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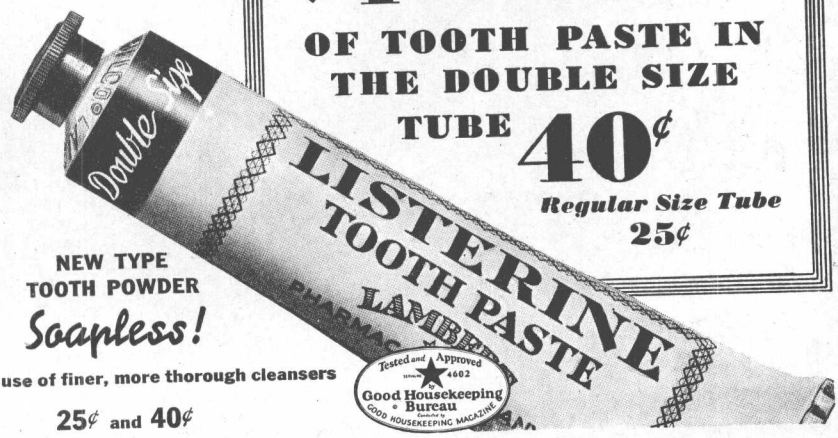

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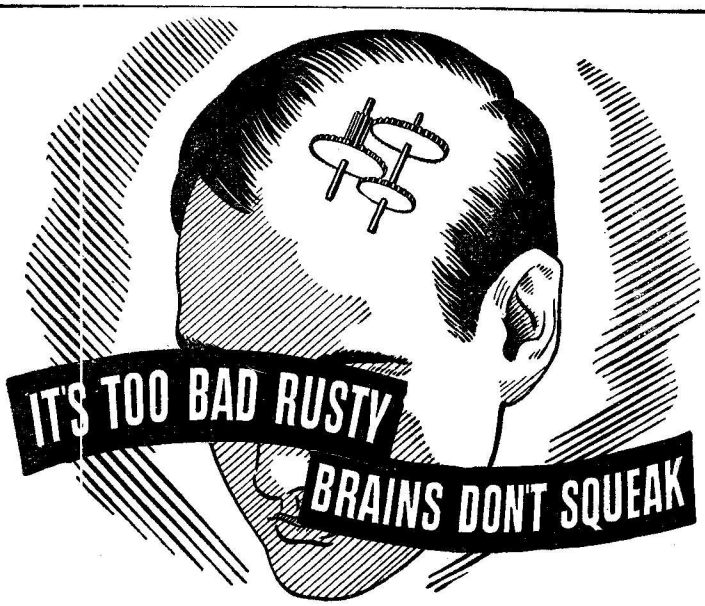

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I

IT WAS not a large place. Crowded, it would accommodate about twenty; but this night it was less than half full. It was a single low-ceilinged room without light except that supplied by the tiny oil lamps the smokers used. A concrete walk bisected it, barely wide enough for two persons to pass, and on either side of this was a platform about six feet deep. On each platform, back against the dirty whitewashed wall, were small square wooden "pillows." At one end of the walk was a door seldom opened: it led to an alley, and was a sort of emergency exit, to be used only in case of a raid. At the other end, at the customary entrance, was a table at which sat the proprietor with cash box, *chandu,* wick trimmers, pipe cleaners, lamps, oil, wires, extra pipes, and a thick rubber bludgeon, which, like the door facing him, was to be used only

in emergencies—that is, when a customer waxed noisy or argumentative.

But the customers seldom got out of hand. Tired, they had come, not as men to a bar, to seek gayety and excitement; rather they had come seeking dreams. Two or three were sitting up now, their eyes shining with unnatural brilliance as they talked in low hissing voices. Most of them, however, either were asleep, or, better, lying on their backs with their eyes wide open.

Allen, propped on one elbow, uncapped and squeezed a tiny tube of government *chandu* As the stuff came forth, black and sticky, he caught it on the end of a piece of wire which he turned around and around. When the tube was empty, and the end of the wire held a black messy ball of *chandu,* he held this over the chimney of his lamp, again turning it around and around. Thin grayish-blue smoke rose from it, and presently it began to splutter, hiss, and bubble. It grew smaller.

With his left hand Allen picked up his pipe. He slapped the agitated mess into an aperture in the side of the bowl. He lighted it promptly, dropped the wire, stretched out with his head on the box-like "pillow" and began to smoke.

Two leisurely pulls and the pipe was empty. Allen propped himself up on an elbow again and reached for his second tube of *chandu.*

As the only white man in the place, he was aware of the fact that he was being watched, particularly by the pro-

prietor. This was an unlicensed place, a bootleg den, and, as such, a favorite hang-out of those who for one reason or another preferred to do their smoking away from police supervision. This made it quieter, but at the same time more dangerous. You could never be sure when the proprietor, a suspicious man at best, would take matters into his own hands.

The men who had been talking wearied of it and took up their pipes again. The place became utterly silent, for street sounds did not penetrate. The air was heavy with the thick, acrid fumes of opium.

AT no time did Allen glance toward the man nearest the emergency exit. That man, to all appearances an ordinary coolie, had smoked only four pipes in something over two hours. The squeezed-out tubes were at his side. He lay on his back, like the others, and stared at the ceiling. Head shaved and dressed only in felt slippers and ragged blue cotton trousers, he was tall for a Kheh. His muscles were knotty, smooth, hard and his enormous hands were armored with callouses. He might have been a rickshaw puller, a stevedore, a digger of ditches. He happened to be one of the coolest professional murderers on the China coast. His name was Lee Chun.

Allen himself was no beauty. Only the color of his skin made him seem a stranger in this establishment. He wore ragged khaki trousers, a dirty khaki shirt, no socks, no hat, straw sandals. His hair, uncombed and uncut, hung down to his eyes. It was four days since he had shaved.

For two hours nothing had happened. Lee Chun smoked another pipe, and ten feet away on the same platform Allen smoked another, too, but they were leisurely about it, and silent. Then they rested, both staring at the ceiling. Two more coolies closed their eyes and went to sleep, or else fell into deeper dreams. Another coolie got up and shuffled out.

Then there was a scuffling in the barber shop in front—the blind for the den. The guard at the door was evidently trying to hold somebody back. There were whispers. The proprietor, his hands in his loose sleeves, sidled out.

In a moment a woman entered the den. This in itself was extraordinary enough, but what was even more extraordinary was the fact that she was a white woman. The proprietor shuffled after her, hissing something, trying to induce her to get out again. She ignored him. She went right to Allen and touched his shoulder.

"You've got to—"

Allen stared at her, trying to keep the amazement from his eyes, trying to seem dopey. Two or three of the coolies, the only ones still able to do so, sat up and stared at her. One of them began to mutter in astonishment. They were shocked.

Shocked, too, was the woman when she saw Allen's face in the light of the tiny smoky lamp at his side. She wasn't more than twenty years old, and had large, dark brown eyes, and dark red hair, and an exquisitely smooth complexion. Her linen hat, her smart linen suit, were spotless—expensive, too.

She stood there for an instant, gasping. Then with a sob, a catch far back in her throat, she turned and ran out of the den.

The three coolies who had sat up, jabbered in soft voices about this unprecedented visit. The proprietor, his Oriental impassiveness disturbed, sat

scowling suspiciously at Allen; he doubtless supposed that Allen was somehow responsible for this white woman's invasion, though as a matter of fact, Allen had never seen her before in his life.

Lee Chun sat up, yawned, slid his legs over the edge of the platform. His dark slanting eyes were on Allen as he padded down to where the proprietor sat. They whispered for a time. Allen could not hear what they said. Then together they went to the middle of the aisle, where they stood in front of Allen, staring at him, whispering. Lee Chun was fingering something concealed under his ragged cotton trousers; the proprietor had both his hands in his sleeves, and it was not difficult to guess what else those sleeves concealed.

