sat her down. Ann Sherwood came next. Then Beard helped Spudsy off. He finally came himself. Two minutes later, the car jerked loose from the mud bank and went riding off down the river headed for the Gulf of Mexico fifteen hundred miles away. . . .

They found they were in Shawneetown, a place of a little more than a thousand inhabitants. But the Red Cross had made Shawneetown a base for Burbank, and there were hundreds of soldiers all over the place, all moving up into the flood area.

They got Spudsy to a jammed hospital for treatment and left him there. Jonathan Beard asked to go to Chicago. So did Ann. Perry scouted around and found a lieutenant.

"Listen," he said, "can I get a plane for Chicago? A plane or a train?"

"You can get a train," said the lieutenant. "There's one shooting back to Chicago in twenty minutes. The depot is three blocks over that way. Brother, you look damp. Were you caught up-river?"

"Caught isn't the word," Perry grinned. "Thanks for the information. What's the latest on Burbank?"

"They're coming out all right," said the lieutenant. "The engineers flooded

Cheoke Valley early this morning. The pressure eased on Burbank. And anyway the crest of the Wabash has passed. They say the water is receding already up in Burbank. They'll be cleaned out by tomorrow. Cairo is the town to have a headache now. The crest has gone downstream."

"Thanks," Perry said.

ON Thursday afternoon, two days later, Spudsy Gill was lying in a white bed in the Shawneetown Hospital, feeling too darn good to be in a hospital and complaining about the service and the looks of his nurses, when there was a knock at his door and it opened. Perry Hilton and Ann Sherwood walked in, each carrying a newspaper.

"Hello, Spudsy," Perry waved. "How do you feel?"

Spudsy groaned. "I feel terrible. A lot you care, going off and leaving me marooned in this one-horse town. . . ." His eyes gleamed. "What you got?"

Perry handed over a copy of the *Chicago Chronicle*. Spudsy stared at the headlines, saw the story *By Ann Sherwood: exclusive to the Chronicle and the New York Planet*. He opened it up, saw the flood pictures. The paper negatives had worked perfectly. Not only that but the very texture of the paper had imparted to the positives made therefrom a canvas-like grain which made the fotos look almost like paintings.

"Gorsh!" Spudsy breathed. "Perry—you got something there—" He peered through them, muttering. Finally he came to the one which the *Chronicle* had printed in eight by ten inches, the last picture, the four on the tank car. Spudsy sighed. "That," he said, "is a gem. I suppose it's exclusively the *Chronicle's*!"

"Yes."

"You're a sap. You could have made a grand or more out of the sale and resale of that particular shot."

"That wouldn't have been ethical," Perry said.

Spudsy groaned. "Ethics again. And when you get all through with ethics, what've you got? Fifty bucks a week."

"More than that sometimes," said Perry. "Show him, Ann."

Ann Sherwood went over to the bed. "I came down to say goodbye, Spudsy. I'm flying back to New York tomorrow. So is Perry. The *Planet* has offered him a better job. You see, we split. I wrote the story for both papers and Perry gave the pictures to both. It worked out fine. But Perry thought of you. Here."

She handed him a newspaper. Spudsy opened it, saw it was the *Clarion*, the most blatant tabloid in the

entire Fourth Estate. And the *Clarion*, believe it or not, had flood pictures! Six of them and all darn good! Spudsy stared. "Duke," he whispered, "you—"

"I told your managing editor you'd been hurt and you'd sent those shots up with me. He was pleased to get them. He's going to give you a bonus . . ."

Spudsy was flabbergasted. After a while, he said: "All right, Perry. So I've been a heel. Just the same, you were a sap to hand my rag pictures like these—"

"Uh-uh," Ann cautioned, smiling at him.

"Aw nuts," Spudsy said. "All right." He braced himself as if he were about to undergo a thing of great pain. He closed his eyes, clenched his fists, gritted his teeth.

"How," he asked plaintively, "does a guy go about getting ethical?"

Pigeon Eggs From Oysters

IN THE early Sixteenth Century when Cortez, in a home-made galleon, anchored in the Gulf of Lower California, the inhabitants of those hot, desolate shores were pearl divers. It was, in fact, some of their pearls that gave impetus to the exploration of the California coast. It is quite probable that those pearls—"big as pigeon eggs"—found in the Indian tomb opened at Monte Alban in 1931 were taken from the same waters, and were like those that Cortez took with him when he sailed back to Mexico.

Today, descendants of those divers who fled at the approach of Cortez are still carrying on at the same old stand and in the same old way. Most of them are "skin" divers, descending to the lair of the wily oyster unprotected by a diving suit, armed only with a knife. Some fall prey to the man-eating sharks that roam those waters and others succumb to paralysis. But, offsetting these risks, is the possibility of sudden wealth, for no diver knows what nacreous plum may lie cancerous within the viscera of the next oyster.

—Charles Dorman



Strike

By JOHN HAWKINS

TROUBLE is brewing in the big Falcon motor car plant at Industrial City. The Falcon Company turns out the finest car in America—and Falcon himself is as solid and honest as the machine that has been his life's work. Until the depression, Falcon's workers were the most contented and decently treated in the whole industry. But an efficiency expert was brought to the plant when the dollars started pinching. An iron-willed martinet, J. D. Vick instituted the speed-up, cut salaries, drove the men at top speed and fired them when they fell behind. With the bad feeling growing among the men, labor-racketeers saw their chance.

They formed a crooked union, talked the malcontents into joining and, one way or another, dragged the rest of the men into line until they could boast a hundred percent membership. Now the union controls the plant. As some of the older, wiser workers realize, a crooked union, from the outside, looks much the same as an honest one; and even if Falcon should one day realize the sort of organization that is burning the heart out of his

plant, he'd be pretty helpless to combat it.

Any move be made to disband the union and encourage the formation of an honest one would result in the leaders calling a strike. Their control of the plant is unchallenged. . . .

THIS is the situation when Duncan McCann arrives in Industrial City to seek employment at the Falcon works. And there's a story behind that, too. A story of misunderstanding between father and son . . . a story of two prides in conflict.

Involved in a hit-and-run smash-up that threatens to become a front-page sensation, Duncan McCann had come to the long-threatened parting of the ways with his father. For to James McCann, the Governor of the State, his son was a no-good wastrel who was constantly compromising the integrity of the McCann name and position. And to young Duncan, his father was a stiff-necked tyrant who refused to

This story began in last week's Argosy

understand Duncan's ambition to become a mechanical engineer, and who offered him a mausoleum instead of a home to live in. He was glad when the break finally came.

So Duncan McCann changed his name to John Duncan and started out for Industrial City.

ON THE way he encounters two girls, both of them destined to play a part in his new and suddenly altered existence. The first is Marcia Dubois, who seems to know a good deal about strikes and who, after hugging Duncan not to try to get work at the Falcon plant, tricks him into missing the bus both of them are riding on.

The other is a pert-nosed, smartly dressed young woman who gives Duncan a lift, who lectures him about capital and labor and the new freedom, and whose enthusiasm for the cause she preaches is matched only by her misconception of the whole situation. Dropping Duncan at the gates of the plant she promises to put him in touch with people who will enlighten his ignorance. She tells him her name, It is Helen Falcon.

Duncan manages to get work as a day laborer in the plant, and almost immediately encounters the tyranny of the union organizers. An Irishman named O'Malley, with a red-headed temper to match his fiery hair, refuses to join the union. He has worked in plants all over the country, and he knows an honest union when he sees one. He also can recognize, on sight, a bunch of racketeers and extortionists disguised as union bosses. John Robb, the union leader, gives O'Malley three hours to think it over.

Late in the afternoon, there is a sudden outcry of "Accident!" And Duncan is told that O'Malley has been killed—six inches of hand-drill steel have gone into his stomach.

When Robb approaches Duncan, only Mack Saddler, Duncan's new-found friend, can keep him from flying at Robb's throat.

"O'Malley called you a rat," Duncan blazes out. "But that isn't strong enough for you! Murderer is what you are, and I'll

see you swing before I put my name on your list!"

Robb only smiles a little, "Better be careful, sonny. You might get what O'Malley got. . . ."

CHAPTER V

MIKE FINN

McCANN'S lean body jerked taut. Anger beat in his temples, grew, until Robb's broad face was the only thing left in the world. Until his shoulders ached with the desire to drive his fist full into those grinning lips. He leaned forward, his hands jerking up, and said flatly:

"Try it, guy, and you'll be starting a union on the under side of a tombstone. You want to be sure you don't miss, not any, or—"

Steel fingers dug into McCann's shoulder, and Mack Saddler's even voice pierced his rage. "Steady, lad, you'll accomplish nothing this way. The job-setter'll have you drawing your check if he sees you."

"Thanks." McCann jerked away, finished ramming the body bolts into place. He stepped back, and Saddler squeezed past him into the car.

McCann shot a glance at Robb as they bent over the chassis that was moving into position under the body drop. The squat man's face was dark, but the leering smile clung to his lips as though frozen there. Ugly lights showed in his muddy eyes as they flicked over McCann's face. Then he was staring up.

The electric crane crawled into position over the square hole in the floor above. A sedan body swayed below the crane. Robb waved it down. The hoist man dropped it, smoothly, until it swung only an inch or so above the four guide punches set in each corner of the chassis.

The rest was simple. McCann had already done it many times in his short day on the assembly line. He and Robb swung the body gently until the corner holes in the floor of the body were exactly above the four punches. Robb would signal then, and the crane man would drop the body that remaining foot. The punches would guide it into place, assured perfect matching of the bolt holes drilled in the body and chassis.

They did that now. McCann's gloved hands were flat against the side of the car, holding it steady, when Robb yelled:

"Hey! Fix that punch!"

McCann's eyes jerked around, saw Robb's pointing hand, saw that the front punch on his side of the car was leaning at a sharp angle. He dropped to one knee, and jerked the punch squarely upright. At that precise second the body came down!

A flicker of unexpected movement was McCann's only warning. He dropped suddenly, whipped his hand away from the punch. Something brushed his fingertips, and steel jarred against steel. Then McCann was staring at his bare hand—at his glove which was pinned between the body and chassis. If he'd been a fraction of a second slower, his fingers would have been sheared off as cleanly as though a giant ax had sliced through them.

He was on his knees when feet scuffed the floor beside him, and Robb's harsh voice asked, "You hurt, Jack? I thought—"

McCann tipped his head up. "No. You weren't fast enough, I had time to—" His voice trailed away as the sharp-faced foreman elbowed close to shout:

"What's wrong? Why ain't you guys on your job?"

"Duncan got his glove caught when the body come down," Robb explained. "I was afraid he lost a couple of fingers." His hand came up. "He's new here so I was doin' the signalin', but the crane guy can't see me so good an' he let her down."

The foreman nodded at McCann. "You do th' signalin' from now on, an' watch what you're doin'. We had enough accidents around here for one day."

McCann choked down angry words. Robb slapped his shoulder and said, "He'll be all right soon's he get's wise." Then the squat man spun, crossed the assembly line, and seconds later was leaning inside the car dropping bolts in place.

THE foreman left, and McCann went back to work. What had happened had been no accident. Robb had deliberately intended to catch his hand, he was sure of that, but Robb had covered himself neatly, and there was no proof. McCann's brow furrowed. He couldn't prove it was anything but an accident. The thing had happened too fast. Robb's dropping hand had been all that was necessary. Just a gesture, easily mistaken, easily denied.

Nor could he prove that the drill that had torn O'Malley's insides to jelly had not slipped by accident. He knew it, every man in the plant knew it, and yet . . . It was murder—perfect murder—occurring in the sight of a hundred men.

McCann's teeth vised, little ridges of muscle stood out along the clean line of his jaw. Something had to be done! But what—and how?

The remaining hours of the afternoon brought no answer. When the line stopped, Robb waited only long enough to say, "That was close, guy,

you want to watch your mitts," before he swung away toward the ramp.

Mack Saddler's eyes were thoughtful, his voice low. "You shouldn't have done that, lad; he's a bad enemy, that one. He's tricky and smooth, and deadly. You'd best change your mind about joining the union. It's the safest thing to do."

McCann swore, and his eyes found Saddler's face. "I ought to—"

"It can wait, lad," Kim Saddler's lips were close to McCann's ear. "Wait till we're away from the plant before you talk."

McCann shrugged, lapsed into silence. Nor did the brothers speak until they were outside the plant gate. Then it was Kim Saddler who asked, "Where're you living, lad?"

"Place called the Arlington Hotel."

Kim nodded. "You can ride with us, we go past there. Our car's in the parking lot down the street."

McCann hesitated, and then fell in step with the brothers. He was bone-tired. Every muscle of his legs ached in separate protest at each step. His shoulders throbbed, and the palms of his hands were raw and blistered. All the springiness had gone out of his stride.

They had covered a full block when the sight of a white hat in a parked car brought McCann's head up. There was something about that pert turban, something about the half-glanced profile and dark hair that struck a familiar chord. His lips thinned as they drew abreast of the big sedan. The girl in it was Marcia Dubois.

She was alone in the car, and she didn't see McCann approach. She didn't move till he put one hand on the door, and said, "Hello, Miss Dubois."

She looked up then, her eyes widen-

ing in surprise. Faint color darkened her cheeks. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

McCann's voice was cold. "You're still very beautiful. Beautiful enough to get away with murder. This car's pretty flashy for a girl who has to ride around the country in busses. Did you send the owner after cigarettes, too?"

She said, "Please—"

"Tell me," he went on, "what it was that I did or said? Why did you make me miss that bus? Why did you want me stranded in the mountains overnight?"

"I'm sorry I did that." She tried to smile but didn't quite succeed. "I had a reason, of course, but now it doesn't seem like a very good one. I can't tell you what it was, and I'd rather you didn't ask, but"—she fumbled in her purse—"you must let me pay for your bus ticket."

McCann shook his head. "A service station attendant got me a ride in. It didn't cost me anything but my time. I was lucky."

"You—" She looked up at him, and then pulled her eyes away. "You're working at the Falcon Plant?"

"Yes."

She didn't speak right away, and in the moment of silence McCann studied the side of her face. He could see only the long, drooping lashes, the curve of her cheek, and the corner of her mouth.

She spoke rapidly then, without looking up. Spoke in a low, murmuring voice that McCann had to strain to hear. "I will tell you this much. I tried to warn you, I really did. *Don't* work in the Falcon Plant. Quit! You can get a job somewhere else, and even if you couldn't it would be—" She stopped then, her slim hands lax in her lap. "Maybe we'd better forget the whole thing. Just act as if I hadn't said any-

thing." She looked up, and the brightness had gone out of her eyes. Her voice was cool, distant. "It's been nice seeing you. Perhaps I'll run into you again. Goodbye."

"But why—"

"Goodbye."

HE WAS still standing on the walk when the big man brushed past him to open the car door. He said, "You drive, Marcia," and dropped into the seat as the girl slipped under the wheel.

McCann eyed him narrowly. He was big, with a hard, sure bigness that extended to his long-fingered hands, to his massive, well-shaped head. His clothes were expensive, but in perfect taste. His close-cropped hair was red, and when he turned, McCann could see the tiny, crescent-shaped scar across the bridge of his nose.

He grinned up at McCann as Marcia jockeyed the car away from the curb. "Hey, Jack, all done for today?"

"Yes," McCann said shortly.

"Nothing left now but a hot dinner and a bath, huh?" The big man's voice was pleasant and deep. There was laughter in his eyes. Laughter and something else . . . something very like the glitter of gun steel under light.

The big sedan was gone then, slipping smoothly out into the traffic stream. McCann wheeled, continued down the block. Kim Saddler hailed him, and he saw the small sedan double-parked only a few feet away.

"Friends of yours?" Kim inquired as McCann climbed into the car.

McCann said, "No," and then realized that both brothers were watching him. He saw that there was an odd, strained look around their mouths.

"You're sure?" It was Kim's bitter drawl.

"Of course. I've seen the woman before. I met her on the bus a week ago, but she's not what you'd call a friend of mine." He told them what had happened.

A questioning look passed between the brothers, and then Mack asked softly, "You wouldn't know who her friend was? The big red-headed man?"

"No, I wouldn't." McCann's temper flared. "And while this third degree is going on, you might tell me just what—"

Kim's mouth pulled down, but Mack's voice carried the same easy tone. "Gently, lad, gently. If you didn't know who you were talking to, there's nothing to get worked up about. Does the name Mike Finn mean anything to you?"

"No."

Saddler started the car, swung it out into the traffic. "It will, lad. Mike Finn is the union boss. He is the union. He holds it together with his two big hands and without him there'd be no union—at least no crooked union. Now do you see why we wondered?"

"Of course." McCann leaned forward.

"The woman is his secretary."

McCann fell silent. Marcia Dubois the union boss' secretary. For a moment thought held him silent.

He looked up then to find Kim watching him. Deep lines framed the tall man's mouth. "You've had a plenty busy day, little man," he said with a wry grin. "Robb's a bad man to have for an enemy. You've declared yourself on the wrong side of the fence. You can't do anything alone. I'd hate—" His eyes became bleak. "I'd hate to see you go out of the plant on a stretcher. And you will, lad, there are too many ways they can get you. Not right away, they won't try anything so soon after

the last—accident." He spat the last word out as though it had a bitter taste. "But sooner or later you'll get it—just like O'Malley."

"What good would it do if I joined the union?"

Kim Saddler looked away. "None maybe. This union ain't the big national kind. Not by a long pull. There isn't one man in ten who joined because he wanted to join, but every man in the plant would jump at the chance to join an honest union."

"Then—?"

"Most of us joined because we had to. And because we knew we could do more good on the inside than on the out. There might be a chance to blast Finn's machine wide open. There might be a chance to get an honest union here—"

"Kim," Mack Saddler cut in, "you talk too much. Let the lad alone."

Kim shrugged. "You've got the picture anyway," he told McCann, "and the rest of it is up to you."

"Right." McCann's voice was even. "I think I might take your advice. But even if I don't, Saddler, I didn't hear a word you said."

A slow grin pulled at Kim's mouth. Mack turned to say, "Thanks, lad," as he pulled up in front of McCann's hotel. He was smiling too.

CHAPTER VI

COUNTERWEIGHT

DUNCAN McCANN spent many hours in thought before he slept that night. Kim's words had been reasonable. After all, there wasn't any sense getting himself killed off. And maybe he could do something from the inside. He found that he wanted very much to help the men at the plant, with a kind of stubborn, angry idealism that

surprised him. Good old McCann blood coming out in him, he guessed wearily. It would be a tough fight.

He knew, too, what the penalty for failure would be. He could still hear O'Malley's scream as six inches of drill steel ripped through his insides. And O'Malley had only refused to join the union. They had murdered him quickly, efficiently. What would they do to a man who tried to wreck the union? A new grimace framed McCann's mouth as he stared into the darkness. Once discovered, he'd be taken care of—plenty! There'd be another messy job for the first-aid crew.

"That," McCann told himself, "would fill even the governor's specifications for making points the hard way."

He grinned then, realizing that, as a union member, he would have a chance to see Marcia Dubois again. He was still wondering how much that knowledge had affected his decision when he fell asleep.

The next morning he tucked one of his remaining ten dollar bills into his watch pocket before he left for the plant. He found Robb already at his station under the body drop.

"Here," McCann dropped the folded bill into Robb's hand. "I've changed my mind. As long as the plant's a hundred per cent union I'd better join."

The squat man's muddy eyes showed no surprise. He merely said, "Okay, guy, I'll write you a receipt at noon."

The work seemed easier that morning, after the stiffness worked out of McCann's back. The line was still running forty-five cars an hour, but McCann had caught the swing of his job and was able to maintain the swift pace. He even found time to watch Kim Saddler. The tall man worked with effortless speed, his big hands

never wasting a motion. He put the strip of insulation, upon which the body rested, in place around the chassis and shellacked it there.

The morning was two hours old when the foreman touched McCann's shoulder, said, "This guy'll relieve you."

McCann stepped back wonderingly as another man took his place. The foreman said, "You're wanted in the office," and led the way across the floor.

They went down a single flight of stairs, past a row of lettered doors, and stopped in front of one bearing the words, *J. D. Vick, Efficiency.*

"In there," the foreman said, "he's waiting for you."

McCann asked, "But what—?"

The sharp-faced foreman said, "Ask him," pivoted, and stalked away.

McCANN went through the door into a windowless, white walled office. A pale, shirt-sleeved young man glanced up from a small desk. "What's your's?"

"I understood that I was wanted down here—"

"Name?"

"Duncan. John Duncan."

The youth consulted a sheet of paper on his desk, looked up, said, "Go on in. He's waiting."