ALLEN lay perfectly still, pretending to be unaware of this inspection. He knew that a false move on his part at this moment would mean death. He did not dare to look directly at the two men who stood at his feet. He did not even dare to keep his muscles tight, ready to roll to one side or the other if they sprang at him with knives. Tight muscles would be out of keeping with the part he played, and these men would notice it instantly. So Allan was limp and looked at the ceiling, and on his face and in his eyes was the expression of one who dreams of the lotus land a million miles away. He did not move. He did not even blink.

After a while Lee Chun grunted quietly, and shrugged, and started for the front door. The proprietor went with him.

Again a door was opened and shut, in front there, out of Allen's sight, and again there was a scuffling, a murmur of voices. Lee Chun came hastily back into the den, the proprietor at his heels. They went to the emergency door, and Lee Chun disappeared through it. Then the proprietor went to Allen and shook him impatiently. In a mixture of Kheh, Cantonese and Kwong-Sai, all of which Allen understood well enough, and with here and there a few words of pidgin English, which were less intelligible, he told Allen that he must depart instantly. The police! It was notable, however, that he made no effort to disturb any of the other customers.

"You go away! You go now! Not safe to stay here!"

Allen mumbled: "Okay. . . ." Grumbling, he slid to the edge of the platform. He rose, swaying. He staggered toward the front door.

"No, no! The *tuan* must go this way! The alley!"

Now Allen balked, but only inwardly. Lee Chun had gone out that way, and Lee was not a man you would care to encounter in a dark alley, especially if he suspected, as apparently he did, that you were on his trail.

However, it was no time for hesitation. Smiling vaguely, foolishly, he turned like an amiable sleepwalker, and like a sleepwalker he slippered out through the emergency door.

The den had been dim, but the alley was black. Amoy Street, deserted at this hour of midnight, was a wan, unhelpful blur. On either side were perhaps doorways, perhaps blank walls: it was too dark for Allen to learn.

The alley was narrow, not more than four feet across. Nothing moved, and there was no sound. Allen crouched a bit, tugged out his service pistol, cocked it, and started slowly toward Amoy Street. His right elbow was outthrust, scraping the wall on that side, and he held his left hand far out like an automobile driver signaling a turn.

What he most feared was not a direct attack—Lee Chun was not a man to do things directly. No, what he feared was that Lee, crouching in the darkness, would let him pass, and then, when he was silhouetted against the entrance of the alley, shoot or stab him in the back. Stab him, most likely. Stabbing was quieter.

It took him a long time to reach the street. Nothing happened on the way. But he was not yet clear. As he was about to step out onto the sidewalk, some sixth sense of a man well used to danger, or possibly the slight movement of a shadow across the street, warned him. He dropped flat.

There were four or five shots. Bullets whined over Allen's head and smacked viciously against the brick wall, ricochetting on a higher, shriller note.

A man bolted from a doorway on the other side of Amoy Street. Allen saw him, fired twice. The light was bad; the man, a fleet shadow, disappeared into another alleyway; and Allen rose.

He made no attempt to pursue the gunman. In that rookery of alleys, backyards, tenements, with a dozen Chinese to a room and a dozen rooms to a floor, a whole company of cops could hardly hope to find him. As faces bleary with sleep began to appear at windows, as nervous voices began to cackle questions, Allen, without haste but not slowly either, betook himself to a corner, rounded it, and started walking in the direction of Collyer Quay. He stayed close to the wall and did not look back.

A LATE rickshaw took him out to a cool neat bungalow in Tanjong Katong. He dismissed the boy, and knocked loudly and with persistence. At a window a voice rasped: "Who the devil is it, and what the devil do you want?"

"Allen, Inspector. Could I speak to you a few minutes?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly! Just a minute—"

Archibald McHenry was a rufous, emphatic Scot who had lived in the tropics for more than thirty years. He was a good policeman, harsh, a disciplinarian, not beloved by those under him, but efficient and scrupulously fair. He had the profoundest contempt not only for the Malays, Sikhs, Khehs, Klings, Punjabis, Achinese, and other curiously complexioned persons who made up the greater part of the force, but even for the white executives as well. How it came about that he liked and respected Allen, a mere American, was a mystery, accounted for only by the guess that it was because Allen was not a Singaporean but a "borrowed" detective from Shanghai where he was a sergeant in the International Settlement police.

"What is it? Tell me. What's happened? Wait—What about a bit of a *stengah* first? Say when."

He poured whisky and soda, and they seated themselves in his tacky, ridiculous little parlor. McHenry was a bachelor.

"Better keep away from that window, Inspector."

"What the devil do you mean, sir? We may be having a bit of trouble, but it's not so bad that a man's going to be murdered while he sits in his own home!"

"You're about my build, and Lee Chun might make a mistake. He's already taken one crack at me tonight. Listen—"

He told the story. McHenry was furious.

"We'll raid the place! We'll raid the whole block! We'll throw every one of them behind bars until they—"

"Now wait a minute, Inspector, if you'll excuse me for interrupting you! Raiding won't do any good. Lee Chun will be blocks away by this time, miles away."

"We'll pick him up! We'll search the whole city!"

"And what if we found him? I only know him as a face, and no other member of the department here knows him at all. I couldn't honestly identify him as the man who fired at me tonight. His fingerprints and pictures are not on file. What charge could we lodge against him? Or even if we booted him out as an undesirable, how is that going to help us? He'd be back again on the next ship or the next train, and after that he'd simply be careful not to let himself be seen. It wouldn't tell us anything about this piracy, would it?"

McHenry gulped his *stengah,* scowling.

"You really think there's some piracy plan afoot then?"

"There's something up, I'm sure of that! I was brought here from Shanghai because none of the local criminals knew me by sight and I could presumably go where I wanted to, and also because of my knowledge of the southern Chinese dialects. The tip has been that the old-time pirates are going back into the business in a big way, now that rubber's hitting good prices again and the labor immigration restrictions are being lifted. And I was sent for to come here and mosey around and see what I could find out. Right?"

"Certainly, certainly!"

"Well, all I've found out is that Lee Chun is in town. I can't find out why. I haven't anything against Lee Chun. I can't prove that he's a hatchetman—though I'm sure he is—and it wouldn't do any good to have him arrested. So I've been watching him instead. If there's trouble brewing, he'll be in it somehow.

"All right. I've watched him for more than a week. He doesn't seem to do any work, but a lot of Khehs and Teochins and Cantonese come up to him from time to time and whisper a while and then slip away. What's it mean? I don't know. What I do know is this: Lee Chun's trying to taper off the bamboo stick."

"Ah," said McHenry.

"THAT MUST mean he's got a big job on," Allen continued. "Last week at this time he was whiffing a dozen a night. Last night it was only six. Tonight it was only five, and he tried to keep it down to four: I could see the effort he made."

McHenry asked curiously: "Doesn't that stuff ever make you sick?"

"It always does. I could go outside and be sick right now if I let myself. Besides, it gives me a splitting headache. I hate it. But—" He shrugged. "It's all part of the job."

He finished his *stengah.* It tasted good.

"Well, there we are. Whatever's going to come off is going to come off mighty soon. I'm sure of that by the way Lee Chun's been holding back on his pipes. Well, if it's going to be piracy, what coolie ships sail from here next? The *Ah King* tomorrow morning, and then there isn't another one for more than three weeks. The *Ah King's* going to carry almost a thousand coolies back to Hongkong. They've been working on the rubber plantations for several months, and they've been paid off. I'm only guessing. If you hinted piracy to the line

and suggested they put armed guards aboard, they'd be sore."

McHenry grumbled, "Yes, they're never willing to spend a little extra money on guards. They complain it's expensive and it scares off prospective passengers. Makes it look as though there'd been a tip that the boat was going to be pirated, and the passage brokers kick about losing business. That's all they think about—business. They don't hesitate to jeopardize the lives of the officers of their own ships. They don't hesitate to call on the army or the navy or the cops, if they think there really is going to be any trouble. But ask them to take a simple precaution like carrying an armed guard on each coolie ship, and they howl like a herd of harpooned bulls. What do you propose?"

"I'm going back. I'm no good here any more. The fact that there was an attempt to murder me tonight proves that. So I'm going back. And I might as well go on the *Ah King.*"

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Have another *stengah?*"

"Thanks, no. If I'm to sail at nine o'clock I've got a lot to do in the meanwhile. It must be practically two now."

"Wait—I'll get out my motorcar."

"I can walk. It's not far."

They stepped out on the verandah, side by side. At the top step they said goodbye, shaking hands. Allen suggested that they cut the farewell short, since he did not believe it was a good idea to stand in silhouette to the lighted doorway.

"Nonsense, man! This isn't Amoy Street! Nobody does any murdering around here!"

"Well . . ."

Allen's head was still dizzy from the opium, and he teetered a little, rocking back on his heels. This saved his life.

There was a flash of silvery light there was a short, harsh *thunk!* Behind an hibiscus hedge which separated the grounds from the street, a shadow moved swiftly. Then silence.

Allen turned, grinning twistedly. "No? No murders here?"

In the door a knife quivered still. The door was thick, for the tropics, but the knife stuck out a good two inches the other side.

"That could have done a lot to my intestines, couldn't it? Maybe I'd better let you drive me home in the car after all."

II

ELLIS ALLEN stood at the lower end of the gangplank while the deck passengers filed aboard *Ah King.* He wore a long white surgical-looking coat, a medical inspector's cap, tortoise-shell glasses; and from his ears dangled a stethoscope. In one hand he held a watch, in the other a wooden stick. Looking bored, as medical inspectors do, he made a show of examining the coolies as they passed. He thumped chests, listened to hearts, took pulse counts (he hadn't the faintest idea what these should be) and sometimes with the aid of his wooden stick stared down the throat of a coolie, making him say "ah."

An admitted detective at the gangplank would have pained the passage brokers and sent line officials into a fit of indignation.

However, next to Allen, and working with him, though not working half as hard, was a real physician.

There were nine hundred and eighty-seven coolies, from Chiang-Chiu, Chan-Chiu, Eng-Chun, Kuan-tung, Kuang-si, Teo-Chiu, Hainan Island. Stooped, brownish-yellow, slant-eyed, they shuffled along silently, without complaint,

like cattle. Each wore a huge straw hat, pointed on top; and very little else. Each clutched his few pitiful belongings, a straw mat for sleeping, a bowl for rice or noodles, a glass for tea, a pair of chopsticks, a packet of cigarettes. Each too had concealed about his person a sum in cash ranging from twenty to thirty Straits dollars.

Criminals are not famous for imagination and originality. When a trick works once they expect it to work forever. Essentially conservative, they do not essay any variations or improvements until these are proved absolutely necessary. Perhaps this is why the police of the world have never been noted for intelligence. They are only called upon to cope with unimaginative stupidity. For criminals, most of them anyway, are unquestionably stupid. If they weren't, they wouldn't *be* criminals; they would learn, after a while, that it's a sucker's game.

Ellis Allen had counted upon this, as every detective must do. He had made a careful study of China coast piracies in the past twenty years, and he had learned that they were all of a pattern. The *Kwong Lee, Sandviken, Sunning, Heng An, Hop Sang, Feng Pu, Solviken, Anking, Wong She Kung, Delhi Maru* piracies—these and dozens of others about which Western newspapers doubtless had not carried a line—were in outline the same.

In the first place, they were all coolie ships. Most of them, most of the serious ones anyway, occurred in August, September, October, December and January, when the coolies were going home, with their wages, for the Chinese New Year or, devoutly, to help celebrate the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, the Seventh Moon. The pirates themselves always went along as coolies, paying their passage money, traveling with the real coolies between decks. There might be anywhere from fifteen to forty of them. At a signal from their leader, somewhere out in the South China Sea, probably in mid-afternoon when almost everybody was sleeping, they would rise suddenly, without any warning, splitting into small, prearranged parties. One party would go to the engine room, another to the bridge, a third to the wireless room, and so-forth. Within a few minutes they would have the whole ship in their possession. They would force the navigator to steer a course for the coast of south China, somewhere between Hainan Island and the mouth of the Si-Kiang. When they got close enough they'd have the vessel stopped and a lifeboat lowered. Then they would row ashore and scatter, after dividing a small fortune.

IT HAD happened this way again and again. If ship's officers and cabin passengers displayed abject obedience, and if the pirates were not too seriously smoked up, then it would pass off quietly enough. Otherwise there would be murder. The pirates never stopped at a little thing like murder.

These pirates invariably were armed with American, German, English or Belgian pistols, first-class automatics, and with plenty of ammunition. The mystery was: Where did these come from? Since extensive searches were made of the coolies themselves and of the space between decks, both before and after sailing, and since the coolies were confined to that space, locked there in fact by steel grills, the answer could only be that arms were smuggled on board in advance by members of the crew. This belief was strengthened by the fact that all the ships pirated had had Chinese, never Lascar crews.

The pirates did not have pistols until the last moment before the raid. And the grills somehow always were found to have been opened for them from the other side.

Ah King, however, carried a Malay crew. This made Singapore detectives, or such of them as had heard of Allen and his hunch, sniff in derision. It was true, they admitted, that although piracies had ceased after 1929, when the price of rubber and tin fell off and Singapore drastically restricted the importation of coolie labor, it was reasonable to expect that these piracies would be resumed with the return of prosperity. The rubber plantations were booming, coolies were sorely needed, and the colony was lifting immigration restrictions. The old conditions, that is to say, prevailed again. And where there were such pickings there would be pirates. The system had almost never failed to work.

But it was never tried with a Malay crew. This man Allen was off his nut. He might know Shanghai but he didn't know Singapore.

"Any luck?" McHenry asked when the last coolie had filed aboard and Ellis Allen had sought out shade and a chair.

"No luck. Wherever Lee Chun is, he's not in *that* outfit."

"You'd better forget it, then, and stay a while longer."

Allen hesitated. He was tired, discouraged. There would be no disgrace in returning to Shanghai. He had been borrowed not to clean up gangs melodramatically, but only to gather information which might help the local police, information they could not get through the usual channels, which were too well known. He had done this. But if he stuck around there was still a chance that—

He looked up. The coolness of early morning was lifting, and already the tropical sun was blazing down upon the dock. Odors of durian seed, of dried fish, of sweating, dirty human flesh, rose on all sides. Black smoke stood up tentatively from *Ah King's* stack.

Across the gangplank farther forward from the spot where Allen sat, two cabin passengers were boarding, followed by porters who carried bags bountifully be-labeled. One was a man in tan flannels and with a large white topee. He looked worn, exhausted, yet jumpily nervous. He was about Allen's age, height and build; that is, about twenty-four, five feet eleven, one hundred and sixty-nine pounds; but his hair was sandy and he sported a trig British mustache. The other passenger was a girl with dark red hair, large dark brown eyes and an exquisitely smooth complexion. She was trim, poised, and wore her chin high. Allen had seen her once before—the previous night. He rose.

"No," he said, "I think I'll go, Inspector. I still have a hunch that there's going to be trouble on this trip."

AH KING, when she steamed past the Dragon Gate, carried nine hundred and eighty-seven deck passengers, four cabin passengers, and a crew of twenty-six, including seven white men—the captain, first and second officers, chief and assistant engineers, doctor, and wireless operator.

The cabin passengers were Allen, a portly Englishman named Fordyce, and Arthur and Miss Alice Hays.