J. D. Vick didn't move when McCann came through the door. He was small, an egg-bald little man with jumpy eyes and thin, bloodless lips. He nodded toward a straight-backed chair, and built a neat temple of his fingers while he watched McCann sit down.

"I sent for you," his voice was surprisingly deep, "after I'd seen your card. According to this you've a college degree in mechanical engineering. Is that right?"

McCann said, "Yes."

Vick consulted the card in front of him. "There are always opportunities for men with a technical education in the Falcon Plant. We want trained men, and we make every effort to give them all possible opportunity for advancement."

McCann waited.

"You understand, of course, that it is impossible to offer every technical graduate a position in our drafting room. But there are other ways, other jobs that offer a substantial salary as well as a chance to show loyalty to the company." He inspected his finger-tips. "Needless to say, the men who do prove their loyalty are first in line for the openings in the laboratory or draughting room."

"Go on, please," McCann said.

Vick cleared his throat and leaned forward. "You may or may not know that most of the workmen in this plant are members of a newly formed union. This union is working against our interests, and against the interests of the men themselves. We already pay the highest wages in the industry, and have the best working conditions. This union is simply breeding discontent.

"Mr. Falcon," Vick went on, "has always had the welfare of his employees at heart, and now he fears that they are in the grip of an unscrupulous group of racketeers. He wants to correct that condition."

A quizzical light grew in McCann's eyes. "Yes?"

"This position I mentioned is along that line. You will, of course, have to continue to work at your present job, and you will have to join the union. And then—then you will attend all the meetings, and whatever other gatherings the workmen may have. You will keep an accurate record of all labor

activities and report to me. For this small service, you will receive double your present wage."

"Wait a minute," McCann interrupted. "Are you trying to hire me for a labor spy?"

Vick swallowed, wet his lips. "If you insist upon using the baldest interpretation, you might call it that."

McCann was silent for a moment. This meant there would be other spies—twenty or thirty of them—scattered throughout the plant. One more couldn't make any difference, and—A thought ticked through his head. It would be safer, faster to work alone.

"I'm sure, if you consider it fully," Vick's deep voice broke the silence, "that you will—"

"Sorry," McCann shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't agree with you. A labor spy is my idea of something pretty low. It's a job I wouldn't want—at any price."

Vick's bloodless lips pressed into a thin line. "You're sure you won't reconsider?"

"Positive."

"I regret that; indeed I regret it very much. I was sure that a person of your ability and training would see his way clear to—" His voice died then, and he bent again to inspect the card in front of him. "I should, I suppose, discharge you, but I imagine that the employees already suspect that there are ah—informers among them. So—" He tipped his head back. "I will have to transfer you to another department." He scribbled something on a small card, passed it across the desk. "Take this to Douglass. You'll find him on the second floor."

McCann tucked the card into his shirt pocket, and stood up. He was nearly to the door when Vick spoke again.

"If you should—ah—change your

mind, you can notify me at any time. The offer will hold good for the balance of the week."

"Okay, but don't expect it." McCann went out and up the stairs to the second floor. One of the workmen pointed Douglas out, a gray-haired, long-faced man who glanced at the card McCann handed him and said, "Hmhm. Well, I can always use a good man up here." His dark eyes probed McCann's face. "Heat bother you?"

"I don't know, I've never worked where it was very hot."

A small grin pulled at Douglas's lips. "You will from now on."

HE LED the way down a narrow aisle through a large double door into a room that was heavy with the smell of fresh paint. It was hot here, too, with a damp, cloying heat that started the sweat springing from every pore on McCann's body.

Douglas stopped beside a tank that reared to shoulder height above the floor. "You'll work here." He jerked a thumb at a man who stood on a wide metal bench halfway up the side of the tank. "He'll show you what to do."

Douglass left, and the workmen gestured at a locker against the wall, said, "Get an apron."

McCann obeyed, and then came back to watch. A hooded oven—like a tunnel about six feet wide and eight feet high—ran the length of the room, and then curved along the wall. There was an opening in the oven beside the metal bench, and the workman was dipping bundles of parts into the tank of paint, and hanging them on hooks suspended at intervals below an endless chain inside the oven.

McCann climbed up on the bench. The hot breath of the oven licked out to meet him, heavy with paint fumes.

The workman grinned. "You can quit worrying, guy, it can't get any worse than this. You got the worst job in the whole plant right now."

McCann worked a smile on his lips. "Okay. What's first?"

The workman showed him. Showed him how to slosh a fifty-pound bundle of fender braces back and forth in the tank. How to wait until the endless chain brought the hook into position, and how to heave that dripping bundle up over the tank edge. Finally how to get it at arm's length and hold it there, while his feet slipped on the paint splashed bench, until the moving hook yanked the load out of his hands.

McCann worked in grim silence. A half dozen times that morning he was ready to quit, and a half dozen times the memory of his father's bitter voice held him there. "*You've never had the guts to stick to any job!*"

His gloves were slippery and paint-sodden by the end of the first ten minutes. He tried working without them, and burned his hands on the hot metal of the endless chain. The paint dripped off the apron, soaked through his trouser legs, got into his shoes.

And the heat . . . The fumes that swept out of that oven door were like Hell's own breath. Sweat trickled off the point of his chin, ran into his eyes.

He was an hour cleaning up that night before he left the plant. Later, at the hotel, he pushed away from the table, and left his dinner almost untouched. He was asleep almost before he could push his aching legs flat against the sheet.

The next day was a continuation of the same, frenzied inferno. Always, the grinning giant who shared the bench with him held to the same killing pace. Up. Down. Up. Down. The heat seemed to increase with each passing hour.

Quitting time found McCann barely able to climb down off the bench. That night he didn't even try to eat.

Two other days McCann spent on that bench before he looked down to find Douglas standing beside him. The gray-haired man was smiling. "The assembly line can't get along without you, McCann. You're to report back there for your old job in the morning."

The paint-smeared giant laughed after Douglas had gone. "I was thinkin' you'd make a good pardner one of these days. These other guys never last."

"Mister," McCann said heartily, "I can understand that."

ROBB'S muddy eyes narrowed for just a second when McCann stopped at the body drop the next morning. "What are you doin' here?" he demanded.

"I was transferred back here," McCann replied.

"Stool pigeon, huh?"

McCann's lips flattened. His hands came up, doubled. He had taken two steps toward the squat man when a hand touched his arm, and an easy voice asked, "Where've you been, lad?"

McCann spun to find the Saddler brothers standing behind him. "Paint shop," he said tersely.

Kim's eyes hardened, and his voice was raw. "Paint shop, huh? It's funny, but they only transfer one kind of guy out of the paint shop."

"You're wrong," Mack Saddler cut in. "The lad's no spy."

"Maybe not," Kim drawled, "but it'll take a lot to convince the other men."

Mack Saddler drew McCann aside. "There's a meeting tonight, lad. How'd you like to go down there with us? You could come out to the house for supper and we'll all ride together."

"This won't get you in bad?"

Mack shook his head. "It couldn't, not any more than we already are."

"Thanks. I'll be glad to come."

Work under the body drop seemed easy after the blistering blasts of the paint shop. Not once during the morning hours did Robb speak to him, and not once was it necessary for McCann to leave his task unfinished.

At noon he ate with the Saddler brothers at the long table against the wall. He had finished before he realized that they were alone at the big table—though every other table in the room was crowded. Coventry . . .

Kim saw his puzzled look. "One thing about eating with you," he drawled, "it's a cinch to get elbow room."

Mack said, "Lay off, Kim, it isn't his fault they think he's a spy."

"No, and it wasn't O'Malley's fault he didn't like the union." Kim's voice was loud, raw. "But he couldn't be any deader!"

The voices at the tables around them died abruptly. There was only a shuffling, rustling murmur as the men twisted to face them. The silence thickened, grew, spreading like a wave across the room. It held, thick and taut, until Robb's bull voice rang out.

"We gotta clean these damn spotters out. We gotta be sure there's no stool pigeons sittin' in on the meetings."

Mack's husky whisper brought McCann's head around. The tall man's face was suddenly, strangely old.

"Kim," he said, "Kim, you—you fool!"

Kim's mouth was a hard line. He made a disdainful noise with his flat lips—a little explosion of disgust and stiff-necked defiance.

McCann had a chance to speak to Mack as they filed past the time clock.

"Maybe we'd better call the dinner off. I've caused you enough trouble—"

"Afraid?" the tall man asked.

"It isn't that, but—"

"Then we won't change it."

Low-voiced comment followed them across the floor to the body drop. Heads averted quickly as they approached, and tight voices buzzed in their wake. Saddler's expression never changed.

McCann watched Robb narrowly all afternoon, but the squat man was unusually good-humored. Once or twice he grinned thickly at McCann, but he didn't speak.

Quitting time found McCann still puzzled, still wondering. The thunderous clamor of the line had died away, and he was racking his tools when Kim's harsh, "Duck, lad!" burst in his ears.

McCann crouched then, threw up his arms. An end-wrench clanged viciously against the post beside him, spun away. McCann whirled. Fifty pairs of eyes met his stare. There were a hundred men within easy throwing distance, and any one of them might have hurled the wrench.

McCann turned to Kim, "Did you see—"

"Not a thing, lad, forget it."

MARK and Kim Saddler waited outside McCann's hotel while he shaved and got into a dark suit. Kim looked at him sharply when he got into the car, but didn't speak. During the rest of the ride Kim was slouched far down on the seat, his chin on his chest, staring moodily in front of him.

Once McCann tried to start a conversation, but drew only monosyllabic answers. Kim didn't speak until after Mack had stopped in front of a low, frame house.

"Listen, Duncan, you say you're not a spy. That's okay with us, we believe you." He laughed harshly. "Maybe we're suckers but that's the way we're made. Anyway even a spy wouldn't be dumb enough to do what you're doing."

McCann only stared.

"Don't go into the hall in those clothes. That suit is tailor made and it cost two hundred if it cost a dime. Same with the overcoat. One look at those duds and you'll never be able to make the other guys believe you aren't on two payrolls!"

Mack said, "I'll lend him a jacket, and he can leave his clothes in the car." He raced the motor. "We'll be back for you at a quarter to eight, Kim."

Mrs. Mack Saddler was a full-checked, smiling woman who made McCann feel at home from the moment she met them at the door.

"You'll be John Duncan," she greeted him. "And wouldn't you think, after all these years, a husband would know enough to warn the cook when he was bringing company for supper?"

Then she was taking his hat and coat while Mack laughed. "That's a woman. Even a week's notice isn't enough. She's been plannin' on this, mind you, for two days, and if you don't praise her pie, she'll hate you forever."

It was a friendly house. More than that, it was a warm, wholesome home that had known much living. The rugs and furniture were old and worn, but spotless. A well filled bookcase stood against one wall of the living room, and there was a stack of magazines on the center table that had seen much reading.

They ate in a white-walled kitchen, off shining oilcloth. Mrs. Saddler kept his coffee cup full, and tried twice to make him eat a third slice of apple pie.

Mack Saddler stuffed his pipe, and smoked thoughtfully for some minutes before he said, "We'd best be moving, lad." He turned to his wife. "If you'll hunt up that old leather jacket of mine, Ann."

She hesitated for just a moment before she left the table, and McCann could have sworn that it was fear that looked out of her eyes, clouded her voice.

"You — you'll be home early, Mack?"

"Right after the meeting."

She brought the jacket, and accompanied them to the door. "We'll be seeing a lot of you," she told McCann. "I know Mack will want you to come back often."

Five minutes later Mack ran the car into the driveway beside his brother Kim's house and sounded the horn. He was bending forward to shut off the motor when a slender figure slipped away from the deep shadow of the garage and ran to the side of the car.

"Mack! Mack . . ." It was a woman's rushing, breathless voice. "He's—he's drinking again, and he's fretting about the union. I've tried to persuade him to stay home, but he won't listen."

She was leaning against the car door then, her hand on Mack's arm. The glow of the dashlight showed her finely cut features—her twitching mouth, her frantic eyes.

"Don't worry, Elsie," Mack said evenly, "we'll take care of him."

"But he might lose his temper, Mack, he might. He's so upset. He might do anything. I couldn't stand it if he should be . . ." Her voice dropped. "He's all I have, Mack. He might forget me and the kids for a minute, but he'd be sorry when it was too late. It's his temper, Mack, you'll have to watch

him." She made a little moaning cry. Her hand leaped to cover her mouth. "What would we do if they killed him!"

"Steady, Elsie, you're being foolish now. Nothing's going to happen to Kim." Mack patted her shoulder clumsily. "We'll take care of him. He'll be home in a couple of hours."

"You're—you're sure?"

"I promise."

The woman raised her head, her imploring eyes clung to McCann's face. "You? Will you help watch him?"

"Of course."

There was a step on the concrete behind them, and the woman whirled, melted back into the darkness. The grinding *whir* of the starter drowned the sound of her footsteps. Kim Saddler heaved himself into the back seat, said, "Let's go." His lean face was dark, and a somber bitterness smoldered in his eyes.

Mack backed the car out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

STRIKE MEETING

UNION headquarters occupied a ramshackle building on the edge of the factory district. The auditorium had once been a theater, and the floor sloped sharply to the flag-draped stage. A wide balcony ran around three walls of the big room.

The hall was already crowded when Mack led the way to a bench against the back wall under the balcony. Tight groups gathered in a dozen places on the floor. Harsh voices blurred, overlapped, beat ceaselessly at their ears. Trailing plumes of tobacco smoke drifted under the hot lights.

Every seat in the hall was filled long before the meeting was called to order.

A thin, dark man in a rumpled suit acted as presiding officer. Mack whispered a terse explanation, "He's the president, the men elected him. Finn's the acting secretary."

McCann's restless eyes searched the room for the big, red-headed man. He wasn't among those on the platform, nor was he anywhere in the crowd.

A reedy-voiced secretary read a list of names of new members. McCann's name was among them. Someone from the floor made a motion that flowers be sent to three sick members, and it was passed by a hearty chorus of ayes.

An uneasy tension gripped the hall then. The sharp clatter of voices interrupted the president's toneless drone, and the speaker who followed him got even less attention.

"He's here!"

The voice came from high in the balcony, and was instantly taken up by a hundred other throats. A splatter of applause ran through the crowd as Mike Finn led a tight group of men through the side door. A smiling giant, his red head towered above those around him.

He paused in the center of the room, held up his hand for quiet. His rich, deep voice reached every corner.

"There's news for you tonight, men, good news."

Someone cheered, and the thunderous pound of stamping feet rose above the calls of, "Speech! Speech!"

Finn's white teeth shone in laughter. "Save the cheers," he shouted. "Time enough for that later." He swung, stalked down the aisle to the platform. The group that had come with him broke up, scattered among the crowd. Two of them found seats on the benches just ahead of McCann. One of them was slim and small, no bigger than a boy. His full-cheeked face was

smooth except for the two deep, harsh lines that bracketed his mouth. A bottle-neck protruded from his coat pocket, and when he spoke to the man beside him his speech was thick, blurred.

The other was almost as big as Finn himself. His high cheek-boned face was flat, scarred, and his brows were only pale glints above lidded eyes.

Mike Finn had crossed the stage, turned to face the crowd. Kim Saddler leaned close to McCann as waves of sound swept over the floor. "They work for Finn," he whispered. "The big guy is Montana Fells. He's Finn's bodyguard and number-one gunman. The other one's Ryan."

McCann nodded, and turned his eyes toward the platform. Finn had begun to speak, and the crowd grew still.

"Six months ago," he said, "I talked to forty or fifty of you from this platform. I promised you certain things if you would help me form an organization. You did that, and tonight I can tell you that the things I promised are within reach.

"I promised you higher wages. I promised you better working conditions. I promised you a share in the profits, and a closed shop."

Finn paused then, allowing the expectant tension to build up before he went on. "And tonight I can tell you that those things are within our reach!"

A salvo of cheers rocked the hall.

"We can get those things," Finn roared, "and we will! Why should the general manager of the Falcon Plants draw a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year in salary alone? Why should he receive a bonus of seventy-five thousand dollars?"

A bull voice from the balcony roared, "Yah! An' he wouldn't know an end-

wrench from a paint brush!" Laughter and cheers swept over the floor. The rumble of stamping feet choked the room with sound.

THE short man in front of McCann was tugging at the flask in his pocket. "I knew it," McCann heard him say, "I knew that'd put 'em in the aisles."

The big man twisted his head, growled, "Shut up, Ryan."

"No man can earn that much," Finn was speaking again. "That money should go to the workmen who build the Falcon cars." The silence came back to the big room. "And the union is in a position to demand that the profits be split up among the workmen. Our membership in the Falcon Plant is a hundred per cent. They have to listen to us now, or we'll shut their plant up tighter than a drum. If they don't meet our terms they can't turn a wheel.

"Here's the program. Tomorrow morning Falcon will get a list of our demands. Union recognition, a boost in wages, shorter hours. If he doesn't meet those demands we'll close his plant. We want union recognition, and we'll get it! Your jobs will be safe then. They won't be able to fire any man without—"

A low-voiced murmur ran through the crowd. "Strike!" A half hundred voices caught the word, repeated it until it echoed from every corner of the room. "Strike!" The muttering died, but the air was electric.

"Wait!" Finn's head was thrown back, his hands held up for silence. "Don't get the wrong idea. We don't want a strike—except as a last resort—and there isn't one chance in a hundred that we'll have to strike. But we've got to be prepared. We've got to build up the strike fund."

Kim's long fingers dug deeply in McCann's arm.

"Mr. President," Finn was addressing the thin man at the speaker's table, "I move that a special assessment of ten dollars be levied on each member. This to be effective at once; the money to be added to the general strike fund."

The thin man was getting out of his chair when big-shouldered Montana Fells bellowed, "I second that!"

Finn was smiling when he faced the crowd. "The motion's before the house, and all in favor may signify by the usual method."

The electric mutter ran through the crowd again. Then, faintly, someone high in the balcony said, "Aye!" Other voices came in, and the chorus grew to a mighty roar.

Finn smiled and nodded as the noise abated. McCann's head jerked around as sudden movement exploded beside him.

Kim Saddler was on his feet. He said, "Let go, curse you!" and shook his brother's hand off his arm. Then he faced the platform and shouted:

"Where's the rest of our money? Why don't you tell us that, before you bleed us for more?"

Awed silence hit the smoky room. Silence that stretched thin before Finn said, "Will you repeat that question, please?"

"You can be darned sure I will." Kim's lean face was paper-white, his hands were knotted into fists at his sides. "I want to know what's happened to the rest of our money. The union's had two thousand members for the last four months. The dues are three dollars a month. What happened to that twenty-four thousand dollars? Why can't that go in the strike fund?"

Someone yelled, "Throw him out!" Other voices joined the clamor, and

then Finn was shouting for silence.

"This hall costs you fifty or a hundred a month." Kim's harsh voice rang out. "And once or twice we've had free beer. And this is the third special assessment! Who gets the rest of the money? You? The general manager of the Falcon Plant is a piker alongside of you."

Finn's expression didn't change. "You can come to my office at any time, and the books will be opened for your inspection."

Mack was pulling at Kim's arm, saying, "Sit down, you fool! Sit down, while you can still—"

Again Finn had to wait for quiet before he spoke. "I can do this. I can bring a statement to the next meeting showing where every penny of the money was spent, and why those expenses were necessary."

Kim Saddler twisted away from Mack's grip, tried to speak, but a storm of protest blotted out his words.

"Quiet! Quiet!" Finn's great voice brought a semblance of order again. "He has a right to question me. Any of you have. This is *your* union. I'm just one of the officers. I'll be glad to answer any question. . . ."

"All right," Kim Saddler roared, "tell us what part *murder* has in union activity. Tell us why you had O'Malley killed! Tell us why—"

THE quiet lasted for just a clock tick, and then exploded into roaring chaos. All over the hall, men were coming to their feet, yelling. McCann got a glimpse of Kim's face as he twisted off the bench. It was white, set, and he was staring straight ahead with the startled eyes of a sleep-walker who has been suddenly awakened.

Then Montana Fells was lurching toward Kim, his big hands leaping for

the tall man's throat. Ryan was beside Montana, his lips tight across his teeth, the bottle still clutched in his hand.

Mack shouted, "This way, Kim, there's a door—"

But Montana Fells had Kim before he could move—had his thick-fingered hands locked around his throat, was pushing his head back. Kim rained blows on the big man's face but he didn't seem to notice. An unholy light flamed in his eyes, and the cords in his neck stood out. His terrible grip never lessened. Kim's blows were weaker, and his legs wilted suddenly.

McCann pushed forward, slammed into Ryan who turned open-mouthed. McCann swept the bottle out of his hand, swung it in a savage arc at a spot just above Montana's ear. Broken glass and whisky sprayed over the big man. He stood for just a second, unmoving, and then fell like a dropped coat.

Mack stooped, got his hands under Kim's arms. McCann bent to help. The angry mutter grew to full-throated roar. Kim was on his feet, swaying toward the aisle that was blocked by a solid wall of bodies. McCann was swinging to follow when a shoulder bumped his, and a low, cool voice said:

"The gun, fellal! You'll never get out without it! Montana's gun, it's under his arm!"

McCann dropped to one knee, fumbled under the big man's coat. He looked up, as his fingers found gun metal. Ryan was standing behind him. His head was bent, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"TAKE that guy out of town. Take him clear to the coast, an' don't stop on the way."

McCann came to his feet, lunged toward the Saddler brothers.

"Look out!" A fat man squawked.

"He's got a gun!" He pressed back away from the aisle. Others took one look at McCann's face and the black automatic in his hand and they, too, jammed away from the aisle. A lane to the rear door opened as if by magic. McCann could hear Finn's big voice above the roar of the crowd as he followed the Saddler brothers through the door. He turned to look back. The lane was still open, and at the far end of that lane Ryan was starting after him. Frail, short, his eyes were shadowed by a down-turned hat brim, his face might have been a boy's face save for the two deep, harsh lines that bracketed his mouth.

THEN the cool, night wind was in their faces as they hurried through the dark streets to the car. McCann stayed a little distance behind the others, watching the lighted square that was the Union Hall door for any sign of pursuit. There was none.

Saddler whipped the car over the Fifth Street ramp, then west on Rosemore. Ten minutes later he parked in front of a dine-and-dance place, and said, "I'll be right back." He slipped out of the car. When he returned he was stripping the foil off the neck of a pint bottle. He thrust it into his brother's hands, said, "Here, Kim, you need a drink."

The tall man shuddered, said, "Thanks!" in a flat, dead voice, and reached for the flask. He drank, and then turned to McCann. "Lad, you got me out of a bad spot."

"Forget it."

Mack said, "Out of that one, yes. But this isn't over yet."

"Why don't you say what you're thinking?" Kim demanded. "Why don't you tell me what a crazy fool I was? Why don't you ask me why I

didn't keep my mouth shut?" His voice broke, then rasped on. "I tried, Mack, I tried, but I had a bellyful of Finn's lies, and then—"

"Stop it, man, that's all behind us now. We've got to think." Mack got his pipe out of his pocket, loaded it slowly. "They won't dare kill you, at least not the way they killed O'Malley, not when every man in the union heard you. That's the thing that'll stop them. There are too many men in the plant who didn't want to join the union. One more killing, and they'll bolt. Finn knows that. Did you see the way the grinning devil sensed the pulse of them tonight? He'd not take a chance that'd wreck his plans. It'll be a different way, that's certain. An automobile accident, or a—"

"He couldn't," McCann cut in. "Even Finn can't get away with murder!"

"You're wrong, lad. He's done it before, and he will do it again."

"Then why don't you leave the city?"

The tall man turned. "Money, lad. It costs money to feed and clothe a family. You didn't meet my two boys; they were at a Scout meeting tonight. And there's three small ones in Kim's family. Our homes are here, and we've worked in the Falcon Plant for years. Then"—a rawness came into his voice—"the Saddlers have never been good at running."

"But there's nothing to hold you here," Kim said to McCann. "You'd be better off if you—"

"He's right, lad," Mack said softly. "Not only do you have to watch Finn's killers, but the rest of the men as well. They think you're a spy. They know you were in Vick's office before you went to the paint shop, and they know that you were transferred back to the

line. They think you're working for Vick."

"But—"

"Can't you see, lad, that half-headed little ape's clever? You wouldn't work for him, but if he can make the men *think* you are working for him, he can cover his real spies."

"So that's what he's doing?" Surprise rode McCann's hot words. "I can't see a dime's worth of difference between us. We're all in bad." He paused thoughtfully, then went on. "Two weeks ago I spent an afternoon listening to a grand old man tell me that our family had never known enough to quit a fight. If it's all right with you, I'll stick."

"It's foolish, lad."

McCann passed the heavy automatic into the front seat. "This should take care of anything they try outside the factory, and—"

"And inside the plant," Kim said bleakly, "they'll find me hard to kill. I've spent too many years there."

Mack got the car under way again. "It will be safer if we stay together as much as possible. We'll pick you up at your hotel in the morning, lad."

McCann didn't answer. He was remembering his father's voice, his words: "A word I didn't think I'd have to use on my son. *Yellow!*" And there was a sudden tightness in his chest, his throat was dry.

CHAPTER VIII

STORM WARNING

THE morning paper carried a headline which read: WAGE TILT ANNOUNCED AT FALCON PLANT. McCann's eyes leaped to the story below.

A wage raise that will affect every man employed by the Falcon Motor Company

was announced here today. The new scale, which goes into effect at once, sets a new high for wages in the motor industry, and is expected to end all labor trouble among the Falcon employees

McCann was carrying the newspaper when he walked to the corner to wait for the Saddler brothers. He grinned cheerfully as he climbed into the car, asked, "Did you see it? This means the war's over, and—"

Mack shook his head. "It means trouble, lad, black trouble. Finn will have to find another reason now for calling a strike. Falcon beat him to the punch, and by raising the wages he sidestepped the question of union recognition. Finn isn't interested in wages, he wants closed shop. He wants it badly enough to force a strike to get it."

"But he can't now," McCann interrupted, "the men got the higher pay they wanted. They've—"

Kim growled, "The men! Finn isn't thinking about the men. He wants recognition, wants it because then he'd be a little tin god, and Falcon would have to ask his permission to breathe."

"Then—"

"Watch yourself, lad, there's bad trouble brewing!"

The other workmen looked away when the three of them came up the walk to the plant gate. Again hostile eyes, and the electric hum of angry voices followed them past the time clocks, and up the ramp to the assembly line.

There was an ominous pressure in the big room. A real, terrible pressure that stretched McCann's nerves wire-tight, and turned Kim's face into a white, twitching mask.

Nor did that pressure vanish when the line began to move, and the strident, machine-gun clatter of the air-

hammers choked the room with throbbing sound. It showed in Robb's sullen, thinly lidded eyes, in the stiff set of Mack's shoulders.

Kim showed it in other ways, too. His flashing hands had lost some of their deftness. They were old hands now—stumbling, groping hands. Once the shellac brush slipped from his fingers, and a raw curse spilled from his lips as he stooped to pick it up.

An hour dragged past. Two. The threat of impending disaster gradually slipped away from McCann's mind. He had more than enough to do. Kim was slow in finishing each time, and McCann had to wait until the strip of insulation was in place before he could start his task. And each second counted when there was only little more than a minute allotted to each car.

Sweat crawled on McCann's back. Robb snarled curses from the other side of the line, and twice McCann saw the sharp-faced foreman hovering in the background.

McCann spoke to Kim as he shellacked the insulation in place on the next chassis. "Don't let it get you—"

Kim's sweat-streaked face twisted to face McCann. "It's not me," he panted, "it's the guy behind me. He can't keep up, and he keeps comin' over on me. They'll have to put a relief man in—" The strip was in place. Kim stepped back and away.

McCann dropped the punches in place, and signalled the hoist man to lower the body that hung above them. His face was thoughtful as he rammed the body bolts home. This might have been planned. They might force the foreman to transfer Kim to another job if he delayed the line. To a job where they could—

He finished his task, stepped back to let Mack Saddler crowd past him. The

next chassis was crawling into position under the body drop. Kim was only half done.

McCann placed one punch and stepped back, waited. Kim grooved the insulating strip in place, leaned forward to pick up the brush.

The hoist man was leaning half out of his cab, lowering the sedan body an inch at a time. McCann's eyes flicked from Robb's face to the yellowish features and knife-thin lips of the crane man. He froze there staring, for just a clock tick, while an uneasy warning churned in his brain.

He shouted wildly, "Kim! Watch out!"

KIM'S eyes jerked toward him. McCann had a split-second glimpse of wide, frantic eyes, of parted lips. And then the sedan body crashed down! McCann heard a scream, and knew, suddenly, that the hideous sound came from his own throat. For a full thirty seconds he swayed there, unable to move. His eyes clung to the car in front of him, to the sagging figure. . .

The dropping body might as well have been the blade of a guillotine. Kim had been trapped, his long body bent over the chassis. He wouldn't have—couldn't have known any pain. There hadn't been time. Just a frantic shout—and death catching him, crushing him there.

One of Kim's hands was close to his side. Blood dripped from his fingertips to join the spreading redness on the floor. The toes of his shoes left a wide, double mark as the moving assembly line pulled him down the floor.

Bellowing shouts rang loud above the clamor of the air hammers. The line stopped, and yammering voices replaced the noise of the machines.

McCann found himself beside the car, pulling Mack Saddler away from the body.

"Curse you," Mack roared, "let go of me! He might be alive. He might be—"

There were other men there then, fifty or a hundred of them, swirling around the body drop. Eager hands reattached the hoist cables, there was a grinding *whir* and the sedan body was jerked clear.

Taut silence exploded into a welter of horrified murmurs.

Mack stared at the pitifully crushed thing that had been his brother. Stared while his hands came up and knotted into fists. Then he turned blindly away. His eyes were glazed, fixed. The white pain lines around his mouth looked as though they'd always been there. He pressed his hands against his temples, pushed a single sentence through gray lips. "God, be good to Kim. He tried, you know he tried."

McCann's throat was dry. He tried to speak, but the words were only a meaningless blur. Saddler brushed past him to drop on a box and bury his face in his hands.

The white-jacketed first-aid men were jamming their way into the open space around the body. One of them dropped the stretcher and looked suddenly away, his face greenish, his mouth working.

The other man cursed him, and worked swiftly with a gray blanket. A moment later the blanket-swathed body was being carried through a narrow lane in the crowd.

A big man in a rumpled suit was talking to the sharp-faced foreman. He turned, eyes searching the crowd, and then yelled, "Where's the man who was acting as signal man here?"

McCann stopped in front of the big

man. "I was the signal man," he said.

The big man's face was screwed up in an angry scowl. His eyes flamed under bristling brows. "You were, huh? Well, how'd this happen?"

"He delayed in his job, and had to stay with the chassis until it came under the body drop. The crane man dropped the body on him."

"Did you signal for him to lower it?"

"No!"

"Well?" The big man swung to face the foreman. "Come on, come on, what's your version? We can't shut the line forever."

"I didn't see it, sir. I had noticed that he was behind, a couple of times this morning, but not enough to warrant a relief man."

Robb's squat body edged through the fringe of the crowd, stopped beside McCann. The big man growled, "And who are you?"

"Robb, sir. I work on the other side of the body drop. He and I"—he nodded at McCann—"have the same operation."

"Did you see the accident?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get it out. What happened?"

"Saddler, the man who was killed, was behind, sir." Robb's voice was even, low. "He couldn't keep up, and he had to come under the body drop with each car in order to finish his job. He was there this time, and I guess the kid here thought he'd finished when he waved the body down—"

"What? Are you saying that this man signaled?"

"It was a mistake, sir. He didn't look, and then when he saw Saddler was still under the body drop he tried to stop the hoist man, but I guess they got mixed up then and—"

"Why you—" Black anger beat in McCann's head. "You dirty liar! That crane man dropped the body without signal unless you waved him down!"

Robb's expression didn't change as he looked at the big man, but his voice became low, hesitant. "I—I hate to say it, sir, but he did signal. You can ask the hoist man."

McCANN'S anger flamed, grew, until in all the world there was only one face—the flat, thick-lipped face of Robb. Robb had done this! Robb had killed Kim Saddler, and now he was sidestepping the blame.

McCann's shoulders hunched, and his gloved hands clenched. Robb's startled eyes jerked to McCann's face, and he tried to step back. McCann threw the punch from his hips, straight at Robb's sneering mouth with all the weight and skill of his shoulders. Glove leather splatted soddenly on flesh. Robb went back, his mouth a crimson smear. McCann was lunging after him when the big voice shouted.

"Grab him! Grab him!"

Hands clawed at McCann's shoulders, threw him off-balance. A foot was thrust suddenly between his legs, and he crashed heavily to the floor. He twisted, instantly, surged up. Blows rained in his face. A fist smashed his head back; a boot thudded into his ribs.

The dull taste of blood was in his mouth then. He could feel smooth concrete under his hands, knew that he had to get up. Then a dozen hands were pulling him erect. Darkness crowded in on his brain. Dully he could hear the big man saying, "That's right, hold him. The police'll be here."

A moment later uniform blue showed in the crowd, and the big man said, "Over here, officer, arrest this man for murder!"

"What's this?"

"I want this man arrested for murder!"

The words smashed through the fog, burned in McCann's brain. Murder! Didn't the fool know that it was Robb and the crane man? Didn't—

This was just an ugly dream. He'd wake in a minute and find . . .

But the shining steel that clicked over his wrists was real, and so was the voice that said, "I warn you that anything you say now will be used against you!"

CHAPTER XI

INTERCESSION

THERE was no hot light this time.

The small office on the second floor of police headquarters was lighted only by the shaded glow of a green desk lamp. There was no violence—only a uniformed cop in the chair beside the door, and a soft-voiced, gray-mustached sergeant behind a flat-topped desk.

McCann's shoulders ached, his back was numb from hours in the straight-backed chair. His throat was raw. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd said, as he was saying now, "But I didn't kill Saddler. I didn't signal the hoist man, and if he says I did he's lying! Robb's behind this. Robb, and that—"

The sergeant's eyes never left McCann's face. "Wait a minute, fella. I been here a long time, and since I been here there's been a lot of guys sit in that chair. I seen 'em come in here for everything from petty larceny to murder. Tough guys, an' punks, an' they all say the same thing. They got an alibi, that's the first thing. Then they say we're fram'in' 'em, that they ain't guilty. Not to hear 'em tell it. They all

start out that way, but sooner or later we get the truth."

"But I didn't kill Saddler!"

"You were there, you were the signal man, and there's a couple of witnesses that saw you tell the crane man to drop that sedan body."

"You're wrong," McCann said desperately, "I—I was framed. I told you who did it."

The sergeant grunted disgustedly, "Okay." He swung, spoke to the cop beside the door. "Hey, give Black a yell, will you? This guy's goin' downstairs an' meet the wreckin' crew. He'll give—an' it won't be nice."

The cop went out.

"See?" The sergeant planted both elbows on the scarred desk-top. "You're goin' to have to talk sooner or later. You might as well get it over. Maybe you can get the D.A. to let you cop a manslaughter plea. That won't get you the chair, an' he can clean the case up in a hurry."

McCann didn't answer. He was trapped. The frantic realization grew in his mind. As thoroughly trapped as Kim Saddler had been when the sedan body hurtled down to crush him. Ruthlessly, perfectly. He'd have to face the reporters soon, and one of them would recognize him. Every paper in the State would carry banner headlines.

GOVERNOR'S SON FACES MURDER CHARGE!

There'd be pictures. Pictures of him in a cell, of his grim-mouthed, iron-backed father behind the desk in the governor's mansion. Suddenly his father's hard, unrelenting voice seemed to ring in his ears:

"My son will receive exactly the same treatment that any other man facing a similar charge would receive.

Should the courts find him guilty there will be no mercy shown!"

The cop came back through the door, and the sergeant wheeled around to ask, "Well, where's Black?"

"He aint' comin', Sarge. I met the captain in the hall, an' he wants the kid in his office right away. They got everybody an' his brother in there. Old Man Falcon's there, an' the chief, an' a—"

"Okay." The sergeant settled back heavily in his chair. "You're gettin' important now, fella. The big shots want to see you." He prodded the air with a stiff thumb. "On your feet, he'll show you where to go."

McCann got up silently, and preceded the big cop out the door, and down the hall.

"In here." The cop stepped past McCann to open a door.

McCann was well into the room before he saw the familiar, blocky figure in the chair beside the window. Stanley! Had the news of his arrest already got to the State Capitol? Or—?

McCann stiffened as Stanley's eyes raked over his face.

THEIR eyes locked, held. There was quick tightening around Stanley's mouth. Then, almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. He was looking away, carefully stripping the wrapper from a slender cigar when the red-faced police captain spoke.

"Duncan, we've uncovered some information that makes it necessary for you to—"

"Better do this right," Stanley cut in evenly. "Tell him he has a right to a lawyer. He doesn't have to talk to us unless he wants to."

"Yes, Mr. Stanley." The captain's face twisted into an annoyed scowl. He leaned forward, said heavily, "Duncan,

you have the right to wait and consult an attorney before you answer any questions, but these gentlemen would like to talk to you now."

McCann said, "Thanks. I'll be glad to tell them anything I can."

"Fine." A lean, dark man left a chair near the wall and came to the desk. McCann stifled a gasp of surprise. He didn't have to be told who this man was. J. N. Falcon's picture was in print too often. The dark eyes, the shaggy brows, and the jutting crag of a nose were unmistakable. J. N. Falcon, head of the Falcon Automobile Company.

Falcon put one hand on the desk. "This gentleman and I," his flat gesture indicated Stanley's bulk, "have been investigating this accident since the time the report of your arrest reached my office. We're here because we're convinced of your innocence."

"Thank you, sir, I—"

"We checked back," Falcon went on, "and found that the hoist man had vanished. The police have found no trace of him so far. It might have been possible for you and the hoist man to have planned this, but I'm inclined to doubt it. The hoist man was transferred this morning from a different part of the plant. You would have had no way of knowing that he would be, and no way of arranging this so quickly." He waited a moment and then added, "We'd like to hear your story."

"Surely." Words crowded McCann's tongue. This was the chance he'd been waiting for. This—

And then he knew that he could say none of those words. The union could still reach Mack Saddler, could still kill him as ruthlessly as they'd killed his brother. Any accusation he made would sign Mack's death warrant. Besides he had no proof. He knew—every man

In the plant knew—but that wasn't evidence that would stand in court.

"Well?" Falcon was leaning forward, waiting.

"Just a second." Stanley got to his feet. "Maybe I'd better tell him whom I represent. I'm investigating the rumors of labor trouble for Governor McCann."

McCann wet his lips, swallowed.

Stanley went on before he could speak, his narrowed eyes an icy gray. "What we want to know is this. Was this accident the result of trouble with this new union?"

"No," McCann said quietly, "as far as I know it wasn't."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Then," Falcon said, "the only thing that remains is that the hoist man got mixed up in his signals and dropped the sedan body at the wrong time. He kept quiet, fearing arrest, then ran."

"But, Mr. Falcon," the Captain asked, "how about this? Wouldn't it have been possible for Duncan here to have signaled the hoist man to drop that—"

"No." Falcon turned away from the desk. "If you had taken the trouble to send one of your men up into that crane cab you would have known better. The operator can not help but see the chassis and the men around it if he can see the hand signals." His voice was tired, thin. "Your job will be waiting for you, lad. I've never yet fired an employee of mine for something he didn't do."

McCann said, "Thanks," and watched the door close behind Falcon's gaunt figure.

THERE was a moment of silence after Falcon had gone, and then the captain shrugged, saying, "That

puts you in the clear, guy. If Falcon don't want you, we don't."

Stanley spoke then, his voice a soft purr. "I'd like a chance to talk to Duncan before he leaves. If you've got an office I could use . . ."

"Sure." The captain got to his feet. "Use this one. I'm overdue at home now anyway. I'll clear Duncan at the desk. He can leave whenever you're through with him."

The captain left, and Stanley grinned at McCann. "I was afraid you wouldn't get the idea, Duncan." He dropped in a chair. "Sit down, I've a couple of questions to ask."

McCann waited silently. "Davork and I are investigating labor conditions for your father. You've been working in the Falcon Plant, maybe you can help."

"I know a little about it."

"Swell. Davork and I aren't getting along any too well. He's been your father's secretary too long. He insists on working alone."

"I know," McCann said bleakly. "Davork's like that. I'll tell you what I know if you'll give me your word not to tell the Governor that I'm here."

Stanley nodded slowly. "I thought it might be like that."

"Okay. This union's big, bigger than anything I've ever seen. They've got a hundred per cent membership in the Falcon Plant." Swiftly McCann sketched in details of the method of organization. Stanley's cigar went out in his hand as the big man hunched forward, listened intently.

"They've killed two men that I know of," McCann finished, "and it looks like they're going to get away with it."

Stanley whistled. "This is big."

"Too big to operate without protection of some kind. There's someone higher up than Finn. There has to be.