Hays was the young man with the mustache, and Miss Alice Hays, Allen soon learned, was his sister. They were English, residents of Hongkong. They stayed in their staterooms most of the

time, though the weather was excellent. Hays wore always a strained look, a look almost of agony, as though he were suffering some inward pain. His sister, too, seemed worried, nervous. Allen bowed when he met them, and they bowed to him, but there were no self-introductions. If the girl recognized him as the unshaven wreck of the opium den, she gave no sign of this.

Fordyce was different. A man of about forty, he was, Allen understood, a commission merchant of some sort. For an Englishman he was singularly sociable. He struck up an acquaintance with Allen before *Ah King* was even out of the harbor.

"Beastly lot of coolies we've got aboard, eh? Beastly little ship, if it comes to that. Sorry I had to take her."

"Yes," said Allen.

"I say, you don't suppose there's a chance of any of those devils turning out to be pirates, do you?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Things are picking up so that it seems quite possible those scoundrels might try their old tricks again, and this is precisely the sort of boat they used to love."

"Yes."

"I shouldn't worry ordinarily, but it happens I've quite a stack of money with me this trip. Negotiable paper, and cash, too. Makes a chap think a bit."

"If I were you I'd have it locked up in the ship's safe."

"Oh, I shall! I shall! But of course, if pirates did raid the boat that wouldn't be of any use, really. They'd crack it easily enough, or force one of the officers to open it for them. Silly of me, I suppose, but all the same I wish I'd brought a pistol with me. You don't happen to have one?"

"Lovely harbor, isn't it?" said Allen.

"Yes. Oh, yes, quite. I say, you know, I think I shall pop up forward and ask the captain about that piracy possibility. Ask him what precautions the line is taking, eh? Care to come?"

"Thanks, no. I'll watch the view for a while."

"Ah, yes. Quite. Well—see you later, old chap."

THAT afternoon, however, Ellis Allen himself went to the captain, a tall, sad, disgusted, roast beefy sort of Englishman named Watleigh. Allen introduced himself.

"Blast it, sir! You'd think that if there was any possibility of pirates on this trip somebody would at least take the trouble to notify the captain, wouldn't you? I appear to be the last person to hear about it!"

"It isn't really a tip," Allen explained. "It isn't anything much more than a hunch. Who else spoke about it?"

"That man Fordyce, this morning. Can't blame him, I suppose. He's carrying a lot of money, almost ten thousand pounds. He turned it over to me and I put it into the ship's safe and gave him a receipt. Then he asked just what you're asking—what precautions have we taken. Well, I can only tell you what I told him, and show you around. Ready?"

"Sure. Let's go."

Coolies smell terrible. They always do. One of them smells bad enough, two smell almost twice as bad as that, and so on. Nine hundred and eighty-seven of them, crammed into the steel afterdeck and 'tweendecks of an ancient vessel which had been odorous enough in the first place, make a smell to contend with. Sardines in a can, the customary metaphor, is not accurate when

applied to an old-fashioned coolie ship. Sardines, comparatively, have elbow room. They don't know what real crowding is.

Watleigh was used to it and didn't seem to mind; but after the first five minutes Ellis Allen, though he had lived seven years in Shanghai, which is no bed of perfume, found himself longing for a clothespin. Nevertheless Allen kept his eyes open, and once again, with even greater care than he had exercised on the dock, he scrutinized the face of every deck passenger. But Lee Chun was not among them.

"You see," the Captain explained, "we've done whatever we're able to do, here aboard the ship, with no coöperation from the line, which hates to spend a single penny it doesn't think it has to spend. *Our* lives mean nothing, of course, to those blighters! Not as compared with expenses! Now look here. The only way any of these devils could possibly get to the engine room or up to the cabins or to the bridge, is by means of that companionway from the afterdeck. And you can see for yourself that it's barred by a double steel gate which can only be unlocked from the inside."

Allen asked, "The crew?"

"Malays, every one of them. They hate Chinese. Wouldn't work with them for anything in the world. Anyway, where could the devils get weapons, even supposing they did somehow force those gates? At the beginning of any voyage like this I always have the forecastle thoroughly searched, and of course the afterdeck and the 'tween-deck are also searched. Well, nothing's been found. So I think we're safe enough."

"It certainly looks like it."

"All the same, I wish to the devil you hadn't brought the subject up, sir! Makes a man jittery. I've never had any experience with pirates myself, but I've talked with men who have—and they tell me there isn't a nastier pack of throat-cutting scoundrels in the world. So I wish you hadn't mentioned it. Spoils my whole trip."

"Sorry," Allen smiled.

"Quite all right, quite all right! I just wish you hadn't brought it up, that's all."

III

THE third night out, after dinner, which he had shared with Fordyce alone, the Hayses having eaten in their staterooms, Allen strolled on the small shade deck, puffing a cigarette. It was good to be on the open sea in the cool of a beautiful evening, far from the fret and turmoil of the city, far, in particular, from city smells. Most of Ellis Allen was well accustomed to the Orient by this time, but his nose was an exception. Shanghai had been bad enough, but the stench of Singapore, sheer concentrated Asia, had left him groggy; and only now, three days out, was he beginning to feel normal again.

Humming a little, he turned at the steps leading down to the forward deck, and crossed to the port side of the shade deck. Three bells struck. The water, lake-like, shushed affably at *Ah King's* bows. Far below engines throbbed. There was a sensational moonrise in progress.

A white blur at the port rail was Miss Alice Hays. Well, thought Allen, English or no English, by the third night out, on a small tub like this, passengers ought to speak to one another like sensible civilized human beings. He approached her.

"Lovely night."

She looked up, gasping, but instantly

lowered her head again. She made no reply. And Allen, puzzled and embarrassed, perceived that she was weeping.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I'm awfully sorry!"

Again she looked up, this time fully, and her eyes shone with reflected moonlight. She was very beautiful.

"You *ought* to be sorry! You *ought* to be!"

"I ought— Say, I'm afraid I don't get this."

"You know what I mean! You—you *beast!*"

She whirled around, walked away, French heels click-clacking on the deck. She did not look back.

"Well, I'll be —," murmured Ellis Allen.

He went to bed puzzled and he woke up puzzed. They were off the Paracels. Allen loafed in his stateroom, had the steward bring him his breakfast there. The sky was clouded, threatening rain. No sail was in sight, no land; and the sea was dark and ominously smooth, almost oily.

At about eleven o'clock Allen at last got out of bed. The day was muggy and hot, and he felt as though he were moving in a cloud of steam.

He took his revolver from under the pillow, emptied the chamber, pointed the gun out the porthole, sighted the horizon, snapped the trigger several times. He yawned, reloaded the thing and put it back. In pajamas, his hair mussed, his eyes rheumy with sleep, he started for the shower. The steward, a Malabari, smiled shyly at him.

He showered briefly and without enthusiasm. On his way back to his cabin he was obliged to pass the door of Hays' cabin, which was open. Hays stood there, looking as though he had not slept for a week.

"I say, old man—" It was the first time he had spoken to Allen. "I say, could you give me a hand with this bag?"

Allen said "Sure," and stepped inside. He wondered why Hays had not called the steward, who was not more than twenty feet away.

THE bag, a heavy suitcase, was in the middle of the floor. Hays wished to push it under his bunk, to get it out of the way. It was a moment's work, and there was no reason why he should have asked for assistance: he was as strong as Allen, who could have done the job with one hand alone.

"I say, thanks so much. Mighty good of you."

"Not at all," said Allen, and started out.

"Uh— See here! Won't you have a splash of whisky?"

"No, thanks. I never touch the stuff before lunch."

"Ah, yes. Quite." Hays seemed embarrassed. "I say—uh— Understand you're a detective at Shanghai, what?"

"Who told you that?"

"Oh, I heard it. Somewhere. Must be frightfully interesting?"