He couldn't order men killed if he didn't know he'd get away with it. That means the city officials are in his pay, or—"

"Or," Stanley cut in harshly, "one of the state police officials. He's covered, that's a cinch, but we'll find out who's covering him." He struck flame from his lighter, relit his cigar. "What are you going to do?"

"Go right on working here."

Stanley frowned. "It sounds like it might be dangerous, kid, but I guess you can take care of yourself. Listen: I'll give you my phone number, and if anything comes up you can call me. I'll see that your father gets the information. Give us warning before Finn calls a strike. That'll tie up the whole city." Stanley penciled a number on the back of his card. "There, that'll get me any time."

McCann got to his feet. "I'll be going, then."

Stanley said, "Okay. I'm just waiting for Davork, and then we're driving back to the Capitol."

MCCANN left Stanley, rode down in an elevator, and collected his belongings from an impersonal desk sergeant. A couple of minutes later he was pushing through a swinging door, and out into the street.

He went east, striding full into the face of the raw wind. He had nearly reached the center of the block when the big sedan swung in ahead of him, and rolled across the walk to stop just a car length down the narrow-walled alley.

McCann paused, eyes shiny with thought. Finn's car. He'd have known that blue and silver paint job anywhere. McCann waited a full half minute, scowling in taut indecision, before he

moved close to the building front and flattened hard against the brick at the corner of the alley.

He could hear the indistinct rumble of Finn's big voice above the low murmur of the engine. Another man spoke then, and the sound put ridges of muscle along McCann's jaw. He'd heard that harsh, nasal twang before.

The car door opened then, and Finn's voice was plain, "I'll keep in touch with you."

"Do that."

The sedan's motor snarled, gears snicked, and it was gone. McCann waited. Footsteps rang hollowly on the damp concrete, came toward him. McCann moved as the short figure loomed in the alley mouth. He lowered his head, took two quick steps, and rammed solidly into the short man.

The short man cursed as he stumbled backward. His hat bounced off, rolled toward the gutter. "Why don't you watch where you're goin'?"

McCann mumbled, "Sorry," and scooped up the short man's hat. They were close together when he straightened. Close enough for McCann to see a thin mustache, thick glasses, full lips, and a long, pointed chin. Then the short man snatched his hat from McCann's hand, wheeled away.

McCann stared after him, said, "So long, Davork," in a low, bitter voice. His eyes were bleak, and his face was set as he strode into the night.

Ten minutes before he'd been telling Stanley that the union had the protection of some higher-up, some power. And now he had seen Davork and Finn together. His father's secretary and the union boss! McCann's throat was tight. The union was protected all right. And it looked like the protection came straight from the Governor's desk!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

And See the World

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "The Quest of the Golden Lie," "Battle Piece," etc.

BACK in the old days in San Francisco—this was quite a long while ago—there was a runner named Limpy who worked for a crimp named McMahon. They were a queer outfit. Artists in their way, if you know what I mean. Limpy's job as a runner, of course, was to go sailing out and meet incoming ships. He'd carry his pockets full of bottles and pass drinks around on a ship he'd boarded while he told what a swell saloon and rest house McMahon ran for sailors ashore. According to Limpy, McMahon was a regular mother to land-bound lonely seamen. And the liquor in the hottles Limpy passed around was a sinister, Janus-faced brew that caused strong tars to become babes in Limpy's arms.

Even the biggest and toughest hawlers who sailed the seven seas wouldn't do a thing against Limpy's never-failing drops. They were sure-fire.

By the time the ship was anchored and tidy, the forecastle hands were raging to get on shore. If they didn't go with Limpy, they'd go in some other crimp's boat, and to some other place. Since they hadn't drawn all their pay, their skipper was satisfied. All that they did draw, the crimp got. Then one morning they'd wake up in a strange forecastle at sea—with had headaches—and find that the crimp had collected the maximum legal advance on each man.

So the crimp was satisfied, and the captains were satisfied. Nobody was annoyed except the sailors.

That was the regular trick. But Limpy and McMahon were artists in their line. Also, McMahon was an economical soul. It irked him to have a hunch of drunken forecastle hands around his place, breaking things and carousing. So Limpy and

Limpy wasn't very bright about most things—but his drops were sheer perfection.

McMahon—being artists—evolved a simpler and more efficient way of doing business. McMahon had a place that looked like a saloon. And he had a very special kind of knock-out drops. They were Limpy's drops. Limpy had perfected them and they were a creation worthy of an artist.

Limpy still acted as runner and met the ships. He described the imaginary delights to be had in the imaginary saloon—the non-existent music, the mythical dance-hall girls. He got the forecastle hands so interested that they would jump into his boat, and they'd go to McMahon's and McMahon would greet them heartily and say the first drink was on the house. And they'd drink it. Limpy'd take one too, of course, but his never had his drops in it. He'd drink his drink, and grin at the others, waiting.

The peculiar thing about Limpy's drops



was that they hit a man's legs first, not his head.

He couldn't get up.

So Limpy'd sit there, grinning, while McMahon went off—ostensibly to summon entertainment. And Limpy'd grin, and grin, until one of the sailors tried to get up. And he couldn't, and the others would try, and find that they couldn't. Then Limpy would begin to laugh. And he'd keep on laughing, in spite of the sailors cursing him horribly, until the drops finished their work and the men fell bitterly to sleep. And just before they'd go off, Limpy would give them a grin and jeer at them. "Have a nice trip, boys," he'd say. "And see the world." Then Limpy would help McMahon clean their pockets and carry them out back—often right into waiting horse-drawn cabs that took them to another ship that needed a crew. McMahon never had any trouble shipping men he'd crimped. They weren't all soft and groggy from two or three weeks of drinking. They were hard and ready for duty.

Limpy enjoyed his work. Laughing at men who'd swallowed knock-out drops in their first drink ashore was just his style of humor. And besides, he took inordinate pride in his artistry. He thought nobody else could do the job with exactly the finesse with which he did it. He even got upplish to McMahon. He demanded more money, and, when McMahon refused, Limpy held out on what he took from the pockets of the unconscious sailors. He felt that the whole business depended on him.

You see, he'd perfected the drops.

But McMahon couldn't see it that way. Although there were never any words between them—McMahon was too old and smart a hand to argue with the smartest crimp that the Golden Coast had ever seen—Limpy knew that McMahon was watching him—and waiting. But he wasn't afraid. Limpy was smart. He knew all the angles—although they didn't call them angles in those days—and he knew that McMahon wouldn't dare start anything. Oh sure, Limpy was riding high—making pretty

good money and enjoying his joke, watching his drops work on the poor chumps. Limpy wouldn't have had his life changed for anything on this earth.

ONE day Limpy sailed out and met a ship coming in, and presently led a motley, thirsty, uproarious mob of fore-castle hands into McMahon's place. And the first drink was on the house. Limpy drank one too, but he knew his didn't have his special drops in it. The peculiar thing about Limpy's drops—you will recall—was that they hit a man's legs first, not his head.

He couldn't get up.

So Limpy sat there, grinning. The joke, for Limpy, never got stale. These men were looking forward to two or three weeks of soft, uproarious living, but Limpy knew that the cabs were already waiting out in back to carry them to the *Vestra*. And the *Vestra's* captain was so tough that even crimps made him pay extra for his crews. One trip on the *Vestra* was enough for any sailor.

One trip on the *Vestra*, most seafaring men said, was more than enough for any sailor on any coast.

Limpy grinned at them until one of the sailors tried to get up and couldn't, and then Limpy laughed outright. Then the rest tried their legs and found them like sponge and they knew what was the matter. They cursed Limpy horribly. Some of them tried to crawl toward him, to kill him, but their movement just made the drops work faster.

Limpy didn't even bother to move when they tried to crawl toward him. He knew his drops. He laughed until he nearly fell out of his chair as the cursing men went, one by one, to sleep.

Then McMahon appeared at the back door. He grinned at Limpy. Then Limpy started to get up to clean out the men's pockets and help carry them to the waiting cabs.

But—

Limpy found that he couldn't get up. His drops were perfect, weren't they?



Leach looked down at the note pinned to Mickey's shirt

King Colt

By LUKE SHORT

JOHNNY HENDRY was perfectly content to be the easy-goin' deputy of an even easier-goin' sheriff in a county that seemed to be run solely for the benefit of hard-cases, wanted men, cattle thieves and killers. Johnny's idea was that no real man ever ran to the law in trouble, anyway.

But when old Picket-Stake Hendry, Johnny's foster father, was reported dead, Johnny's mood abruptly changed. He wasn't going to rest until Picket-Stake's killer had been brought to the gallows.

Johnny's first move is to get himself elected sheriff, nosing out Baily Blue, his former boss, by a scant margin. Choosing Hank Brender and ex-badman Turk Hebron for his deputies, Johnny begins to clean up the town in grim earnest.

Apparently he's a little too successful.

Somebody is getting worried. Two attempts are made on Johnny's life—and, as a final blow, a little juggling of the election returns pushes Johnny out of office, and Blue is legally declared sheriff once more. No sooner has that happened than Johnny and his two deputies are framed for a bank robbery and forced to skip town. But they don't go far, for Johnny is still determined to find Picket-Stake's murderer.

BUT Picket-Stake isn't dead at all. He shot faster than the man who attacked him, and has let himself be thought dead just to see what Johnny would do about it. Picket-Stake has found a rich claim but the money doesn't matter if young Johnny is nothing but an amiable ne'er-do-well.

Meanwhile a clue is provided to Picket-Stake's "slayer" when sample ore turns up at the assay office—ore that could only have come from Picket-Stake's saddlebags. Attempting to ferret out the mystery, Hugo Miller, the assayer, discovers that the man who had brought in the ore and the claim papers was merely a more or less innocent pawn in this game of gold and death. But before he can learn any more, the man is killed and the claim papers stolen. Miller, disappointed that the ore hadn't been very rich, has falsified the assayer's report to

This story began in the *Argosy* for July 3

make the killer think he'd struck it rich. Then when he went to the claim, Miller intended to nab him. But now the chase seems hopeless. . . .

CHIEF among Johnny's supporters is Major Fitz, the manager of the big syndicate-owned Bar 33. Fitz's fellow cattlemen put his name on the list of undesirables they gave to Johnny; but even so, Johnny can't believe that Fitz is dishonest.

And yet Fitz is the clever spider in the web of Cosmos County crime. Through Leach Wigran's band of desperadoes, Fitz has been behind all the robbing and the rustling. It was one of Fitz's men who tried to kill Picket-Stake, and it was another of Fitz's men who found the body of the slain gunman, stole from it the ore that Picket-Stake had left for him to find—and died before Fitz's gun when he was no longer useful to the Major. It is Fitz who has framed Johnny . . . Fitz who worked the election swindle that cheated Johnny of his star. . . . And it is Fitz who, falling into Picket-Stake's bandit trap, now thinks himself in possession of the claim papers to a phenomenally rich mine.

Anxious to maintain the friendship of Johnny's supporters, who are the law-abiding element of the town, Fitz offers a reward for the discovery of the "real" bandits, or for evidence tending to prove Johnny innocent of the bank robbery charge.

It is a smart move and completely wins over people who were beginning to have doubts of the Major's honesty. Nora, the girl who loves Johnny, is surer than ever that Fitz is Johnny's friend, and Commissioner Bledsoe, watching Fitz ride away after posting the reward notice, calls the Major "the finest man in the whole of Cosmos County." Her eyes shining, Nora agrees. With Major Fitz on his side how can Johnny Hendry lose?

CHAPTER XIII

STUBBORN JOHNNY

JOHNNY remembered a little-known water hole high in the foothills of of the Calicos that Pick had told him about long ago, and it was here they decided to make their camp. It was a long, silent ride, for all of them were disheartened at the news Johnny had brought from Hugo. It meant that every clue they had to Pick's killer had vanished. And of the three, Johnny was the most downcast.

Outlawry would have meant nothing so long as he had a chance to even Pick's score, but now that this was gone, these long and aimless days on the dodge would be intolerable. He resolved grimly not to remain idle, waiting for chance to free him of these outcast bonds. And he had the wisdom to sense that Turk and Hank, good men that they were, would fret at idleness until one or the other of them would decide to pull out. He must have a plan, something to keep them all busy until they could pick up again the trail of Pick's killer.

The camp did not suit him, but in the circumstances, it was the safest. Tucked in a fold of a gaunt and up-ended field of malpais, the trail to it was devious and rocky. To cross the malpais would have meant that the horses' hooves would be cut to ribbons, so that it was necessary to follow a thin ribbon of arroyo, which angled down through the malpais field to strew its pebbles over the glass-sharp terrain. Wood had to be hauled; there was no grass; but there was a tiny spring of good water seeping out of a crack in the black rock, and the jagged, up-thrust sides of a canyon afforded them the shelter they needed. If it was hard to get to, then it was all the safer, Johnny reasoned.

They spent the first day making the camp livable. They raked the sand and stones out of the arroyo into a small pocket of the canyon, so their horses would have a place to move around. Wood was hauled.

In mid-afternoon, the work was done, and it was now, Johnny knew, that the tedium of passive waiting would begin. Turk had looked at him several times today with a question in his eyes. Hank was more phlegmatic, but Johnny knew they were both thinking the same thing.

Squatting on his haunches against the steep side of the canyon, Johnny rolled a smoke and contemplated the camp. To Turk, who was sitting beside him, he said, "Well, it ain't much, Turk, but then we won't have to be in it much."

Turk looked at him swiftly. "How come? We're hidin', ain't we?"

Hank strolled across to join them now. Johnny waited until he too was seated, then said, "Hidin'? Maybe you could call it that. But if you keep movin', you're harder to find than if you sat still, aren't you?"

"But what can we do?" Hank growled. "Hunt the whole Calicos for that claim jumper that killed Pick?"

"Remember the proposition I made you when I thought I was goin' to be sheriff?" Johnny countered. "Well, that still holds. We're goin' to clean up this county."

"How?"

"Rustle from rustlers," Johnny declared. He paused, waiting for them to comment. When they didn't, he said, "Me, I'm not goin' to let anybody drive me out of this county. I aim to live here. Also, I aim to be sheriff of it some day. And when I am, I'm goin' to drive these hard-cases out, just like I promised. Well, maybe that day's far off, but I reckon I can start in to work right now." He grinned. "Also, since I ain't sheriff yet, I won't be bothered by all the laws a sheriff is bothered with. I'll fight these jaspers their way."

Turk looked fondly at him and laughed. "I could show you some tricks, fella'."

"Good! That's what I want. And Hank can learn 'em too—just in case he's hard up for a job some day. How about it, Hank?"

Hank grinned and nodded. They were with him, Johnny knew.

"When I thought I was goin' to be sheriff," he went on, "I went to Major Fitz with a proposition. It was this." And he told them about the lists the ranchers had given him of the men they believed should be driven out of the county.

"I got the answers," Johnny finished. "Who do you think got voted the most unwanted man in Cosmos county?"

"Me?" Turk queried.

Johnny grinned and shook his head. "Major Fitz."

TURK was surprised, but Hank, remembering things he'd seen while working under Fitz on the Bar 33, was

not; and Johnny, seizing on Hank's lack of surprise, questioned him. "You're not surprised, Hank. Why not?"

"I dunno," Hank said, after a moment's thought. "There was a time when I thought Fitz was a broad-gauge hombre, a man to ride the river with. Now, I dunno. I think he puts up a good front. But somethin' goes on in his head that we don't see."

"You think he could be a rustler?"

"I don't see how," Hank murmured. "I worked on the Bar 33 for a long time. None of them boys was doin' any considerable night ridin'. On the other hand, they wasn't a good crew, about what you could expect in a company outfit."

"Then if Fitz doesn't steal cattle, how'd his name get at the head of this ranchers' list?"

"Maybe they jst got a feelin', like I have," Hank replied. "Remember that jasper that tried to get away with the Esmerella gold? I can't prove it, but I feel like Fitz had somethin' to do with that."

Turk said reminiscently, "I knew a bank president once. He was the most pious son of a gun in the world. He prayed longer and louder than anybody in church. Come to find out, he was makin' too much money out of the bank. He was tied up with a cattle-stealin' ring. He'd pass on the word to the rustlers about who was borrowin' money to save their places and their cattle. Then those folks would be stole blind and the bank would foreclose on the place. He had a good thing out of it—and he never wore a gun." He looked at Johnny. "That's what you're hintin' about Fitz, ain't it?"

"About," Johnny said.

Presently Hank said, "Then if somebody's doin' his rustlin' for him, who is it?"

"What do you say, Turk?" Johnny asked. "You know all those boys."

"There's only one man doin' a real business, cattle-stealin'," Turk replied. "That's Leach Wiggin. The rest of them—me, too—wasn't swingin' an awful wide loop."

We'd take a dozen head here, and a dozen there and then quit for a month until we'd drunk it up. Once in a while, some of us'd get together, but Leach was the only broad-gauge cow thief."

"Then Fitz would be hackin' him?" Johnny asked.

"I never said so."

"He'd have to be. If not, these honest ranchers wouldn't put him ahead of Leach Wigran on those lists, would they?"

"Why don't you ask em?" Turk drawled, grinning.

Johnny's lean face showed disgust. "Ask 'em? If they're scared to sign a name to those lists, they're scared to say it out loud, aren't they?"

Turk and Hank nodded.

"All right. My plan is danged simple," Johnny said grimly. "I think Fitz is behind Leach. I aim to get proof."

"How?"

"I dunno. But I'm goin' to saddle up in an hour and try to find out. You ridin' with me?"

THEY were. It was decided they would ride over to Leach Wigran's spread. Perhaps by watching Leach's movements, observing as well as they could whom he talked to, who his visitors were, and how he worked, they might turn up a clue to his tie-up with Fitz. Johnny doubted it, however; it would be too easy for Leach to ride into town and receive his orders, either from Fitz, or, more likely, from somebody sent by Fitz. Even by letter. Nevertheless, he couldn't afford to pass up any bets.

But first, Johnny had another errand. Hugo had promised to deliver Johnny's message to Nora last night. She was to meet him east of town tonight, above the road to the Esmerella mine, just after dark. This would be on their way to Wigran's, and Johnny timed their ride so that they approached Cosmos just as dusk was settling into night.

The meeting place was a huge old cedar on a sloping butte, from whose top the lights of Cosmos could plainly be seen.

Johnny approached the place cautiously. He saw a horse tied under the tree and dismounted and walked slowly over.

A voice said, "Johnny!" and in another moment, Nora was in his arms.

Johnny laughed huskily as she buried her face against his chest. "I'm a better outlaw than you think, honey," he said gently. "They haven't got me yet."

"Oh, when will this be over, Johnny?" Nora asked despairingly. "Today, Baily Blue got a posse out hunting for you."

"That's queer," Johnny murmured, trying to see Nora's face in the dark. "He never bothered to do that before."

"Tip Rogers insisted."

"Tip?" Johnny asked softly. "So he's leadin' the pack now?"

"He was responsible for that gold that was stolen."

"Does he think I took it?"

Nora only nodded, and Johnny's jaw set a little more grimly in that darkness. This was the way things went, then. Your friends, like a pack of snarling dogs, only waited until you were down to jump on you.

He led Nora over to the tree and they sat down and Johnny asked for more news from Cosmos.

"Yesterday Major Fitz posted a thousand dollar reward for the bank robbers," Nora said quietly, "with this provision: that the reward should not apply to the capture of you or Turk or Hank." She paused. "You see he does believe in you, Johnny."

Johnny said dryly, "Does he?"

"Why do you say that?" Nora asked swiftly.

"Remember the ranchers' list?"

"That's foolish!" Nora said vehemently. "Do you still believe that?"

"Eight men out of ten—all honest—can't be that far off."

"But what evidence have you!" Nora cried. "Are you going to believe all the gossip you hear about a friend? You're hitted at Tip, I know, because he believes the worst of you. And now you're doing the same cruel thing to Major Fitz!"

Johnny had no answer to that. Still, he couldn't change his convictions. It was useless to tell Nora anything his judgment was based upon; it wouldn't convince her either. So he remained silent, feeling her anger against him, but stubbornly refusing to try to justify himself.

Nora was stubborn too. "I'd like you to explain a little, Johnny. You seem to doubt that Major Fitz believes in you."

"He may believe in my ability," Johnny said carefully. "But I doubt if he believes in the same thing I do—and you do—that this county deserves to be cleaned up."

"What cause have you to say that?" Nora demanded angrily. "Just because eight sneaking ranchers who hadn't the courage to accuse a man to his face did have the courage to do it behind his back?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

Johnny said wearily, "Darlin', you wear long spurs. Let it go. Let's talk about the weather."

"What other things?" Nora insisted.

"They don't matter," Johnny said stubbornly. "This vote of the ranchers is good enough for me."

Nora got to her feet, and Johnny rose to face her. "Major Fitz is my friend," Nora said coldly. "He is yours, too."

Johnny did not trust himself to speak. "First, he offered you the foremanship of the Bar 33 last year," Nora went on accusingly. "Then he advised you to run for sheriff. His men all voted for you. He was the first man to approve your scheme of this poll of undesirables. He gave you his best man to act as your deputy. He tore up heaven and earth for you when he heard you'd been framed. And to top that, Johnny, he has offered a thousand dollars reward for the real bank robbers." She paused, and Johnny could almost feel her contempt. "And now, in your deep gratitude, you believe what eight cowardly ranchers have to say against him without giving the least bit of proof!" She paused, waiting for Johnny to speak. He didn't. "Haven't you anything to say for yourself, Johnny?"

"You've said it all, I reckon," Johnny replied huskily, stubbornly.

"Then—then I don't want to see you again—not until you've changed your mind," Nora said haltingly. "I—I hate—yes, hate—ingratitude more than crookedness or stealing or lying or—" Her voice broke, and she turned away.

JOHNNY, standing motionless under the tree, watched her mount and ride off; and he could do nothing. But deep inside him, he felt a wave of bitterness and anger and unhappiness that was almost blinding. Automatically, he reached in his pocket and brought out his tobacco and rolled his cigarette. The smoke helped to calm him, but his hands were shaking so that he could scarcely hold the cigarette.

It was many moments before he could trust himself to turn and walk over to where Hank and Turk were waiting. And, he reflected, the heart gone out of him, all excuse for his staying here had vanished—except one. Pick. When that score was wiped off the slate, he would ride away. Even now, he couldn't blame Nora, but he couldn't understand either why she had forced herself to choose between their love and the casual friendship of Major Fitz. For a moment, panic almost seized him, and he was ready to mount his pony and overtake Nora and apologize. But even while he thought it, he knew that honesty would not allow him to do it, and that he was forever a slave—and a willing one—to that conscience Pick Hendry had bred into him.

When he was mounted again, Turk said, "Any news?"

Johnny told him of what Nora had said about Fitz's offer. Turk and Hank did not comment until they had put their horses up the slope and headed north, toward Wigan's.

"That makes us look like three prime saddle-tramps, don't it?" Turk observed.

"Look what's behind it," Hank said, and Johnny saw that Hank agreed with him.

"What?"

"If he's goin' to play out this hand he's dealt himself, he's got to have a front, don't he?" Hank argued sanely. "He knew Nora would bring this news to us, and that we'd think he was our friend." Hank spat.

CHAPTER XIV

BAR 33 STEERS

LEACH WIGRAN'S Running W outfit was placed deep in the timbered foothills of the Calicos. Johnny remembered that it was a big frame place built in the dead center of a grassy valley, so that no one could approach it without being seen. While Leach had not built it, it seemed as if this place was designed for a man of his shady business. Remote, inaccessible, in the heart of a wide, good range, with a thousand canyons behind it, it was a perfect headquarters for a cattle thief.

They had left the road long since, and were now making their slow way through the tall lodgepoles when Johnny spotted a light off to the right and below them.

"That's the Runnin' W," Turk said.

"We can't move till daylight," Johnny said, "so we might as well pick a comfortable spot."

It was just breaking dawn when they had settled on their place of observation. It was on a high wooded ridge which afforded perfect cover, yet allowed them a good view down through the tall avenue of trees to the valley below.

While they were not close enough to identify individual riders going into the Running W, they were near enough to the road to ride down for a closer view.

Slowly color began to bloom over the gray landscape, and day marched forward. Smoke began to rise from the chimneys of the Running W, and Johnny settled down to watch, while Turk and Hank rolled up in their blankets for an hour of sleep.

Soon, a strange and distant noise came riding down from the south on the faint wind. Johnny listened, head cocked. In another moment he identified it. The sound of a herd of howling cattle cannot be mis-

taken for long. They were being driven up the narrow valley to the Running W.

Johnny moved over to Hank and Turk, about to wake them, and then decided to let them sleep. He could do this job alone, and they were in no danger of discovery.

So, putting the bridle back on his horse, which was grazing with its saddle still on, he mounted and worked his way down the slope. He hurried, for the sound of the driven cattle was becoming plainer every minute. When he came to a sprawling thicket of scrub oak, he raised up in his saddle and looked down through the trees. Here, he could get a good view of the road. He tied his horse in the screening oak, then went forward and down the slope a way and hid himself in the brush.

Presently, the point rider appeared, the cattle strung out in a long howling line behind him. Johnny caught the brand on this rider's horse, and it was a Running W.

Then, through the cloud of dust that the shuffling herd was kicking up, Johnny tried to read the brands on the cattle. He saw one he thought was a Bar 33, but knew he might be mistaken. He could not be sure because these cattle were branded on the right hip, and he was on their left side. But he was patient, knowing that sooner or later he would have the chance to make sure.

And he did. One of the weary steers angled out of the herd and began to graze, turning back to get some fresh hunchgrass, and Johnny saw with amazement that he had been right. These were Bar 33 steers! Still he could not believe it, for this did not fit in with his theory. But when a calf, pushed ahead in the crush, finally broke loose and turned around and started howling for its mother, Johnny was certain. Bar 33 cattle!

When they were past, he walked back to his horse, mounted and turned up the slope, his face thoughtful. Hank and Turk had been awakened by the noise of the herd, and they had guessed where Johnny had gone.

"Whose were they?" Turk asked sleepily.

"Bar 33, believe it or not," Johnny said grimly. Hank sat bolt upright in his blankets.

"Well, I'll be sunk in sheep dip!" he said slowly, looking at Johnny. "Leach is s'posed to be workin' for Fitz. Where does that put us?"

"In the wrong," Turk ventured.

Johnny squatted on his haunches and sifted gravel through his fingers, staring thoughtfully at the ground. "Does Leach bring all his rustled stuff up to this place?" Johnny asked Turk.

"Mostly, he drives it over to Warms. It's too easy to track up to here. He ain't got enough rock and rough weather and wind and rain and hard goin' here, and that's what you need to steal cattle."

"Then why is he doin' it?"

Turk shrugged. Johnny was silent for a full minute, and then he rose and savagely threw down his handful of gravel.

"This don't make no sense at all!" He looked up at Hank. "You reckon Fitz sold or give him those cattle?"

"Might he—in payment for a joh, or somethin'?"

"I'm goin' to find out."

"How?"

"Backtrack, and see if the boys even tried to hide the tracks of this herd. If they did, it might be they stole the beef. If they didn't, it'd mean Fitz knew about them bein' moved."

AN hour later, the three of them rode down off the slopes to the valley bottom, and picked up the sign of the cattle. An hour of following the tracks showed them that the Running W men had taken no pains to cover up cattle signs. A two-hour drive to the east, in the rocky, mountain going, would have afforded the Running W men a terrain which would make the tracking of the beef less easy. Apparently, then, they were making no attempt to conceal the drive, although they had been careful to avoid the roads.

It was only when they did not find a bed ground, or place where the riders had camped, that Johnny became suspicious

again. "If they were drivin' bought beef, they'd've stopped to make a camp, wouldn't they, and rest the stuff?"

"Sure," Turk said. "It's a two-day drive from Fitz's place, if they didn't push 'em."

"Let's go on," Johnny said grimly. "They looked pushed."

In mid-afternoon, Hank, riding ahead as a sort of scout, wheeled his horse and rode back. "Pull off in the brush," he said. "Somebody else has the same idea as us."

They turned off behind a ridge into the brush, and dismounted. Johnny mounted the ridge and belled down to see who was coming.

A lone rider came into sight—Kennicott, one of the ranchers Johnny had seen some days ago. He was riding at a fast walk, eyes on the ground.

"It wasn't his beef," Johnny mused. "Why is he cuttin' sign for it?"

When Kennicott came to the place where Johnny and Turk and Hank had pulled off the trail of the cattle, he reined up. For a moment, he stared at their tracks, then up at the ridge, and suddenly whirled and spurred his horse off into the brush. A minute later, Johnny caught sight of Kennicott's horse heading back in the direction from which he had come.

Johnny returned to the horses and told what he had seen.

"Kennicott?" Hank exclaimed. "It ain't his beef."

"Maybe he was as curious as we was," Turk offered.

Johnny remembered that Kennicott might be one of the eight who accused Fitz. More evidence. He turned a thoughtful face to the south. "It's about time I talked to Hugo Wilks," he murmured. "I've got to find out what's goin' on in town."

They stopped on the outskirts of Cosmos just after midnight. The town, as in the days before Johnny Hendry's brief spell of sheriffin', was roaring wide open. The saloons were a bedlam of noise; occasional gunshots racketed down the street. A ranny, dead drunk in his saddle,

galloped past without even seeing them.

Johnny made his way carefully down the back alleys until he arrived at Hugo's. A pencil of light lay under the rear door; Johnny moved over to the window and looked in before he knocked. Hugo, his feet tilted on his desk, was deep in a book.

At Johnny's entrance, he rose and frowned. "I've been worried," Hugo said, regarding Johnny with fond seriousness. "Blue was out this morning lookin' for you with a posse."

Johnny grinned and sat down. "He'll never find us. We've got a safe hide-out."

"That's what he said when he came back," Hugo observed dryly.

"Came back?" Johnny echoed. "You mean he only looked for us one morning?"

"Oh, Tip Rogers is still out, but Blue was called back to town by business. Major Fitz had a herd of beef stolen."

"Ah," Johnny said. "Did he?"

"He and his men rode into town this morning and started yelling for Blue. It seems a herd of his just vanished." Hugo shook his head. "The hard-cases will start working on Fitz now, since he put up that reward money. Fitz thinks that's what's behind the rustling."

"Does he now?" Johnny murmured.

Hugo looked sharply at him, his curiosity awakened by the tone of Johnny's voice. For a moment, Johnny was tempted to tell Hugo what he suspected of Major Fitz, but he refrained. If he was wrong in his guess—and he was sure he wasn't—it would not be fair to Fitz. Besides, a secret can be kept only by a few. He said quickly to Hugo, "Did Blue go out with Fitz?"

"Out and back. The rustlers drove the stuff into the mountains, Blue said, and didn't leave a sign." Hugo smiled wryly. "It's the old excuse."

"Into the mountains," Johnny murmured, smiling privately. "So Blue give up?"

"He did. Fitz was helpless."

Johnny looked at Hugo with some curiosity. "Has anyone claimed that it was

me and Turk and Johnny that stole Fitz's stuff?"

Hugo shook his head. "Fitz killed that story right off. He said it was five men. Besides, he said you'd be the last man in the world to touch a head of Bar 33 cattle."

"Well, well," Johnny drawled.

Again Hugo looked at him sharply. He said suddenly, impulsively, "What's got into you, Johnny? You're changed."

A slow flush darkened Johnny's lean and browned cheeks. He cuffed his Stetson back on his forehead. "Changed?"

"Are you lettin' this frame-up sour you, boy?"

"No," Johnny said stubbornly. "Why?"

"Just a look in your eyes. Like you don't give a tinker's curse any more." He paused, as if wondering how what he was about to say would be received. "This is none of my business, Johnny, but have you had a row with Nora?"

"Have you asked her?"

Again Hugo shook his head. "No, but she's got the same look in her eyes that you've got—a nothing-matters-now look. Besides, when I asked her what you planned to do after she saw you last night, she didn't say a word." Hugo grinned disarmingly. "Maybe that's all right, but I've got an interest in your career too, boy."

"Maybe you better ask her, Hugo. As for me," Johnny said slowly, "you know how I feel about Nora—how I always will feel. No, that hasn't changed." He rose and hiked up his levis. "Nothin' new about Pick's claim?"

Hugo only shook his head. At the door, Johnny turned and said briefly, "It'll be some time before you see me again, Hugo. Take care of Nora, will you?"

And with that, he slipped out into the night. Back at the horses, he said to Turk and Johnny, "Fitz had a herd of beef stole. Blue went out to take a look and come back with the story that the herd got clean away."

"Ain't that too bad?" Turk murmured sarcastically. "A jasper that couldn't track a ten-horse freight hitch across an alkali flat could have followed that herd."

Paused, Turk waited for Hank to say something.

Hank said only, "Well, don't that prove that Fitz wanted Leach Wigran to get away with the stuff?"

"So it would look to the town like the hard-cases was fightin' Fitz now," Johnny put in grimly. "That's what he wants. And"—here his voice took on a tone of quiet savagery—"that's what's goin' to happen."

"Us bein' the hard-cases," Turk murmured.

"Right," Johnny said. "And when we end up, Fitz won't know whether he can trust his own mother."

CHAPTER XV

TRAIL DRIVE

JUST after dark two nights later, Johnny was sitting in the dark doorway of one of the Bar 33 line camps, smoking. The night was quiet about him, the only sounds were those his saddled pony made cropping the grass out in the dark. Johnny had been there an hour, during which he had smoked eight cigarettes. Lately, he had found himself restless and impatient, and time and again he had to put a check on his temper, which had always been quick. Deep within him, he knew why he was edgy, but he wouldn't admit it. Right now, he was fuming inwardly at Turk and Hank's tardiness, forgetting the fact that the Running W was many miles from here, and that they would have to be careful in covering their movements.

When he heard the sound of approaching riders, he faded back into the doorway, drawing his gun. Then Hank's low and cautious whistle came to him, and he stepped out to meet them.

"Get it?" he asked Hank.

Turk answered instead. "Sure. And he's lame now. What luck did you have?"

"They're spread out below us right now, without a man ridin' herd."

"Then let's get to work," Hank said briefly.

It was a horse branded Running W that Johnny had referred to. The three of them mounted, hazed the extra horses and the lame one ahead of them, and rode the short distance down to the flat. Over the rolling, tilting upland of grass, a big herd of Bar 33 cattle were grazing, some of them bedded down.

Out of this bunch they cut a hundred and fifty head and then turned and pushed east toward the mountains. The lame Running W gelding, along with the three other ponies, was pushed in with the cattle.

It was Turk giving orders now, for he knew every one of these devious trails and could pick out the few water holes they would need on their way over the Calicos. At dawn next morning, they paused to let the herd drink at one of the high mountain springs.

Before they pushed on toward the pass in the gaunt peaks, the gelding was cut out and left behind. He seemed willing to drop out, for he was limping badly. Johnny reasoned that he would rest here by the spring until hunger drove him down on the flats.

All that day they prodded the cattle into the face of a gathering storm that broke in mid-afternoon, half blinding them with sleet and hail and rain. For an hour they worked furiously to keep the cattle beaded up the mountains into the storm, and just when the exhaustion of their ponies was ready to defeat them, the rain slacked off into a steady drizzle.

His eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, Turk rode back to Johnny, who was riding drag. Both of them were drenched, even through their slickers, and the cold, driving wind that poured down from the peaks had their lips blue.

"It'll be dark before we make the pass. You want to try it?"

"If we let these critters stop, dynamite couldn't keep 'em from goin' back," Johnny said. He raised his eyes to the sky, which seemed almost low enough to touch. They were far above timberline now in the boulder fields of the peaks, and all nature here seemed merciless, bent on breaking them.

He shouted into the wind, "Can we do it, Turk?"

"Sure. You'll lose some of the stuff, likely, and he pretty doggoned miserable, but we can do it."

"All right. Let's change ponies."

They took turns cutting fresh mounts out and dropping back to saddle; the herd was not allowed to stop.

AS night settled down on them, they knew they were in for it. The rain held on, increasing the misery of man and beast. A dozen times that night, the cattle were on the verge of stampeding. Every time they rounded a fresh bend in this tortuous trail and the wind drove at them with the force of padded hammers, Johnny and Hank were driven to a fury of activity. Johnny never knew where they were going, what the country looked like, or if Turk was lost. It was his job and Hank's to keep the herd moving . . . and somehow they did it.

Toward morning, the wind died down and the rain lifted a little, so that Johnny almost drowsed off in the saddle. He could tell by the ease with which his horse walked and by the increased pace of the cattle that they were through the pass and on the gentle down-slope of the eastern side of the Calicos.

Dawn broke cold and clear, and in another hour they reached timberline. Already behind them, the thunderheads were gathering for a new downpour. When they got to the green belt of trees, they conferred and decided to rest the cattle and let them graze on the hardy upland hunchgrass if they could. Pursuit was hardly probable, since a fresh storm would be almost certain to blot out the tracks.

A half day of sleep and dry clothes lifted their spirits. At noon, after a quick lunch, they got the cattle moving again. Turk, with the experience of many such drives behind him, took them down the slope through the thick timber until, when dark fell, they were in the foothills.

Warm's, Turk said, was off several miles to the right. They were heading for the

railway station and stock pens that Turk had used in his rustling days. A crooked agent, no brand inspector, and a split of the rustled beef would allow them to dispose of it without so much as a trace to indicate where it had gone.

Close to midnight, they saw the lights of the way station. Turk had ridden ahead, to confer with the agent. When Johnny and Hank arrived with the beef, the pens were open, ready to receive it.

"There'll be a train out of Warm's tomorrow morning," Turk informed them. "It'll pick the stuff up." He grinned up at Johnny. "I signed Leach Wigran's name on the waybill. That all right?"

Johnny nodded. Next morning, in the mining town of Warm's, Johnny opened an account at the Warm's bank in the name of Leach Wigran. He arranged for the deposit of the money from the sale of the cattle shipment. If Fitz got curious and searched for his herd, Leach Wigran's name would be dark with guilt.

A few moments later he joined Hank and Turk on the main four corners. They looked at each other and smiled. They each needed a shave, clean clothes, and rest. Johnny, in spite of his bone-weariness, felt something driving in him that would not let him rest. His eyes were hard and mocking, as he said to Turk, "You work for what you get in this rustling business, Turk. I didn't know that."

"Where now?" Hank asked.

"Cosmos. This has only begun."

IN place of Barney, who had been *segundo* under Carmody, Fitz had appointed a silent, surly puncher named Art Bodan, who was years younger than he looked. Fitz didn't know much about him except that Carmody said he was to be trusted.

So, that morning when Bodan had finished his story in Fitz's office, the Major regarded him with some curiosity and a little suspicion.

"You say you found the horse down on the flat, grazing. How do you know he was the one whose track you saw?"

"I know," Bodan said stubbornly. "Rain or no rain. That's the same horse. He's not only crippled in the same foot, but the other tracks tally." He paused, his dark, smooth-shaven face sullen. "You can't track an animal for ten miles without you learn somethin' about his tracks, Major."

Fitz said nothing for the moment, his face scowling and unpleasant to look at. "Running W. It couldn't be a changed brand, could it?"

"Come out and look for yourself."

"I'll do that," Fitz said, and rose.

Outside, he paused at the corral while Bodan cut out the lame gelding and led him over to Fitz, turning him so that Fitz could investigate the brand.

"That's real, all right," Fitz said. He straightened up. "You're not to say anything about this, of course."

"Three of the men know it a'ready."

"Saddle up my bay," Fitz said, and turned to the house.

An hour later, he rode into the main street of Cosmos and dismounted at Bailly Blue's office. He did not need to cover up his visits now, since it was known that, as a victim of rustlers, he had legitimate business with the sheriff. Blue was not in, but Fitz sat down and smoked his pipe, staring thoughtfully out the window.

When Bailly finally did come in, "Is Leach in town?" Fitz asked. When Bailey nodded Fitz said, "Bring him here."

Blue's eyebrows lifted. "That ain't very cautious, Fitz."

"Bring him here. And do it in a hurry."

Blue vanished; ten minutes later he was back with the hulking Wigran in tow. Leach Wigran seldom talked to the Major, never recognized him in public, and that Blue should call him to an open conference with Fitz was a surprise to him. His face, almost hidden by that thick shovel beard, showed a surprise which he could not entirely disguise.

"Sit down," Fitz said abruptly, when the door was shut.

Leach sat down facing him, holding his hat in his hand. Blue leaned on the desk, watching.

"This morning Bodan, my *segundo*, came in with the news that I've been rustled of a hundred and fifty head of cattle. He cut for sign and found where they'd been driven up the Calicos. The rain had washed away the sign there, but he saw enough to know that whoever stole those cattle had a lame horse. That horse was finally turned loose, up by a spring in the Calicos, and it drifted down to my range." He leaned forward and regarded Leach with careful eyes. "We found the horse. It was branded Running W, Leach."

Leach stopped fiddling with his bat, his great hands still. "Running W?" he echoed. "There's some mistake. We're missin' no horses."