"Yes, sort of. But I'm not working right now."

"No, of course not. Uh— Like me, eh? On vacation?"

"Are you on vacation?"

"Oh, yes. Quite. Been down to Singapore to go after a tiger. In Johore, you know. Deuced big fellas they've got there, in the jungle there."

"Did you get one?"

"Well, no." He laughed awkwardly. "Fact is, I made rather an ass of myself. Played around too much in Singapore—too many friends and all that, you know — till I quite forgot about tigers. Then my leave was up."

Allen grinned. "Well, that's the way it goes." He started for the door, which had remained open all this while.

"But I *have* bagged tigers," Hays said hastily, almost desperately. "Bagged some quite decent ones in Cambodia last winter. Would you care to see some of the snapshots?"

"Not right now, thanks," Allen said. "I want to get dressed now and go out and stretch my legs a little."

"Oh, quite."

The passageway was deserted, except for the steward, who had not stirred. Allen went immediately to his stateroom, where he looked around. On impulse, he threw back the pillow of the bunk.

The revolver was gone.

There was no place it could have fallen. He had left it there not more than ten minutes ago, and during the time he was in Hays' cabin, he was sure, nobody had approached his own cabin: he would have seen them.

He rang for the steward. "Have you been out there for the past fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, sir." The boy looked scared. "There all time, sir."

"Anybody been near the door of my stateroom?"

"No, sir. Nobody been out at all."

"*You* weren't here, were you?"

"No, sir. Not since I bring breakfast."

"Okay. Thanks."

He dressed slowly, thoughtfully. He believed the steward, who was too young and too easily frightened to be a good liar. This meant that whoever had entered the cabin must have done so by way of the porthole. Allen stuck his head out of that hole.

On his right, at the upper end of the corridor, was the porthole of Fordyce's cabin, on his left that of the girl who wept. Beyond the girl's cabin was the cabin of her brother, the curiously agitated Arthur Hays. Each had one porthole. About three feet below the portholes, and only a few feet above the water, was a very narrow ledge formed by thick overlapping steel plates. A person with cold nerves, who was also desperate, or else a fool, might conceivably climb out of a porthole and make his way along the ship's side, treading that ledge, to another porthole. Though risky, it *could* be done while the sea was so quiet. But *had* it been done? And by whom?

He went to Fordyce's cabin, knocked.

"Come in!"

Allen tried the door.

Fordyce's voice came: "Oops, sorry! Just a moment."

The door was unlocked, was swung open. Fordyce stood there, dressed, beaming good-naturedly. "Hello! Come in. What's up?"

ALLEN sauntered in, smiling. He seated himself on a huge sea chest, the sort of article many Singapore shops specialize in, native teakwood on the outside, exquisitely carved with dragons and elephants; and probably lined with camphorwood.

"That's right, make yourself at home. Not much room, eh? Clumsy thing, that chest. I'd have had it stowed below if I'd known it was too big to shove under the bunk. How's the lad?"

"Feeling pretty good," Allen lied, "but it's kind of hard to get awake on a day like this. I was wondering if you'd care to play a little deck tennis with me—help me snap out of it?"

"Surely, surely! Oh, quite. Be jolly. Just a moment till I get my sneakers on, and I'll be right with you."

"I'll go put my own on," Allen said. "Meet you out on deck."

"Righto!"

Allen went back to his stateroom and found Alice Hays there. She had one of his suitcases open on the floor, and she was fumbling in it with both hands. When Allen entered she rose swiftly, terror in her large eyes.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "I must have something somebody wants, eh?"

Her face was crimson with embarrassment, but her mouth was set in a stubborn line.

"You *have* got something!" she cried in a low voice. "And you've been selling it to him. You know you have. It's got to stop!"

Allen closed the door, stood with his hands in his coat pockets, his head a little to one side. He asked quietly:

"What's got to stop?"

The girl's right hand slipped under the linen sport jacket she was wearing, and emerged with a tiny, shiny .22 caliber pistol.

"I tell you it's got to stop!" she whispered. "You were in that place, and you—you— If it doesn't stop I'll *kill* you!"

"Better be careful with that. It might be loaded."

"It is loaded!"

"Then aren't you afraid you'll hurt somebody with it?" He smiled quizzically down at her. Their faces were not more than a few inches apart, and even in this tense moment Allen could not help reflecting what a beautiful girl she was. "See here, Miss Hays," he said in a quieter voice, "why don't you tell me—"

There was a knock on the door; then Fordyce's voice.

"Be right with you," Allen called. He looked down at the girl again. "It wouldn't really be a good idea for you to be found in here," he said gently. "I'm going out now anyway, and you can take your time and search this place to your heart's content. I think I have an idea what it is you're after. You won't find it, here. But go ahead and look."

He stepped out, opening the door only a little way so that the girl could not be seen from the corridor.

Fordyce wore sneaks, doeskin shorts, a polo shirt, a maroon blazer. The well dressed Englishman, all set for a stiff game of deck tennis.

"I say, you haven't got your sneakers on after all!"

Allen took his arm. "Let's step into your stateroom a minute, Fordyce. There's something I want to talk to you about."

THE other passengers until this time had seen Ellis Allen as pleasant, quiet, and somewhat lazy perhaps, a young man who did not seem to take much interest in what went on. But now Fordyce saw him when he meant business. His dark blue eyes were hard, his lean jaw tight, and when he spoke his voice was low and harsh.

"Fordyce, you've been selling Arthur Hays opium."

There was no interrogation here. It was accusation, nothing less. Fordyce frowned. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Never mind beating around the bush about it! He's got the habit—I could tell that the instant I saw him—and he's trying to pull out of it, or at least his sister's trying to *make* him pull out. They thought he wouldn't get any on board a ship like this, and he shouldn't. But they didn't reckon on you. Well, what's the idea?"

Fordyce, too, had stopped being good-natured. He was angry—firmly, coldly, viciously angry—and he showed it.

"You meddling fool! Do you think I'd risk my position to peddle a few tubes of dope to a man like that?"

"No, I don't," Allen replied promptly, "and that's just the reason I want to know why you've done it. You've made him your slave already, haven't you? What's the idea? Not for the petty profit. That's foolish. You got him to hold me in conversation long enough for somebody to sneak into my room and steal something, didn't you? *Why?* That's what I want to know!"

Looking at Fordyce, he knew that this man was not himself the thief. Fordyce wouldn't have the nerve to make a climb from porthole to porthole—probably wouldn't be able to squeeze his not inconsiderable bulk through one of those holes in the first place.

"If you've got any complaint to make, Allen, make it to the captain, not to me. Meanwhile, please get out of my cabin!"

"All right, I'll make it to the captain then! He knows who I am, and he'll take my word for it that I've smelled opium more than once when I passed this stateroom door. I wouldn't have said anything about it, ordinarily. If you want to hit the pipe yourself now and then, that's your business. But this matter of Hays makes it different. Are you going to answer me, or am I going to the captain and demand to have this stateroom searched?" He reached behind him, tapped the teakwood chest. "You've got the stuff in here, and a search will prove it. Well? Let's have an answer."

Fordyce's face had darkened, his eyes were brighter, his lips were working in anger.

"Here's your answer—"

But Ellis Allen was not without experience in these matters. A step took him to Fordyce's side as the Englishman was yanking open a dresser drawer, and he grabbed Fordyce's right wrist and twisted it vigorously. The man squealed, dropping a pistol. Allen kicked the pistol under the bunk.

"I thought you said you didn't have a gun?"

He released Fordyce, but he stood near the man, both fists clenched. Fordyce was licked, and knew it. Nevertheless Fordyce smiled. When he had caught his breath he asked with elaborate politeness:

"You really wish to know what's in that chest, Allen?"

"I do."

"Then turn around."