"I saw it, and it's branded Running W," Fitz said sharply.

"Then somebody stole it."

"Where've you been these last four nights?" Fitz asked him coldly.

"Why—a couple of 'em I reckon I was here in Cosmos."

"Your men were—where?"

Slowly, Leach heaved himself to his feet and regarded Fitz with hot eyes. "So you think I took 'em, Fitz?"

"I didn't say so. I want to know who did."

"I dunno. But I know I didn't and none of my men did. I can account for the whole crew."

Fitz said nothing, and Leach, after holding his gaze for several seconds, turned to Bailly Blue, as if for help. Blue however, kept his face carefully blank.

And then Leach started to get red. "Fitz," he said hotly. "I've danced to your tune for two years now. I've had many a chance to hang the deadwood on you, but I've not been a hog. I've kept in line and taken your orders, and I aim to from now on."

"Then where'd the horse come from?" Fitz asked gently. "He was being ridden by the men who took that beef."

"I tell you he could have been stole!"

"By whom, then?" Fitz drawled. Now his voice got ugly. "When I hired you, Leach, you promised me that you'd keep

these small rustlers in order, and have them let me alone. Apparently"—and here his voice was dry, thrusting—"you're losing your ability to keep on top in this county, Leach. Maybe somebody has an idea that you've got a little soft, a little easy. What do you think?"

"I'd like to see 'em claim it!" Leach said uglily.

"What do you call this, then? They stole a herd of my cattle and put the blame on you. Either that, or your men think you're soft, too. Do they?"

Leach took a shuffling step toward Fitz, his face dark with anger. "They do what I tell 'em!" he said thickly. "They aren't crossin' me. They know it'd be worth their life if they did."

"Then who is? These small time rustlers you thought you could kick around?"

"I still can!"

FITZ rose now. He came scarcely to Leach's shoulder, but there was a look of hard and implacable command in his eyes and on his face that told Blue that Fitz was the stronger man, always had been, always would be.

"Leach," Fitz said mildly, "I can't use a second-rater. I've made money for you, and I'll make more. But not if you can't keep your men in line. If you're through, get out while you still have a chance. If you aren't licked, then straighten this out. Get back my cattle for me and see that the man responsible is punished." He paused. "And Leach, if you're considering stepping into my shoes, don't. I've taken care of a dozen like you in my day, and it wasn't any trouble—only a little messy."

He stepped past Leach and out the door, closing it gently behind him. For a long minute, Leach stood in the middle of the floor, clenching and unclenching his fists, his face hard and savage and entirely readable.

Blue shifted his weight on the desk and cleared his throat.

"Don't get any ideas, Leach," he said softly.

Leach looked at him, now, and there

was bewilderment in his eyes. "But I ain't. I know when I'm well off. But I don't have any idea who took them cattle, not a one."

"Find out."

"I aim to."

Blue smiled faintly. "But don't ever get any ideas about Fitz, Leach. He goes with good people here. His credit is good, he's polite, the decent women like him, and he acts considerable like a dude sometimes. But don't let that fool you." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Out there at the Bar 33, he hasn't got what you'd rightly call a crew of punchers. Once, just for fun, I added up how much reward money I'd collect if I'd take that Bar 33 crew, nail 'em up in a boxcar and ship 'em back to where they were wanted. The reward money came to over a hundred thousand dollars."

Leach was listening, his eyes veiled.

"Fitz sends for them. He gives them protection, work, and good wages, until things have cooled off for them. Nobody knows their right names except him—and sometimes me. They ain't common gun-fighters Leach—they're killers. Tested, wanted, gunslick, hair-trigger killers. So don't get any ideas. And if I was you, I'd see that them cattle was back at the Bar 33 in pretty short order."

"I will."

When Leach stepped out onto the street, he was considerably chastened—and he was angry, too. He knew that what Bailly Blue told him about Fitz was true. Without ever raising his voice, Fitz could put more genuine fear into Leach than an army of ordinary men with guns.

Leach went into the bar at Prince's Keno Parlor and downed a stiff drink. Then he walked to the gambling tables, where four of his men were playing an idle hand of poker.

"Come along," he told them.

One puncher, young, tall, with several days' growth of reddish stubble on his face, threw down his cards and looked up at Leach. "More work?"

Leach nodded grimly. "Plenty, Mick."

CHAPTER XVI

RUSTLERS' WAR

ONCE on the road to the Running W, Leach motioned Mickey Hogan to drop behind the other two. Mickey was Leach's foreman, his top hand and gun-fighter. It was Mickey who enabled Leach to keep peace among his twenty hands—saddle-hums and saloon riffraff.

"How much time did Fitz give us?" Mickey asked when Leach had finished.

"He never said."

"I'll need a couple of days, anyway. You got any ideas?"

"Well, there's them Winkler brothers up in that old Ophir mine. They're a tough crew, and they don't like us much."

Mickey shook his head. "Maybe not, but they're plum scared of us. They're out."

Leach named a list of men known as rustlers, but at each name, Mickey shook his head. Nevertheless, when they reached the Running W, Mickey took only the time to change horses before he rode off with five of his men. For Leach, the rest of that day and the next was intolerable. The longer Mickey stayed away, the more certain Leach grew that he was having no luck in tracking down the rustlers.

And that was true in the beginning. Mickey's first visit was to the Winkler boys up in the old abandoned Ophir mine. They were insolent, but they offered an alibi which Mickey had to accept; three of them were down sick. With their blankets pulled around them, rifles slacked in their arms, they stood in the doorway and faced Mickey and his five riders.

"All right," Mickey said. "I reckon you're tellin' the truth. But if I thought you wasn't . . ."

"You'd blow our heads off," Winkler said. "Well, ride on, Hogan. You've come to the wrong place. When we steal anything you want, we'll admit it and be ready to scrap for it. You can tell that to your boss."

"I believe you," Mickey said mildly, and wheeled his horse out.

So Mickey made the rounds. On the afternoon of the second day he and his riders pulled up at Cass Brigg's place in the hot-land of a creek over on the west edge of the county.

Cass was drunk and belligerent. "Steal Fitz's stuff?" he said thickly. "Why, why shouldn't a man? His heef will walk just as good as another man's, won't it?"

Mickey regarded him thoughtfully. "Take a *pasear* around the corrals, hoys," he said to his men.

Cass straightened up. "Wait a minute," he said loudly. "You'll find tracks over there, but no heef. I had five head here until last night."

"Whose heef?"

"Kennicott's," Cass answered sullenly.

Mickey said, "Look around, hoys."

WHILE they were gone, Mickey watched Cass, whose increasingly furtive air he could not quite understand. Mickey, in the course of his business, was pretty well acquainted with these shift, close-mouthed men who practiced on a small scale what Leach Wigan did on a large one. He knew their hideout, their markets, their methods, their needs and their characters. It was another world remote from the brisk and businesslike air of Cosmos, but one in which Mickey was thoroughly versed.

The Running W riders returned. "There's been cattle out there all right."

"How many?"

"I dunno."

Mickey returned his attention to Cass. "I haven't seen you in town much lately, Cass."

"I been here."

"You couldn't have been somewhere else—say over on Bar 33 range—with George Winkler, could you?"

"I tell you, I been here," Cass said irritably.

"Or over the Calicos in Warms," Mickey went on idly. "Maybe these had rains up in the Calicos is what stove up those Winkler boys." Mickey was talking idly, hit or miss, giving little attention to what

he said, But he saw now that something he had said had touched Cass. Cass tried to look him in the eye, but failed.

"I was here," Cass said sullenly.

"But with the Winkler boys, though."

Cass spat. "All right, what if they was over?"

"So they were?"

Cass straightened up defiantly. "Anything wrong with asking your friends over to have a few drinks?" When Mickey said nothing, he added, "They got drunk and slept outside. I couldn't help that, could I?"

Mickey didn't answer immediately. Presently, he said, "That's funny, Cass, that you five should have been together just for a parley." He paused. "So you did drive the beef over to Warm's?"

"We did not!" Cass said hotly. "I sold 'em my share for the price of a couple of bottles."

Mickey said quickly, "Your share of what beef?"

"Kennicott's."

"I thought you said you only got five head."

"That was my share, I said. We worked it together."

"I hadn't heard anything about it in town," Mickey said gently. "Usually Kennicott squawks the loudest"

"He don't know it," Cass mumbled.

Mickey let his hand fall to his gun. "Cass," he said gently, "you're lyin'. What did you do with that Bar 33 beef? Drive it over to Warm's?"

"I dunno what you're talkin' about," Cass said earnestly. "Don't get so quick, Mickey. Come in and have a drink. I tell you, it wasn't no Bar 33 beef. I dunno whose it was. I was drunk, and so was they. We just took it from over west of town and drove it down here in the breaks, and then we come home and we was drunk for a couple of days. I sold 'em my share."

Mickey drew his gun, raised it. "Cass, you and the Winklers took that Bar 33 beef. None of you've been around Cosmos for a week now. The Winkler boys are stove up from that mountain rain. No-

body's missin' beef except Fitz. Are you goin' to tell me you stole it?"

"I didn't!" Cass cried.

Mickey smiled and leveled his gun. Cass made a lunge to get inside the house, but Mickey's gun roared before Cass could make a move.

SLOWLY, Cass started to claw at his chest and then he sat down abruptly, and his head sagged down on his chest.

Mickey regarded him coldly. "I never thought he'd have the nerve," he said mildly. He shrugged. "Well, the beef's gone. Let's go back to the Winklers."

It was midnight before Mickey rode into the Running W. He and his riders had a little trouble with the Winklers, had had to burn them out, which took a little time. However, Mickey had a feeling of a job well done as he lifted his saddle on the corral poles and walked toward the house.

The front room of the Running W was bare and cluttered with gear and filthy with dust and papers. At Mickey's entrance, Leach jumped to his feet, his hand traveling toward his gun. By the light of the single lamp Leach looked deathly pale.

Mickey, puzzled, closed the door behind him. "What's the matter, Leach? You're spooky."

Leach regarded him with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. "An hour after you left, one of the boys rode in with word that the herd of beef we was holdin' for Fitz is stole too."

Mickey said softly, "Stole?"

"Drove over the Calicos. I been out trackin' it. But it was took to Warm's, sure as hell."

"How long had it been gone?"

"A couple of days."

Mickey sank into a chair, and he and Leach looked at each other. "Then I must've made a mistake," Mickey said quietly, and he told Leach about Cass and the Winklers. Leach didn't even show interest. He sat there, his head sunk on his chest, staring at the table. Presently, he said, "Mickey, I can make this good with Fitz. I mean I got the money to do it,

hut"—and he raised barred eyes to regard Mickey—"what am I goin' to tell him? That they've got us on the run?"

"Who?"

"I wish I knew," Leach said savagely. "Fitz ain't pleasant to face. This time, he's going to be wild."

Mickey thought a long moment. "Tell him you found Cass and the Winkler boys with the beef high up in the Calicos. You took care of them, all right, and then you got to thinkin' and you decided to drive the stuff over to Warm's—all of it, so long as you was close as you was. Then give him the money. What can he say?"

"He'll know I'm lyin'."

"He'd never know I was lyin'," Mickey said quietly.

Leach seemed not to hear this for several moments, and then he raised his head with a jerk. "That's it, Mickey! You tell him. Can you do it?"

"I never seen the lie I couldn't tell with a straight face," Mickey boasted quietly. "Sure I'll tell him."

"Right now. You ride over right now."

"Wait till tomorrow," Mickey drawled. "That'll give us time enough to have drove the beef over and come back."

Mickey started out at sump for the Bar 33. At dark, he was not back. He did not return that night, nor the next day. At midnight, he was still not back. Leach, his eyes frantic, paced up and down the room, listening occasionally.

Some time that night, as Leach lay on the rough and soiled sofa, staring at the ceiling, a thunderous knock on the door brought him to his feet with a leap, gun out.

He waited a moment, and then crossed to the door, listening, his hand on the knob. Then, gathering himself he yanked the door open.

Something was standing there on the sill. Instinctively, protectively, wildly, Leach fired, but the body did not move. It simply toppled into the room at Leach's feet.

Leach looked down at it. It was Mickey. He was dead and stiff. On his chest was

pinned a note and stooping slowly, Leach read it.

This was a mistake, Leach. Get that beef back or get out.

And Leach, trembling there in the guttering flame of the lamp, knew that war was declared, and he was afraid.

CHAPTER XVII

GUNFIRE BY NIGHT

WHEN Tip Rogers waked and struck a match to look at his watch, it was seven o'clock. He knew that if he was to get down to the dining room and eat supper before it closed, he would have to hurry with his shave. Two days and one night in the saddle heading a posse had left him stiff and sore, but he was refreshed after fourteen hours of sleep.

Down in the lobby and heading for the dining room, he thought of Nora inside, and his face settled into gravity. He knew that she must hate him now for the stand he had taken against Johnny, and he hated it too, but the honesty in him would not let him do otherwise.

The dining room was almost empty. Major Fitz and Bledsoe were seated at a side table in the corner, and Major Fitz's harsh and dogmatic voice could be heard the length of the dining room.

Tip took a table and Nora, who had been standing listening to Major Fitz, came over to take his order. Surprisingly, she smiled at him, and Tip smiled warmly in return. "Too late to get anything to eat, Nora?"

Nora shook her head. "No, I had the cook save something for you, Tip. Hungry?"

"Watch me."

When she returned with his food and sat down opposite him, he observed her carefully. She was a little pale, but her eyes looked bright, almost feverish, and her talk and even her actions were animated. Tip made a vow that he would not bring into the conversation any mention of

things that might upset her, such as his activities of the last few days.

Nora, however, spoiled this resolution with her first question.

"Did you have any luck with the posse, Tip?" she asked.

Tip looked up at her, his face coloring. "Of course not. If I had, I'd have brought them in."

"Not shot them?"

Tip shook his head. "Why should I? I liked Johnny Hendry. Maybe he didn't do what he was accused of, but he'll never prove his innocence by running away."

There was a quizzically probing expression in her eyes. She said:

"You'd have brought him back to stand trial then—for his own good."

Tip grinned and shook his head. "No, I'll be honest. Not for his good, but for mine. I won't pass up a chance to find out who robbed the bank and got the gold."

Nora didn't answer for a moment, and then she said quietly, "Perhaps that's what he needs, Tip. Somebody ought to scare him, to make him prove his innocence, even if he didn't take the gold."

Tip laid down a fork and stared at her, as if he had not heard rightly. Nora laughed a little self-consciously and said, "Why not? Johnny treats other people that way. Why should he expect more in return?"

Her voice shook a little with anger, but Tip was too much in love to see that Nora's displeasure with Johnny Hendry was dictated by her mind. It was something she felt—and tried to feel—because she thought she should.

"Treats them how?"

"Oh, he makes snap judgments, believes the worst of people. He's unfair and unjust."

"You think that's the kind of treatment I've given him?"

Nora nodded and said, "A little. But I can't blame you, Tip. You're only doing your job."

"And one I don't like," Tip said quietly. Nora did not answer. Tip ate in silence,

frowning at his plate. Suddenly, he raised his eyes to Nora's face. "Believe me, Nora, I don't like this. I know how you feel about Johnny, and I could understand why you'd hate me for what I'm doing."

"How do I feel about Johnny?" Nora asked bluntly, looking him in the eye.

"Why—why—I've been seeing you for over a year, Nora, even since I came here—when I ask you to marry me, you just laugh. And you've been just as nice, even nicer, to Johnny Hendry. But when he walks in the room, you're different. He's the one. My name could be Ted or Jim or Bob and you'd treat me the same. Don't you see? I may be one in a hundred but Johnny is one in a million—to you. Maybe he always will be."

All the while Tip was speaking, the flush on Nora's face was deepening. When he was finished, Nora said swiftly, "Tip, that's not true! You've been imagining it! I—I don't love Johnny Hendry. Maybe for a while I was infatuated with him, but I don't love him! And I've tried to treat you both the same—because I really do feel the same about you!"

Her eyes blazed.

Tip's mouth sagged open, and he could not speak for a moment.

"I know but—"

"And that's not because Johnny is in trouble!" Nora said defiantly. "I'm just as loyal to him as I ever was, Tip! I've talked to him since he was framed! If I wanted to, I could take you to his hideout! But I won't! So you see, I'm not deserting him in his hard luck. Only, I don't want you or anybody else, Tip Rogers, to think I love him. I don't!"

WISELY, Tip held his silence, but he allowed himself a broad grin, and as Nora watched him, the fire died out in her eyes and she began to smile. Suddenly, they both laughed together.

"Finish your eating, Tip," Nora said, "I'm almost ashamed of myself."

Tip lifted his plate off to one side and leaned both hands on the table, and he began to speak in utter seriousness.

"Today, Nora, when I got in from the mountains, I went up to the Esmerella. Sammons, the manager had some news for me." He paused, watching her. "He said the Esmerella will have to close. I'm out of a job. He offered me one with the same company down near the Mexican border. I'm not going."

"But Tip, why not?"

"Because I found out something tonight. If you like me as well as you do Johnny Hendry, then I'm going to stay here until you like me better. And the only time I'll take that job down there is when I can write the manager and tell him that he'll have to provide quarters for a new superintendent—and wife. Her name will be Nora."

Nora smiled shyly. "You're nice, Tip."

"Nora, will you marry me?"

"I—I don't know, Tip," Nora said. "Everything has happened so quickly. Tip, give me time. Please."

Tip reached out for her hand and spread her fingers out in his palm. On his own little finger was a ring, its band of silver, its stone of deep blue turquoise. He took it off and slipped it quickly on her middle finger.

Tip said gently, "The Indian who gave that to me, Nora, told me that as soon as my greatest luck had come, to pass the ring on to somebody else I wished luck for. If you take it my luck has come. Will you wear it?"

His hand relinquished hers, as if he didn't want to put the slightest pressure on her.

Slowly, Nora raised her eyes to his. "Is this an engagement ring, Tip?"

"It's for you to name," Tip said gravely. "I want it to be that."

Nora looked down at the ring. It was beautiful, its stone cool and smooth and deep, but she was thinking of what this ring symbolized, what she could make it symbolize—a new life with a man she liked, a man who was steady and honest and patient, whom she could depend on, who would not change over the years, who, while he would not make her laugh and

cry and be angry with him, would be as predictable as a calendar, as steady as the sun in its course. It would be refuge and security, something she sorely needed and wanted now. But did she love him? She looked up at his face, and saw Tip's quiet love for her shining out of eyes that were honest and very grave. For a moment, she remembered Johnny's eyes, careless, mocking, affectionate, light-hearted, quick as mercury—

"Let's call it an engagement Tip," she said softly, stubbornly, and she hardly realized she had said it until she felt Tip's kiss on her lips. She laughed then, and pushed Tip back in his seat.

"Your supper is cold, and you've got to eat, Tip," she told him, but Tip was only looking at her, filling his eyes with the beauty of her. Nora rose and went out into the kitchen.

WHILE she was gone, a man entered the dining room and looked around him, waved to Tip, and went over to Fitz and Bledsoe's table. It was Les MacMahon, a tall slim young man in careful black clothes who studied law at nights and waited on customers at Bledsoe's store in the daytime. Tip was friendly with him, and liked him. MacMahon talked quietly with Fitz and Bledsoe for some minutes, and Nora returned with hot food for Tip. She sat down by him again and made Tip eat.

Presently, MacMahon left Bledsoe's table and came over to speak to Tip and Nora. "Is it true the Esmerella has closed down, Tip?" he asked. His sharp face was inquisitive, amiable. Tip nodded. "What are you going to do, leave town?"

Tip looked at Nora and smiled slightly. "No chance. I'll do something around here."

MacMahon leaned down and talked quietly. "I just had a funny experience, Tip. Six men—I don't know who they were—came in the store and started buying supplies—mining tools, blankets, grub, black powder and such. One of them, the man doing the buying, was drunk. He

started talking to me about their claims, said they were the richest he'd ever seen. He told me quite a bit about them before the boss came over and shut him up."

Tip leaned forward, his eyes intent and excited.

"Did he say where they were?"

MacMahon flushed. "I know this sounds silly, Tip, but to begin with, they bought about a thousand dollars worth of supplies. This drunk was bragging around that their assay showed higher than any mine that was being operated around here. I thought it was bluff, but when they'd gone out, I went over to the claim-recording office. Sure enough, six men had just filed claims together there. Furthermore, they just bought a dozen pack mules from McGrew down at the feed stable. Does that sound like it's a bluff? They paid cash for everything."

"It doesn't," Tip conceded. "Were they mining men?"

"Looked it."

"What do you want me to do?" Tip asked, interested now.

"You're free now. You know minerals. Get their locations at the recorder's office and go out and if it looks good, file on some claims. I just told Bledsoe and Fitz. They said if I could get a good man to look it over, to put their names down, I'll want one too." He indicated Nora. "So will Nora, won't you?"

"Whatever Tip thinks," Nora answered.

Tip scowled. He had been around mining camps long enough to understand that fabulous mines had been discovered on just such thin rumors. A drunken boast, an incautious poker bet, a brag on a street corner had been the start of many a paying mine. He was free now with no job to hold him in town. Besides that, he hoped he would soon have a wife to support and it had been Tip's dream that some day he would own a small paying mine. Perhaps this was the chance he had been waiting for.

"I'll do it," he said slowly, "only don't be disappointed when I come back and tell you it's phoney."

MacMahon drew up a chair and soon they were deep in mining talk. MacMahon had copied out the claim locations, and now he gave them to Tip. They discussed Tip's outfit, his expenses and such, and while they talked, Nora listened, content only to watch Tip. She liked his quiet gravity, the slow and careful way that he arrived at decisions, the temperance of his speech, and the dry humor that crept into much he said. And she knew too that he would never change, that this was the way he was made, and the way he would always be. Moreover, she knew deep within her, that if her life with him would be dull at times it would be a generous life, with rewards and riches at the end.

Bledsoe and Fitz came over, and Nora rose and went about her business of clearing off the dishes. Later, when she returned to the dining room, Tip was at the door, waiting for her. He drew her out into the dark lobby and said, "How does it sound, darling?"

"I don't know, Tip. What do you think?"

"I think I'd be willing to gamble anything to get money and presents and things to give you," Tip said quietly.

Nora squeezed his hand. "Not for that alone, Tip. You want to get ahead. You always would. Why don't you take a chance?"

"I am." He folded her in his arms and kissed her, and it was so strange that Nora almost protested, then smiled, and Tip vanished up the stairs. Back in the dining room, MacMahon and Bledsoe were taking leave of Fitz. They were going to go down to the store to assemble Tip's outfit.

MAJOR FITZ beckoned to Nora and she came back to the table. "Sit down," he said. "I want to talk to you. . . . Have I been drinking too much, or did I see that young scalawag kiss you, Nora?"

"You did," Nora admitted, blushing. "I like him, Major Fitz."

"Hmm. So do I. But I don't kiss him."

"I mean I like him awfully well."

"Better than Johnny?"

Nora looked him steadily in the eye. "Better than Johnny," she said quietly. "It's—it's just that Tip is steadier and more considerate than Johnny."

"Remember, Johnny was an orphan, raised in a rough town and with rough people, Nora," Fitz pointed out gently.

Nora patted his hand. She could not help but compare Major Fitz's tolerance and justice to Johnny's hot-headedness and his quick anger. Here while Johnny was hunting ways to prove Major Fitz a crook, Fitz was pleading Johnny's case with her, and a deep wave of bitterness passed through her. Whatever doubts she had had as to preferring Tip to Johnny—and they were few and dim, she thought—were vanished now. She felt anger toward Johnny, and pity and quiet affection for this loyal man across from her.

"I understand all that, Major Fitz, but it isn't as if I liked a man for his manners or for his polish."

"I know that. You like me," Fitz said, and smiled a little, "and I'm just a roughneck."

"And I was raised on a ranch," Nora said. "Maybe I wouldn't know good manners if I saw them."

"Nonsense. You're a lady because you can't help it."

Nora squeezed his hand, and there were almost tears in her eyes. "Don't be hard on me, old friend. I'm just trying to do what I think is best."

"I know you are. They are both fine boys." He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't undertake to say which you'd be the happiest with Nora—if you can be happy with any of us men. Tip is steady, maybe a little bit dull. And Johnny is wild and a hellion, but more to my taste. But you're the one that's choosing. You stick to what you like and you—"

Fitz stopped speaking, and his eyes shuttled quickly to the lamp overhead. Its flame was guttering, as if a sudden draft had struck it.

And then, explosively, Major Fitz shoved hard on the table, so that it

slammed against Nora and carried her over backwards to the floor. He dodged aside, snaking out of the chair, just as the blast of a shotgun filled the room with terrible noise.

Major Fitz, lying on the floor, whipped a hand to his shoulder holster, flicked out his gun and in one snap shot at the lamp overhead plunged the room in darkness.

Then, on his knees, he swiveled his gun to one of the back windows and emptied it in thundering peroration, filling the room with the savage hammering of his gunfire.

When the gun was empty, he paused, and waited. There was no movement, not a sound from that partially opened window.

Fitz pulled himself slowly to his feet. His knees were shaky and he was angry at himself for the sickness deep in his belly that he recognized as fear.

"Nora!" Fitz whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right," Nora said weakly. "What happened?"

Fitz walked over to her and lifted her to her feet in the darkness. "If they'd hit you, I'd never have forgiven myself."

"But who was it?"

"I don't know," Fitz answered simply. "Evidently, I have my enemies, like every other man."

The dining room door opened and the clerk came running in with a lamp. By its light, Fitz looked at the table. Its cloth was tattered, its top channeled with the blast of buckshot. And the lines it had drilled in the table top told their own story. By shoving the table against Nora, and upsetting her, Fitz had saved her from taking the full charge of the buckshot in her body.

She looked at him, her eyes still wild with fright, and he folded her in his arms, trying to quiet her hysterical sobs while the clerk looked on in bewildered silence.

And looking at that scarred table top, Major Fitz knew that Leach Wigran had taken up the gauntlet.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Sea-Goin Samaritan

By
KENNETH L.
SINCLAIR

THE weather was thickening fast. Skookum had news, that, to any Bristol Bay skipper. But to "Kindly" Kennard's way of thinking, even a williwaw was only a minor irritation when stacked up against the presence of the *Togiak's* owner aboard.

In the estimation of many a seagoing man, an owner is a sort of two-legged monster who crouches in a warm office somewhere ashore, navigates a swivel chair with the greatest of skill, and pours endless clouds of cigar smoke from his funnel. An ideal owner is one seldom seen, and even less often heard.

But Oscar Pattler was far from being an ideal owner. Pudgy, pompous, he kept thrusting his sharp little jib into matters that were none of his proper business. And as any Alaska man knows, a Bristol Bay skipper has a tough enough proposition on his hands without having owner trouble added to his worries. On these treacherous, shoaling shores lie the bleaching bones of many a fine ship—and many a seagoing man's career.

Right now, though, in spite of the howling gale, Pattler was coming up the iron ladder to the tug's little bridge. He harged into the wheelhouse, without so much as a by-your-leave.

"Kennard! What do you think you're doin' now?" the little owner shrilled, shaking the sea's bonest spray from his coat.



"Why'd you slack speed and swing off your course?"

Calmly, the skipper put the helm over a bit more, peered through the rain-swept windows as the *Togiak* swung. "Somebody's piled up on that shoal off Cape Chichagof," he stated. "He's making distress signals—hear that foghorn?"

Pattler snorted. "You've cost me enough, with your yen for rescuing people! This is a tugboat business—and from now on you're letting the Coast Guard take care of those fools that get themselves into trouble." The sharp-nosed owner squinted through the windows. "That's a tugboat!" he yelled. "Must be Burkun, man!"

Kennard grinned, nodded. "Yeah. It's his boat."

Pattler lifted himself on tiptoe and yelled up at the lank, calm master. "Now you listen, Kennard! I've stood enough! You've lost time and money by chasing into the craziest places, risked my vessel and my business to pull blundering fools off the

rocks. You've wasted my oil—you went out to Seal Island in a howling williwaw, to pick up a flyer who landed in the water. You yanked a Fisheries Département boat off Protection Point last fall in ice that strained the *Togiak's* frames so bad that I had to send you clear down to Ketchikan to have her hauled out and repaired. You've pulled so many rescues that they're callin' you the Seagoin' Samaritan. An' I'm tellin' you right now—orderin' you—to let Burkun set! He got himself into this—"

"It happens to be the law of the sea, to help those in distress," Kennard stated pointedly. "Competitors not excepted."

Pattler bristled. "I'm the owner of this boat, and I'm ordering you to take no more chances with her! Right now we got a tow waiting for us at Egegik, and we're goin' in after it on this high tide. You'll do as I tell you, or I'll put you on the beach without a job so quick you'll wonder what hit you!"

"I'm the master of this vessel," Kennard stated. "At sea, I'm the boss, Burkun's broadside-to on that shoal. In this blow that's making, he'll pound to pieces in a few hours. So I'm going after him. Now, if you'll get off my bridge, Mr. Pattler..."

Pattler's sharp little jaw sagged. He pulled a noisy breath between his teeth, rose on the balls of his feet to yell an answer; and then suddenly closed his mouth with a click and backed out of the wheelhouse. Kennard was calm and kindly in manner—but years of battling the sea in treacherous Aleutian waters, and in equally dangerous Bristol Bay, had given him hardness and force.

KENNARD eased the *Togiak* carefully toward the shoal. Now, as he came nearer to it, he could see that Burkun's red *Becharof* was rolling heavily under the impacts of the howling combers which were going right over her. A man was clinging to the stricken tug's bridge, frantically waving what seemed to be a red undershirt. From the giant build of him, the man would be "Blaze" Burkun himself. And Kennard's lips moved in a grin.

Burkun on the shoal! Burkun, the upstart who had given boasting, unwanted advice to almost every skipper on the Bay. Burkun, who freely admitted that after four months' experience, he knew everything there was to know about these waters.

For Kennard, there was a smile in this. But there was some mighty ticklish work ahead, too. He knew these waters as well as he knew the back of his own right hand—knew just how close he could approach this shoal in safety. But in this thick weather, he couldn't see Cape Chichagof and so he had no guide to his position. None, that is, except Burkun's squat red tugboat, which naturally showed the location of the shoal upon which it was grounded.

True enough, Kennard had charts and the usual pilot books. And he knew just how reticent they were in describing this shoal. The pilot book had it this way: "A dangerous obstruction is reported to exist about four miles off Cape Chichagof." Nothing more than that. And Chart 8802 confined itself to an indefinite "X," followed by one of those *Position Doubtful* notations that many a seaman has had reason to curse.

No help there. Nothing to do but depend upon the *Becharof* for a marker, approach as closely as possible, then come about and try to hold position and float a line downwind to Burkun. It was quite possible that, before the tide fell, the *Togiak's* powerful Diesels could pull Burkun off the sandy shoal.

Kennard rang the engineer, Vince Waldo, for full speed and got set to bring the tug about. And then, with the smoke of her engines flung low over her stubby bows by the gale, the *Togiak* struck.

Turning as she struck, the tug heeled far over to port. The sand laid hold of her keel and brought her to a wrenching, groaning stop. Pattler, on the foredeck, went asprawl and rolled into the scuppers and when he bounded back to his feet he was yelling like mad.

Kennard rang *Full Astern*. He got it promptly—but it was no use. With her own speed and the thrust of the storm to drive

her onto the shoal, the *Togiak* was hung up for sure—and on a falling tide, at that.

With a cold gleam in his eyes, Kennard flipped the engine-room telegraph to *Finished With Engines*, lashed the wheel to keep the rudder from hanging itself loose, and went out onto the little bridge.

Blaze Burkun's huge figure was plain to be seen, now, on the *Becharof's* bridge. The man's red thatch was being whipped by the gale, and he was grinning with triumph. The *Becharof's* foghorn was stopped now; and Burkun's stentorian yell rose above the hollow crashing of the breaking seas.

"What's the matter, Samaritan? I thought you knowed these waters? How come you grounded?"

"Scum!" Kennard retorted. "What's the idea of faking distress?"

"Why, whaddayuh mean?" Burkun yelled, innocently. "We jus' dropped the books for a little rest, that's all! No law against that! We anchored fore-an'-aft, because we're tough babies an' like tuh roll. Our foghorn stuck—maybe we'll fix it, at Egegik. An' I was shakin' my laundry out in the wind. Can't hang a man for that, can yuh?" Burkun pulled his greasy sea cap over his tousled red hair, tilted it to a cocky angle, and grinned wickedly.

"Well," he went on "we gotta be goin' now, Kennard. I guess you won't be able to handle that cannery tow now that you're roostin' on the shoal. We'll jus' sort of pinch-hit for yuh!"

A couple of Burkun's men started the fore and aft winches and lifted the books which had held the *Becharof* in position behind the shoal. Smoke spurted from the craft's rust-eaten funnel. Burkun let loose a series of derisive toots with his whistle, as he swung away and headed toward Egegik.

VINCE WALDO came out of his engine-room just as Kennard reached the deck. Waldo was a frail-looking, precise man, addicted to stiff white collars and a scholarly manner. Not a man made to the mold of an engineer a good many would

say—and right there they'd be wrong. Waldo kept his Diesels running like jeweled watches and his engine-room was cleaner than most galleys.

"We're on Chichagof Shoal," Kennard informed him.

Then Pattler elbowed Waldo aside. "Why didn't you look where you were going?" the owner demanded with a landsman's disregard of the simple facts of seamanship. "Why didn't you look down into the water—see how deep it was? Why didn't you take soundings? Why couldn't you tell by the breakers that—"

"Burkun put one over on me," Kennard admitted. "As dirty a trick as I ever heard of, too. I took it for granted that he was on the shoal—broadside to as he was, he sure made the thing look real. I didn't think that with Burkun's tub marking the shoal for us there was any need for the lead—and short-handed as you keep us, there was nobody aboard to use it anyway. And this water is so murky with volcanic ash that you can't see a foot down. And if you'll take a look around you'll see that in this shallow water the breakers extend for miles. Satisfied?"

"Satisfied!" Pattler yelled. "With my boat aground and Burkun going in to Egegik to grab our tow—Satisfied! Burkun put it over on you, all right! All he had to do was play on your fool yen for rescuing people. If we ever get outta this I'm goin' straight to the marshal at Pawik. I'll see Burkun behind bars, before I'm through with him!"

"Not likely, mister" Kennard stated. "Burkun's lied himself out of worse deals than this one. And he's got a crew of accomplished liars with him on that tub, to back his yarn."

That put Pattler back a notch. For a moment his sharp-fronted mouth kept opening and closing, like that of a fish out of water. Kennard could well understand Pattler's rage. For years, Pattler had enjoyed a monopoly in the towboat business on the Bay. But now Burkun had horned in—and, with both his pride and his profits caught in the squeeze, Pattler was wild.

"Well anyway, I'll settle your hash for you!" he shrilled. "Kennard, I'll put you on the beach and I'll see that you stay there! Now work this boat offa here. Use your engine, wiggle back an' forth or something!"

Kennard gave the owner a frosty smile. "This, mister, is a *boat*. And a *boat* doesn't answer her helm unless she's going ahead. And to run the engines forward would just drive us harder onto the shoal. We've got to sit here until a higher tide comes along—or until somebody gives us some help. Our job now is to keep the ship from breaking up."

A vicious sea slammed against the tug with an impact that wrenched a groan out of her, and flung spray high into the air. Pattler, slammed against the deckhouse by the murky water, came up gasping weakly. "Call for help, somehow!" he ordered.

"That," said Kennard, "will be easy. We'll just send a message to the Coast Guard with that radio transmitter that you never hought us!"

Quivering, Pattler retreated aft, toward his cabin.

Kennard watched him go.

Vince Waldo looked very solemn. "I told you Splinterpuss would bring us bad luck when he came aboard. I worked it out by numbers—"

"Come on aft," Kennard interrupted.

On the tug's broad fan-tail, deluged by spray and buffeted by the gale, the skipper and the engineer made things fast as best they could. "Nothing much we can do, Vince," Kennard said. "The old *Togiak's* due to take a beating, but she can take it, while Burkun's tub would fall apart. Keep a close watch below, though. If we start taking water, let me know."

"And when we get off," Waldo asked, primly, "what do we do to Burkun?"

The engineer's gentle manner might have fooled those who did not know him into overlooking the hard and joyous gleam which lurked behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

Kennard gave the engineer a slow grin. "We'll see, Vince."

PATTLER spent the afternoon in his cabin, locked in with his worries and his profit-ledgers. He emerged, along about sundown, cornered Kennard in the forepeak, and went at the skipper like an excited little terrier.

"Kennard! Now you listen to me—I've been figurin' up the losses you've caused me by your fool rescue acts, an'— Hey! There goes Burkun—with our tow!"

Pattler was right, for once. In the murky gray mixture of sea and sky, a man could just make out the 554 ton cannery ship, with Burkun's squat tug wallowing ahead of it. This was one of the off-years when the Egegik salmon run dropped to zero—and the cannery people were anxious to get their vessel, an old bark which had been converted to a floating cannery, to work on the Nushagak Bay run as soon as possible. Knowing Kennard for a towboat man who knew his business, they had given the job to the *Togiak*. But when Burkun showed up with word that Kennard was in trouble, it was only natural for them to give the *Becharof* the nod. A salmon run waits for no man.

Vince Waldo came out of the engine-room companion. "I been listening to my short-wave radio," the prim little engineer reported. "The Egegik cannery station sent a call to the Coast Guard. Told 'em we were hung up on this shoal!"

Kennard clenched his fists. This was a sock on the jaw, and no mistake. Word would go the rounds that Kennard had to be pulled off a shoal by the Coast Guard. And the towage business, from then on, would go to the competitor who knew these treacherous waters and their currents well enough to keep himself—and the tows placed in his charge—out of trouble. Meaning Burkun.

Blaze didn't know Bristol Bay nearly so well as he pretended. But he did make a lot of noise. And he'd make a mighty good thing out of this.

Pattler realized all this, too. And without a word now, the owner went stamping back to his cabin. And there he stayed until the *Togiak* was pulled off the shoal just after

dark, by a Coast Guard who hellowed questions through a megaphone and got some very unsatisfactory answers.

Free of the reef Kennard headed the powerful tug northeast by east. Driven by the steady pulse of her Diesels, the *Togiak* smashed along, helligerently shouldering through the seas. There was something mighty businesslike about the tug. And there was an unwavering purpose in the eyes of her skipper, as he peered through the rain-lashed windows of the wheelhouse.

After a while, Vince Waldo came up with a tray of food that he had prepared. The *Togiak*, far under-manned because extra hands cost money which Pattler couldn't bear to subtract from his profit column, had no cook.

Kennard gave the engineer the wheel, put the tray on the chart-table, and consulted page 316 of his pilot book while he munched absently.

On his face there was a shadowy smile when he took over the wheel again and let Waldo go helow to the engines.

AFTER hours of zigzagging in the nasty cross-sea horn of a conflict between storm and tide, Kennard picked up the lights of the *Becharof* and her tow. Against the northwesterly blow, Burkun was making scant headway.

And as he passed close-to, Kennard blinked his lights in mocking salute.

From that moment on, in the wheelhouse of the staggering, plunging *Togiak*, the skipper was mighty busy. He fought the wheel, consulted Charts 8802 and 9050, kept minute track of his position and speed, and made allowances for the tide-current and the drift caused by the gale.

The sea wrenched at the tug, as if determined to tear the keel out of her. Outside the little wheelhouse there was only the blackness of night, crammed with the roar and the crashing of the water. Inside, Kennard's face wore an expression of frosty amusement as, gently, he altered the course a bit to port.

After a few minutes he lashed the wheel and went out onto the little hridge and

clung there, looking back toward the dimly-seen lights of Burkun's tug. Burkun was swinging to follow the *Togiak*. Burkun, who made a lot of noise about knowing these water intimately, was relying on Kennard's judgment, now that the going was tough.

The master of the *Togiak* altered his course a trifle more, then held to it. The seas suddenly became more savage; took on a suspicious resemblance to breakers; but soon, however, they slacked off and the motion of the *Togiak* eased.

Kennard went out onto the hridge again. It was hard now to make out the dim lights of the *Becharof* and its tow; but, after a few minutes, Kennard perceived Burkun's lights brighten in intensity, while those of the cannery hulk gradually disappeared.

Kennard returned to his wheel and rang Waldo for *Half Speed*.

After fifteen minutes or so, Burkun's squat tug drew alongside. Hauling dangerously close to the *Togiak*, Burkun let loose a series of frantic toots with his whistle.

Kennard rang his engines to *Stop—Stand By* and went out onto the hridge again. Across the narrow strip of water which separated the two plunging, rolling tugs, he looked down at Burkun's giant figure on the *Becharof's* deck, plain against the vessel's lights.

"What'll you have?" Kennard asked calmly, leaning against the rusty iron-pipe railing of his hridge.