LEE CHUN was motionless. His black eyes were smoky, his face a yellow mask. He wore coolie garb but there was nothing of the coolie's humbleness in his attitude, even less of it in his eyes. He was arrogant, sure of himself. He had reason to be. In his right hand was grasped a Colt .45 automatic.

"This man detective," he said.

Allen said: "You can talk your own language, Lee. I understand it."

Fordyce cried: "I don't!"

"I wasn't talking to you," Allen pointed out.

"We start now." Lee Chun was addressing Fordyce, yet his eyes never left Allen's face. "We no wait. Start now."

"Now is right," muttered Fordyce.

Allen heard the water carafe rattle in its holster as it was withdrawn. He guessed what Fordyce was doing, but he did not guess quickly enough. He started to turn—and the carafe hit the right side of his head, glanced off, struck his right shoulder.

He staggered backward, bumped the

bunk, sat down. Dizzy and weak, his head whirling, he tried to get up again, tried to raise his arms. He had a flash of Fordyce, purple with rage, the carafe, water tumbling and gurgling from its mouth, raised for another blow. He had a flash of Lee Chun, beyond Fordyce. Lee was still standing upright, unmoved, in the sea chest. The Colt was in his hand. His eyes were expressionless, his face covered with fine shiny sweat.

The carafe came down.

IV

ALICE HAYS emerged from cabin B in a swirl of hysterical doubt. It simply had not seemed possible that Mr. Allen was the man who had been supplying Arthur with opium, yet the fact that she had seen him that horrible night in Singapore when she'd talked the taxi driver into taking her to one den after another in search of Arthur —the fact that she had seen him, a white man in a place like that, had convinced her that he was the source of supply aboard *Ah King*. Arthur was getting it *somewhere*. She knew that. The steward and sailors were not Chinese and presumably would not have opium. The deck passengers were ignorant coolies; even if some of them did have *chandu* concealed about their persons, Arthur, who couldn't speak a word of Chinese dialect, would not be able to bargain with them. Besides, Arthur had no money in his pockets. A coolie would not give him credit, nor would any member of the crew, in a transaction of this sort. They couldn't afford to. Arthur himself would not tell her where he got the stuff, of course; but she assumed it could only have been from Allen.

Now, coming from his cabin, she was not so sure of this. Frightened by the pistol she'd bought as a means of protection when she went from dive to dive, he had invited her, not sneeringly either, to go ahead and search his stateroom. This she had done. *Chandu,* prepared opium, could be hidden in a very small space, and she was not clever, had no experience in searching. But a pipe—an inch or so thick and fully two feet long—was difficult to hide. She had not found either pipe or opium.

In a way she was glad. It was horrible to think that a man like Allen, a man who seemed kind and good, even charming in his quiet way, should be a drug addict, and worse, a peddler.

On the other hand, the mystery remained: Where was Arthur getting it?

SHE started up the corridor toward the deck, meaning first of all to seek out Allen and apologize to him, and explain.

The passageway was utterly quiet. Indeed, the only sound anywhere was the far pounding of the engines. She did not notice that the Malabari steward was not in his usual chair at the end of the passage. She did not know, of course, that this poor lad was lying bound and gagged in a dry bathtub.

A door on her left was opened.

"Excuse me, Miss Hays."

"Yes?"

"Could I see you in here a moment? It's not very proper, perhaps, but I shouldn't want anybody to overhear what I'm going to tell you. It's most important. It's about your brother."

"Oh . . ." She stepped inside without thinking. "What is it? Where is Arthur now?"

Fordyce was calm, serious. He seemed embarrassed. But he went on like a man who knows his duty and means to perform it.

"I only thought you ought to know, Miss Hays, that your brother is getting opium on board this ship."

"Oh, I do know that! He won't tell me where, but I know he's been getting it!"

"I'll tell you where. He's getting *chandu,* and a pipe to smoke it in, from our esteemed fellow passenger, the American."

"Mr. Allen?"

"Exactly. It's only fair to tell you this. Allen claims to be a detective sergeant in the police of the International Settlement in Shanghai, and maybe he is, for all I know. But he's also an opium smuggler. I'm sure of that. I have proof."

She sat on the sea chest, and she was sobbing again. For a long while she had been holding back these tears.

"Oh, I've tried so hard! I've tried to— When Arthur said he was going to shoot tigers, I really thought he was free of the habit. He took his rifle with him and everything. And I stayed in Hongkong. The vacation would do him good, I thought."

Fordyce went to her, patted her shoulder.

"I was so happy! I thought we'd won the fight for him at last! And then I got that anonymous wire telling me that if I didn't want to have my brother deported from the Straits Settlement as U. B. S., I'd better take care of him right away. I knew what that meant! I boarded the next ship."

Fordyce muttered in a husky voice, "Brave girl. . . ."

"And I found him at last, after going into horrible places! I persuaded him to take this ship, a slow ship, and it was the first one sailing back. In Hongkong, I thought, we could start the fight over again. We'd won it there before. We could do it again. And on the way, on this voyage, Arthur would not have a chance to get any of the stuff. It would be a big start. And then this man came along—"

The door was opened with no preliminary knocking, with no warning of any sort. It was opened violently, noisily.

Alice looked up, saw the men, and screamed.

Fordyce started. "See here! What do you mean by—"

The men were five in number, all Chinese, ragged coolies. Two of them held pistols. One held a short iron bar with which he slapped Fordyce across the mouth. Fordyce fell back, spluttering. His lips began to bleed. Two coolies grabbed him, one on each side. He tried to struggle, but they rushed him out of the cabin.

From the doorway another coolie, who held a pistol, said to Alice:

"You stay here, make no noise."

He closed the door, locked it from the outside. She heard a banging and thumping in the next stateroom, Arthur's stateroom. She heard Arthur shout something. Somebody ran along the corridor. There was a shot, another shot. Then silence.

SHE rose from the sea chest, screaming: "Arthur! Arthur!" She fell against the door, fought with its handle in vain. It was firm, heavy. She slithered to the floor in a faint.

When she regained consciousness, only a few minutes later, she was amazed to find that everything was so quiet. Only one sound disturbed the stillness, a silly sound, a dull, persistent bumping. Dazed, she raised herself to hands and knees, staring.

The lid of the sea chest was going up and down. Up an inch or so, then down again. Up and down.

Was she hysterical? Was she dreaming all this?

She rose to her feet, swaying. She lurched toward the sea chest. She lifted the lid—and almost screamed again.

Ellis Allen, wrists bound, ankles bound, was seated in the chest. He had been lifting its lid, as much as he was able to do so, with his head. That head was no pretty sight. It glistened with sweat in the places where there was not blood. The blood was drying, thickening, turning from red to a dark, dull brown. There was a gag in Allen's mouth. But his eyes were alert enough.

She never remembered quite how she managed to untie him.

He stood up, stretching, moving all his muscles. He was moving his mouth too, trying to speak. At last words came:

"Don't scream. They might come back and kill you if you do. Their little job of work has been launched a bit ahead of schedule and they're probably panicky about it."

"But what— What is it? What's happened to Arthur?"

"I don't know, but maybe it would be best not to think about that for the present. The point is, Fordyce is working in with the pirates and they're taking over the whole ship. He had the chief of them right here in this room, in this chest."

Allen stepped out of the chest.

"But they hit Mr. Fordyce!"

"Fake. For show purposes only. So you could testify to that effect afterward. It's part of the same stunt that caused him to bring along a lot of money, so that he could look like the hardest-hit victim of all. He probably even has the gall to plan to sue the line for that money afterward. Oh, he's in with them! They usually get somebody in the crew, but a white passenger was better yet because his room wouldn't be searched. Fordyce smuggled in the chief, he smuggled in the guns, he smuggled in opium so that he could make your brother his slave on this voyage. Look—"

He stooped, reaching into the chest. He took out a large tin of *chandu* tubes —it must have contained two hundred of them—and a couple of bamboo pipes.