"Yuh know well what I'll have!" Burkun roared. "You led us across a shoal! The cannery hulk's aground—our line carried away! The hulk'll hust up any minute an' you gotta help us get her off h'fore she does! You got a line heavy enough—"

"You think the pounding we took on Chichagof Shoal did us any good?" Kennard retorted. "We strained some frames, bent our rudder, and had some ports stove in. You got us into that, with as low a trick as ever was pulled by anything on two legs. Then you went off and left us. Now, I'm heading for Dillingham—and if I choose to take a short-cut through shal-

low water, that's my business. I'm sure surprised that a man who claims to know as much about these waters as you do should have to follow someone else in thick weather."

Burkun shook spray from his eyes and glared up at Kennard with the malevolence of a cornered Kodiak bear. "You ain't gettin' away with this!" he roared. "That cannery hulk's worth a couple hundred thousand, with the machinery that's in her. You knew she drew more water than either your tug or mine—you knew she'd strike on that shoal. Everybody knows you're one of them wise guys that uses charts an' such, an' keeps track of his position all the time. You went an' deliberately led me—"

"You'll never make that stick," Kennard cut in. "Your tow is your responsibility, not mine. You knew how much water she draws; why didn't you use your lead?"

"I did! It showed eleven fathom' a minute before the hulk struck! I seen some breakers, hut by then it was too late."

"Well," Kennard said easily, looking over the men who crowded the *Becharof's* deck behind Burkun, "your tow is roosting on Ustiugof Shoal. If you'll look at a chart some time you'll see that Ustiugof has two fathoms at mean lower low water, which is just about the stage now. And if you'll look at a pilot book, you'll find it says Ustiugof is steep on the offshore side—I see you've taken off the crew of the hulk. Well—" Kennard turned, opened the door of his wheelhouse and started to go inside.

"Hey!" Burkun's hull voice was as near to pleading as he could bring it. "This is a case of distress, see? Do I get some help, or don't I?"

"Why," Kennard said—grinning when he saw that Pattler had come pussyfooting out onto the deck and was listening intently—"sure you do, Blaze. Always glad to help a man out."

Burkun's heavy jaw sagged. Pattler's head swiveled and his sharp face pointed up at the skipper.

Kennard went back into his wheelhouse and rang for *Half-Speed*. The *Togiak* got under way.

And with the storm lashing at their broad fan-tails and the smoke of their Diesels swirling low over their bows, the two tugs raced back to the stranded tow.

THE cannery people had done wrong by the *Susan M*—any seagoing man would tell you that, profanely. The old bark's proud masts had been stubbed, her hold crammed with iron *Chinks*, dehydrators and steam chests to make her a floating salmon cannery.

And now she lay heavily on the shoal, her stubbed bowsprit pointed defiantly into the storm.

Kennard eased the *Togiak* close past the bark and the *Becharof* followed closely.

"I'll send a man or two aboard!" Burkun megaphoned to Kennard. "We'll haveta use your line."

Kennard agreed to that. Burkun sidled close to the *Togiak*, close enough for two of his hands to jump across to Kennard's vessel and bent a light line onto the end of his galvanized wire-rope tow cable.

That was the only cable of its kind on Bristol Bay. Burkun used Manila line. And Pattler, if a man could judge from the way he was stamping around on the fore-deck of the *Togiak* down there, didn't like this idea of helping Burkun, not any.

But it wasn't Pattler's way to do his objecting now. He'd wait until Burkun wasn't around—not good business to let the competition know that there was dissension aboard the *Togiak*.

Burkun's two men returned to the *Becharof*, carrying with them their light line. Burkun swung the red tug away and sidled it up to the cannery bark. His men made the precarious jump to the low platform that had been built out from the bark's hull to serve as a landing-stage for the Aleut fishermen's small boats. From there, aided by the glare of the searchlight beam which Burkun threw against the bark, they made their way easily to the deck.

With the help of their light line, they drew Kennard's steel towing-line aboard, made it fast to the bits at the bark's stern. Then they signaled with a flashlight.

Burkun responded to the signal with a blast of his whistle, swung back to the *Togiak* and had a man throw a short Manila line across the *Togiak's* bow. Pattler made the line fast. The other end of it was fast to the winches on the *Becharof's* fan-tail, so that Burkun's craft could add its pull to that of the *Togiak*.

Then, with Diesels snorting and lines creaking, the two tugs threw their stubborn might against the sand's grip on the cannery bulk's keel.

For several minutes, nothing happened. But then Kennard felt the bark stir, felt her come reluctantly free.

He grinned, in the dim glow of his binocular. Had Burkun been a better seaman, he would have waited for the rising tide and the storm to help him, rather than chase frantically after the *Togiak* for assistance. But it was just as well that he had done it this way. This way a neat share of the towage fee would go to Pattler, and perhaps then the owner of the *Togiak* would come down off his high-horse for a while.

For himself, Kennard would be willing to let it go at that. Fighting Bristol Bay was job enough for a man—and Kennard liked to be at peace with his fellow men. Competitors not excepted.

THE *Susan M* was running free now, and one of Burkun's hands came aft on the *Becharof* and cut the Manila line which had coupled the two tugs together. Burkun let go a series of blasts with his whistle.

And as if in answer, the *Togiak* bounded forward. The laboring beat of her Diesels lifted. Running free, she smashed wildly through the seas until Kennard rang down the engines and darted out onto his little bridge to look back.

It wasn't hard to see what had happened. Those Burkun men who were aboard the bark had cut Kennard's steel tow-cable

And now Burkun's squat tug was circling, grazing past the bow of the bark. His men had broken out another line aboard the cannery vessel—were throwing it down to his tug.

By the time Kennard had circled to come alongside the *Becharof*, they had the line fast; and Burkun's craft was swinging the tow, getting under way.

The sky was lightening some now and Kennard, as he ranged close, could see Burkun's gleeful face on the *Becharof's* bridge.

"What'll yuh have, Kennard?" the red-headed giant hooted.

Kennard went out onto his own bridge. "What's the idea? Trying to gyp us out of our share of the tow? We pulled the bark off that shoal for you, and if you think—"

"Don't know what you're talkin' about!" Burkun taunted. "I ain't seen yuh since you was roostin on Chichagof!"

"You fool, those cannery workers you've got aboard there will testify—"

"Now ain't that too bad?" Burkun retorted. "Accidental-like, they went an' got intuh my private stock of fire-water. They've passed out on me, to a man!"

Kennard moved with an odd, stiff carefulness as he lashed his wheel and went down to the *Togiak's* deck. Vince Waldo was sticking his head out of the engine-room. Pattler, his sharp face white under the dripping brim of his hat, was pacing the deck.

The *Togiak*, though running at slow speed, was drawing away from Burkun's craft. Burkun yelled: "Hey Kennard—want tuh come over an' argue?"

Kennard looked speculatively at the choice collection of hruisers who crowded the *Becharof's* deck. Vince Waldo, lugging a huge wrench, came scurrying forward. "Anything you say, skipper—"

"Not!" Pattler interrupted. "We'll put this thing before the commissioner at Dillingham. We'll—"

"That'll huy you nothing" Kennard stated. "Burkun's all set to lie himself out of this—beat us out of our claim. He

fed those cannery men some of that de-born he peddles to the Indians, so they'll be no help to us. A man has to have proof."

Pattler said, "Well, we're not going to get our beads smashed. Start for Dillingham—and when we get there, you're fired! Twice in one day you let that red devil put it over on you. Seagoin' samaritan—" The little owner swelled up. "Pbooeey!" he snorted.

Vince Waldo squinted up at the skipper. "What say, Kindly?"

"Not a word, Vince. It won't be words that will settle this thing."

THE *Togiak* lay peacefully at anchor, in the Nushagak River just off Dillingham. In his cabin, Kindly Kennard was busy with the melancholy task of packing his duffie.

Not an easy job, this. A man becomes attached to a ship which has gamely seen him through as many adventures as are inevitable in four years of Bristol Bay tow-boating. And though a tug may be a blunt and unlovely specimen of sea-craft, she has a persistent individuality which no other type of vessel can equal.

Vince Waldo stuck his head into the skipper's cabin. Kennard swung around, saw that the engineer had his own sea-bag slung over one shoulder.

"Now look here, Vince," the skipper began. "Just because I'm canned—"

"I'm sick of this tub anyway," the prim little engineer retorted. "Sick of Pattler. I'm—"

"You're a poor liar," Kennard retorted. "You'd leave those engines of yours, just because I pulled one rescue too many? You're a fool."

They were still arguing that point, when they reached the deck. But their argument stopped when they saw a gas-boat, carrying the U. S. Commissioner and Pattler, come threading through the maze of Indian outboard boats which were plying nets on the river.

Pattler was white, quivering with helpless fury.

"Burkun's brought the cannery hulk to

anchor off Nushagak!" he said wildly, gesturing when he reached the tug's deck. "The commissioner staged a hearing—Burkun's gang of thugs lied their heads off! The commissioner says I've got no proof—can't do a thing! Do you realize what this means to my business? If I can't get the goods on Burkun, he's set to get all the towing business—"

"Too bad," Kennard sympathized.

"Too bad, is it?" Pattler yelled. "How about the investment I've got tied up here? What am I gonna do about that? What about the guff I've had to take from that red devil?"

"I wouldn't know," Kennard said gently. "I don't work here any more. I'm just waiting to go ashore. And, having helped myself out of a job, I've sworn off helping other folks."

Pattler squinted. "Kennard, what are you so all-fired cagey about?"

The skipper moved toward the rail. "Business is business. You said so yourself. So I'm keeping what I know to myself, from now on. Maybe the commissioner will give Vince and me a ride to Dillingham."

But Pattler grabbed Kennard's jacket. "Listen, Kennard! What've you got up your sleeve? Can you prove—"

"I might prove that we pulled Burkun's tow off a shoal, last night. But—"

"How?" Pattler yelled. "How c'n you prove that?"

"That," Kennard stated calmly, "is my own business, now. If you want me to work for you again we'll talk business. But it's going to cost you ten hucks a month extra on my pay, for every time you told me I was fired—about six times, I think, or sixty dollars."

Pattler's mouth sagged open, closed with a click, sagged again. At last he managed to wheeze, "All right—if you prove it! And, if you don't, I'll see that you *never* get a job, so help me."

THE commissioner's boat, carrying Pattler and Kennard and Vince Waldo now, in addition to the commissioner,

crossed the broad reach of the river and came alongside the cannery hulk. The four went aboard.

They were met by Burkun. The giant glared at them and spread his feet defiantly. "You guys whinin' around here again?"

Kennard grinned. "Like to have a look at those stern towing hits, Blaze. If you don't mind."

Burkun's bushy red eyebrows lowered suspiciously. But then he pulled air into his barrel chest and let out a derisive snort. "Go ahead! If you think you c'n make anybody believe that yarn of yours, go to it. Trouble with you guys is, you got grounded on Chichagof Shoal, lost a towin' job—an' now you're tryin' tuh get even."

He followed them aft, though. And he scowled when Kennard knelt at the towing-bits.

Burkun had, of course, removed the end of the *Togiak's* cable from the hits. But Kennard pointed to the weathered wood.

"There you are, Commissioner. This hulk hasn't been moved for years—and ours is the only steel-cable towing line of its particular size on Bristol Bay. Burkun's Manila line would never have bit into the

wood as our line did. Our steel line left its fingerprints here, so to speak. And you can check them any time, with a section of our cable. Which proves Burkun was lying. And when the hearing about a certain dirty deal that was pulled on Chichagof Shoal comes up, the fact that Burkun lied about this won't help him any, will it?"

Pattler chuckled, as pleased as a little boy. But Burkun let out a roar of fury. He crouched with his nostrils flaring.

Smiling, Vince Waldo drew a big wrench out of his pocket. "Take it easy, Burkun."

The red-headed giant blinked, looked from Waldo to the commissioner and then back to Kennard. "Awright," he grumbled. "But you guys got nothin' on me, see? You can't—"

"If you come out of this with your ticket still in its frame, I'll sure be surprised," Kennard said. "Mister Pattler, shall we go back to our vessel?"

"Kennard," the sharp-nosed little owner complained, "what with that extra pay you're makin' me kick in, you'll damn' soon be part owner of the boat!"

"Not a bad idea," Kennard commented, grinning. "I'd say it's a good way of handling an owner who won't stay ashore!"





Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



MUTINY seizes us this morning. Unrest has us in its grip. It's probably merely a symptom of delayed spring fever, but we are conscious of accelerated mutations, of a sense of life rushing giddily ahead without much direction but with a great speed and gusto. On our own private and figurative merry-go-round, there is no reward but the exhilaration of the ride—not even a brass ring. And we are content that this be so.

It is a dangerous mood, prompting us to inaugurate all sorts of changes, to fill wastebaskets with those perfectly useless scraps of hieroglyphic-covered notepaper that have been kicking around our desk, to rip pages off calendars, even to wince at the sight of a face familiar to us for more than a day or two, and to abandon old philosophies with shattering recklessness. We knew perfectly well that we must sternly hold ourselves in check; any impulse obeyed today will be regretted forever after. Our only hope of muddling through this treacherous seizure is to sit perfectly still and say nothing whatever to anyone. Repression is the keynote.

Be that as it may, our comparatively antic frame of mind leaves us wide open for the kind of letter that popped at us out of the mailbag the very first thing. (All you have to do to get your letter in featured position, apparently, is to guess in advance what weird frame of mind the editor is going to be in when he opens it. Simple, really.)

ROBERT ESSIG

May I dare say I hope to be different? Can I dart from the beaten path like a tangent? First of all—I have not read the *Argosy* for twenty, thirty, or—alas! not even forty years. Hardly, I say, for this is the first copy I've

ever read. I haven't sailed on your brilliantly golden ship before it was merged with *All-Story* and I didn't live throughout the war for it. You see, my dear editor, I am young, yes, painfully so! Perhaps my ears need a toweling, and I can use a razor blade almost a month without changing.

I like the *Argonotes* more than most of the stories. I think they are very hypocritical and sycophantish. I pride myself on my ability "to be fourth dimensional and read between those so well known lines."

Needless to say, I do like your stories. They are different and what excitement they do carry—certainly not harmful to my so innocent ears.

Glenn you.

Pottstown, Penna.

THANKS, Mr. Essig, for falling in so beautifully with our mood. There was a place, though, in your third paragraph where we weren't exactly sure of your intention. You like the *Argonotes* better than the stories—but when you say "they are very hypocritical and sycophantish," do you mean the *Argonotes* or the stories? And if the *Argonotes*, are you being slightly ironic, or do you really like things because they are "hypocritical and sycophantish?" Or what, exactly? We're not trying to be picky, but you do leave us deep in a fine mist of bewilderment.

T. SCOTT OFFUTT, JR.

I was delighted to see that illustrious exponent of the formula yarn—Mr. Lester Dent—appear in your pages. I have followed his *Doe Savage* with much pleasure, and consider Dent a veritable one-man factory.

Also delighted to see my old friend Jos Townsley Rogers appear. See if you can't persuade him to tackle a novel in the fine frenzy of hurly-burly that characterized *Once In A Red Moon*. But possibly too many years of the blue pencil have sobered his diction.

To you, and to preceding editors—congratulations! I doubt if there's a pulp in existence

which can claim as many devoted followers and I attribute that to a most gifted and aggressive line of editors. I won't pick favorites—all your writers are A-1. And I notice that not only have a host of your contributors "graduated" to the slicks, but that a few appear simultaneously in the *Argosy* and the slicks to-day.

I'm collecting *Argosys* and would like to contact any readers willing to part with old ones—the older the better.

Towson, Maryland.

JUST to reassure Mr. Offutt, we hasten to say that the work of Joel Townsley Rogers and the editorial blue pencil are almost utter strangers. In fact, Mr. Rogers' blissfully untrammelled condition on our pages is practically an office scandal.

For weeks, we've been howling for letters from new or newish *ARGOSY* readers. So when we find them somewhat less restless than the roseate reminiscences from old-time Argonauts, it's probably nobody's fault but our own. Anyhow Mr. Offutt wants more Rogers, while the next gentleman wants a good deal less of him and apparently none at all of J.T.R.'s controversial colleague, Theodore Roscoe.

JOHN E. POTTER

I am a rather new *Argosy* fan. I've always liked your magazine, but until recently felt satisfied with any pulp of the higher class. For several months now I've been sticking to *Argosy*, and am very well satisfied, except for your pet Theodore Roscoe, whose stories I am astonished to see included with those of Brand, Challis and Bedford-Jones. Roscoe's characters lurch about the stage with aching muscles and tortured lungs, until my tongue hangs out and sweat beads my brow! I read for pleasure, so I must skip Roscoe, who leaves me exhausted.

But my purpose in writing is to cheer your magazine. Each issue brings me new thrills, new glimpses of far off lands and ancient times. The farther back you go the better I like it. I hereby order some Crusaders, Phoenicians, Norsemen and Romans. I am yours unless you find too many Roscoes and Townsley Rogers.

Darien, Conn.

IT'S been a pretty much stag affair so far today, so immediately to the south, you'll find two members of the distaff side in full cry. First an elusive correspondent

who gives us no clue to identity except in the superscription:

FROM THE HILLS O' MAINE

Have been reading numerous references to republishing some of your older stories in an *Argosy Quarterly*. Fine idea but when do you begin? May I mention a few I should enjoy again? *The Black Butterfly*, a Semi-Dual story which first attracted my attention over 20 years ago—All your Semi-Duals are worth repeating. *The Argus Pheasant*, that interesting story of Borneo and the Dutch East Indies. *The Master of the Hour* by Achmed Abdallah (the story of the man who would be ruler of all Africa); *The Three Hostages*, a fine detective story. How often I have recalled it by the cryptic meaning of "On the side of Jordan." In the *Green Fields of Eden*—remember it? *The Moon Pool* and its sequel both by A. Merritt were eerie enough for anyone. That winter of 1917 and '18 was full of splendid stories. *The Ship of Ishtar* was another good one. These, in my opinion, are much preferable to some of your recent gangster stories. *Madame Storey*—what's become of her? Gillian Hazeltine was always good, and Burroughs has always delighted boys.

Why not print stories of Ancient Egypt, Babylon, the Gobi Desert, and Persia? Even historical novels or novelets are better than gangster stories. I skip the latter—but have always enjoyed *ARGOSY*. A good interesting magazine is to be enjoyed during the long winters. I've tried many but like best the *Argosy* because it is different.

MRS. HARRY W. WALKER

The *ARGOSY* has a new cover. Long live the *ARGOSY*.

We did not begin with the early readers of the *Argosy*. We began with the *Cavalier*, December, 1911. Later on, the *Cavalier* was married to *All-Story*; and later *All-Story* became the *Argosy*.

We liked the early stories so much that we have home-bound copies of George Allan England's trilogy—*Darkness and Dawn*, *Beyond the Great Oblivion* and *The Afterglow*. Also, Jacob Fisher's *Cradle of the Deep*—August, 1912—and Wm. Brown Meloney's *Golden Gate* published in December, 1913.

We like nearly all the stories, but do not miss any.

We would like to see more Semi-Dual tales. Also *Madame Storey*, *Jimmie Cordie* and the *Mr. Solomon* stories. The fantastic, scientific or futuristic are our particular favorites, but we read them all.

So I say good luck, and you have our wishes for a long and prosperous run.

Baltimore, Md.

FOR many months we have been aware of the fact that the one thing which ARGOSY does not need is a *Poet's Corner*. Why should we clutter our pages with nonsensical jingles? Who gives a hoot about moons in June and goons in tune? Nobody, of course! A fig for that would be the vivavoce vote of our Argonote legions.

Therefore, with the fine logic for which we are truly infamous, we herewith inaugurate our *Poet's Corner*.

This sub-department, we are certain, will loom large in the literary history of this century. We plan to conduct it under rules which are most unique. It will appear, for example, only at such obscure times as we happen to be in the mood for it. We shall pay not one penny for contributions: in fact, each contribution must be accompanied by a penny (or an unreasonable facsimile thereof). All professional and all amateur poets are harred. Not one word do we want from Edna St. Vincent

Millay or Robert Frost. Hush, all you Edgar Guests. Only the editors and authors of ARGOSY, plus bonafide Argonotes stalwarts, are eligible to this holy of holies. In certain moods we will har all poems that rhyme; in others we will reject all verse except that of most intricate rhyming.

We inaugurate our epoch-making, revolutionary, super-streamlined innovation to wit and as follows:

MULE

I prithree
Do not kick me;
For I am slender-tender.
—Leo Lawson Rogers.

Or this, which we consider, frankly, a masterpiece:

Barbecue, Barbecue, where have you been?
Who, me?
Yes, you, Barbecue. . . .

—L. L. R.



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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The sides of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

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