"Now listen. There's no time to waste. They won't leave you here long. I think they believe I was dead when they stuffed me into that chest, but they won't take any chances. They'll be back in a little while. Have you still go that .22? Good. Hang onto it, and use it if you have to."

He tried the door, easily at first, then with more pressure. He backed away from it, eyed it thoughtfully.

"No use," he muttered. "I could smash it down, but it would make a lot of noise and they must have somebody out there." He put his ear to the door, frowned. "They're coming back already! Do what they tell you to, Miss Hays, and don't let them know you've seen me."

He jumped into the sea chest, folded up suddenly like a pushed-down jack-in-the-box, and closed the lid without a sound.

The door was opened. A slant-eyed pirate in dirty blue cotton said simply: "You come."

She went. They closed the door after her.

ELLIS ALLEN was out again the instant that door was closed. He tried it, found that it was locked from the outside. Once again he thought of smashing it down, and once again he rejected this idea. Unarmed, what could he do against a gang of pirates?

He went to the porthole. He had to swallow once or twice before he could summon the courage to wriggle out. With Lee Chun it had been different. Lee Chun had doubtless enjoyed a pipe or two before he made that trip to the next porthole and back again with Allen's own pistol.

He removed his shoes, threw them into the sea.

The edge of the steel plate wasn't more than half an inch broad. It wasn't that much. But though *Ah King* moved shudderingly, thuddingly, at least she did not pitch or roll in this calm sea.

The water rose with a sucking sigh, and it seemed with a certain eagerness, to within two feet of his heels. He edged along the top of the plate, his chest flat against the side, dirty dried paint crisping off as he rubbed it. His hands, the whole length of his arms, were pressed against the ship. Inch by slow inch he moved until he was obliged to release his grip on Fordyce's porthole. Now a single slight roll of *Ah King* and he would be pitched into the ocean.

He resisted the temptation to try to go fast, the temptation to look down at the water. Inch by inch he moved. It was a matter of balance. There was nothing to hold onto.

Then he could not move. His feet were slipping ever so slightly, but they were slipping all the same. He dug with stockinged toes, but they slipped the more. His face was absolutely cold, like ice, and sweat rolled down his cheeks with tantalizing slowness. The edge of his own porthole was not more than four inches from his left hand, but he was afraid that if he reached for it he would lose what footing he still retained. On such a small matter as this his life depended! The ocean rose again, languorously beckoning him. He was lost in panic. He was paralyzed. He could not think or act.

Ah King decided for him. She lolled slowly, ever so slightly, to starboard. Ever so slightly—but it was enough. Allen's left foot slipped off the ledge.

He grabbed for the porthole. It was all he could do.

The fingers of his left hand felt brass, cold, comforting brass that meant safety. He swung his right hand over. The left slid off as the right found the porthole, but the right fingers got a firm grip. Then the left crawled back.

For half a minute, breathless, he swung there. Once the sea rose so high that he felt it caress his feet—regretfully, he thought.

Then, very slowly and carefully, he began to pull himself up. It took a long while. And getting through the porthole, arms first, was a most unexpectedly difficult proposition. But he did it. He tumbled, weak and panting, into his own bunk. And *Ah King* throbbed on.

V

ALLEN rested for a few minutes. He found that he was trembling all over, like a man with chills. He rose, muscles aching and went to the washbasin. He washed his face thoroughly staring at himself for a moment in the mirror. The cuts in his head were bleeding again, and his hair was clotted with dried blood. He went to the door, listened a moment, then they very quietly slipped outside.

He had no plan of action, except that he hoped to get to the bridge. The bridge superstructure contained not only the navigating apparatus but also the wireless room; and the ship's arms, a pistol for each officer, a rifle and shotgun in addition, were stored there. Allen had learned this on his inspection

tour with the captain. The trouble was, Fordyce had learned it the same way.

At the end of the passage he looked out over the small steel deck which separated the passenger cabins from the bridge. Even as he stood there, wondering whether to take the chance and step out into the open, there was a scream from the bridge, and the assistant engineer, a blond lad scarcely more than nineteen years old, came clattering down a steep companionway to the deck. He started to run toward Allen. At the head of the companionway three pirates appeared, each with a large pistol.

It had all happened, it was all finished, before Allen could catch breath. The assistant engineer, running, was pitched forward as though somebody had shoved him between the shoulder blades. That he was dead there could be no question, for his back was a red mass of wounds; but the pirates, who seemed to think it was funny, stood there on the bridge and continued to shoot at him, emptying their automatics into his body, which jerked convulsively as each bullet struck it. Then, reloading, they came down the steps.

Ellis Allen slipped back among the shadows of the passage.

At the far end of the passage, one on each side, were two doors. The left-hand door, Allen knew, led to a bathroom. He did not touch it. Had he done so he would have found the steward bound and gagged in a bathtub; though that boy, frozen with terror, would have been of no assistance. The right-hand door was closed but not locked. Allen opened it.

Utter darkness faced him. He felt carefully, exploring with one foot. Steps led down, steel steps, very steep. Some sort of baggage room was below, probably. He might find a weapon down there—at least a bar or heavy tool. He started down, closing the door behind him.

From somewhere above, and aft, came a dull splatter of shots. They were faint, muffled, in this dank place.

There were sixteen steps. This must have taken him to a point below the waterline. There was not the faintest glimmer of light. He fumbled in pockets and found that he did not have matches. He must rely on his hands. He started forward, feeling.

A box or crate was the first object his fingers found. He encircled it, encountered another like it only somewhat larger. Then something larger still, and shiny. A trunk? Yes, it was a trunk. A wardrobe trunk, apparently. It stood on end, about as high as his chest.

Here his exploring ceased abruptly, for he became aware of the fact that he was not alone.

HOW Allen knew this he could not tell. Yet he was sure of it. He had heard no breathing, no sound of any sort. But somebody was there. Somebody was within a few feet of him. He crouched low and started to go around the trunk, touching it for guidance with the tips of his fingers.

At his left, very close, there was a dry, swift scuffling sound. It could not have been caused by a rat.

Allen got lower, hunched his shoulders, spread his arms in readiness for attack from either side or from the front. His back was to the trunk. He waited thus for what seemed a long while; but nothing happened and there was no further sound.

Yet he was certain he had not imagined it, that scuffling which might have been caused by a human foot.

Desperate at last, stiffening in his position, he decided to risk a move.

Somebody had to move! He shifted a little to the right—and his outstretched hand touched a human head.

There was a gasp, a scrape of feet. Something struck Allen in the right ear.

It was a lucky blow and a hard one. Allen's head seemed to explode. He fell sideways, but he had presence of mind to grab the fist, and he pulled the other man over with him.

They rolled back and forth, both fighting furiously. They grunted, gasped, panted; but there was no other sound. It was not possible to see anything at all, and neither man dared to let the other get out of his grip; each held his antagonist with one hand while swinging wild punches with the other. In that way they rose to their knees, still battling blindly. They even got to their feet. Then the other man missed a straight-from-the-shoulder punch so vigorous that its impetus threw him slap against Allen, and they fell to the floor again.

Allen rolled, wriggled, got on top. Sheerly by luck, one of his knees pinned an arm to the floor. The other arm was flaying wildly, the fist seeking Allen's face. Allen leaned to one side and his own two hands felt for and found a soft throat wet with sweat.

The man's chin went down, he must have twisted his head. His teeth fastened themselves upon the back of Allen's hand, and Allen, in spite of himself, squealed with pain. He snatched the hand away. He got the throat again, indisputably this time, unmistakably.

He did not choke the man, as he could have done. He was remembering, through the red whirl that remained of his consciousness, the feeling against his hand just before that bite. Hair. Stiff hair, like that of a toothbrush.

Chinese, certainly coolies, do not have mustaches. They can't, most of them. When a Chinese does succeed in growing a mustache—and only the educated do this—it is a scrawny, silky, straggling thing. It is never stiff.

Besides, this man underneath him was not half naked like a coolie. He was fully dressed, and his clothes, from what Allen had felt of them in that wild, blind battle, were good.

"Is that you, Hays?"

The figure stirred. There was a weak, gurgling sound. Allen relaxed a little the pressure of his thumbs, though he took good care to keep them on that throat.

"Who are you? Are you Allen? Fordyce?"

"Allen. What are you doing down here?"

"Let go of my neck and I'll tell you."

ALLEN released his grip, and sat down, panting for breath, wiping his wet face with wet hands. Hays seemed to be doing likewise. For a full minute there was only the sound of their heavy breathing.

Then Hays whispered: "I'll strike a match. Ready?"

"Right," whispered Allen.

It seemed natural to whisper. Curiously, they were both afraid to raise their voices.

The match spluttered, flared. For an instant it was like a terrible torch, blinding in that place of pitchy blackness. Then it softened a trifle. Then went out.

Hays struck a second; and this time the two men looked at one another.

"I couldn't have inflicted all *that* damage!"

"Is there blood? No, you didn't do that, except what's around my mouth.

Your friend Fordyce, with the help of *his* friend, Lee Chun, the pirate boss, walloped me with a bottle for a while and left me for dead. How did you get away?"

"They were taking me forward when some shooting started up in the bridge and all the Chinks except one ran to see what was happening. Even that one Chink, who stayed with me, forgot himself in his excitement and let his pistol fall to his side. I shouldn't have taken the chance, but I did. I was thinking of Alice. When he let that pistol fall a bit I lifted a handful of knuckles to his chin. Then I closed in with him and kept him from raising the gun when he caught his senses back. We roughed it to the rail. I don't know how he went over. I'll never understand that part of it. But I can't say I'm sorry. The only thing I'm sorry about is that he carried the pistol with him. It had gone off once or twice, and I had every reason to expect the other boys to come pelting back from the bridge house. So I bolted into the cabin passage here. I went to Alice's room first but she wasn't there. I didn't have time to look any further. I could hear them coming down the ladder from the bridge and I had to think fast. I dodged down here partly because it seemed like a good place to hide but chiefly because this trunk here is mine and I've got my rifle in it. A rifle, I thought, might come in handy."

He had lighted a third match while he talked, and a fourth.

"When you came I thought you must be one of the pirates. So I tried to be quiet and hoped you'd go away. I hadn't been able to get the trunk open yet. The key's up in my stateroom, and when you came I was snooping around looking for something with which to break open the thing. I wouldn't have touched you if you hadn't collided with me, but when you did that there wasn't anything left for it but start swinging. I say, it was a jolly show while it lasted, wasn't it?"

"Lovely," said Allen. "Let's get that trunk open, eh? Do you have more than one rifle?"

"I have two and also a pistol, but the big rifle's the only one I have ammunition for. It's a Mauser."

They prowled, Hays striking matches, Allen feeling dark corners with his hands. Soon Hays found a crowbar. With this they went to work on the trunk, and opened it. Hays took out the Mauser, a brute of a gun. Allen took the pistol, a heavy Webley revolver. Even empty, it might serve to frighten somebody. He also took the crowbar, a light one.

"Now let's start looking for—"

The door at the head of the steps was opened and there was a swirl of men's voices. Arthur Hays sank back of the trunk. Allen slipped underneath the steps.

THREE Chinese came down the steps. The first had an electric flashlight. They were looking for somebody, perhaps Hays, perhaps Allen himself. They left the door open.

The first man had reached the foot of the steps and started to move the flash back and forth; the second man was only a step or two above him, and the third man was about half way down, when Allen reached through the steps from underneath and, grabbing the ankles of this third man, gave a tremendous pull.

The coolie screeched, a thin high noise, snapped short as he fell. He struck the second man, and the two footballed into the third. The flashlight and all three men went to the floor.

The flashlight went out, but there was a drizzle of light from the open door, enough light to show the three men. One lay motionless, all breath knocked out of him; or perhaps his head had been cracked upon the steel floor. Another sprang to his feet, yanking out an automatic. The third stayed on hands and knees.

Allen stepped free of the stairs and threw the crowbar. It hit the man who was standing, hit him in the neck, and slammed him against the wall. His gun thundered twice. But he kept his feet. Scowling, he swung the pistol toward Allen. It was doubtful whether he could see Allen, but he knew the direction from which that crowbar had come.

Arthur Hays sprang out from behind his trunk, swinging the Mauser like a club. It made a horrible sound when it struck the coolie's uncovered head. The coolie dropped.

Hays and Allen together jumped upon the man who was on hands and knees, and Allen wrenched a knife from the fellow's hand before any harm could be done.

"You talk the lingo, don't you, Allen? Suppose you ask him where my sister is, while I keep watch above in case anybody heard those shots. Ask him properly, too! I shan't mind what I overhear."

It was five minutes before Allen went up the steps, the captured automatic in his fist, in his pocket a box of .45 shorts. Only the first coolie had been armed with a pistol.

"He says he doesn't know where your sister is, and I believe him. Now comes the question what to do with these babies."

"That's easy." Hays produced a large key. "This was in the door when I ducked down here. I took it out for fear somebody would see it and give it a turn. Well, we can lock these beggars in. They can make all the noise they want down there. I doubt that it could be heard very far, with this door closed."

In the better light of the passageway he did not look as confident and as quick-witted as he sounded. His hands, wet with sweat, trembled. His lips were drawn back tight. The man was in agony. His nerves were taut and keen, his heart a frenzied pounding thing. Allen, who had seen men suffering like that when they were trying to keep away from the poppy, realized the nervous strain the man was under. Only Hays' love for his sister, Allen knew, was forcing him to keep his nerves in control whatever the cost in physical pain.

"To think that if I'd been clean in Sing'pore, Alice never would have come down! And we never should have been in this filthy tub! And that rat, Fordyce—"

"She thought I was the one who was selling it to you."

"She did? I'm sorry. Poor Alice! Allen, you can't know what that girl has been through!" He clenched his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and long hollows leapt into his cheeks. "If I ever get out of this," he muttered, half to himself, "I'll have learned my lesson. I'll never go near a pipe again."

"Yes," said Allen. "If you ever get out of this."

Hays grabbed his arm. "We've got to! We've *got* to! We can't let Alice stay in the hands of those yellow blighters! We've got to get—"

"Easy, now! Easy! Not so loud, or you'll have them pouring in here. Let's get going."

"Where?"

"I don't know. But the bridge ought

to be the best bet. If the wireless operator is still alive, and if we can release him, we might be able to get off an S.O.S. Also the bridge is all by itself and can't be reached from below. The ship's guns are there too—or were. Controlling the bridge, we'd practically control the whole ship."

"But I'm not trying to recapture the ship! What I want to do is find Alice!"

"Don't you think I do, too? It comes to the same thing."

"I suppose you're right. Do you think we could get across that stretch of forward deck without being killed?"

"We can try."

VI

THE cabin superstructure, amidships, contained four staterooms on each side, in addition to a couple of bathrooms and toilets. The two sides were not connected in any way. Allen and Hays were on the starboard side, which was where the passangers had their quarters. The four staterooms on the other side were occupied ordinarily by the doctor, the wireless operator and the chief and assistant engineers. The captain and the first and second officers slept forward, just under the bridge itself.

The top of this cabin house formed the shade deck. From that deck to the afterdeck, where the coolies were quartered, there was a single outside companionway, protected, supposedly, by a doubly locked gate. Two sets of steps led down to the forward deck. Between the cabins and the bridge structure was about seventy-five feet of rusted steel plating littered with hatches, cranes and hoisting engines. The only sign of humanity in this space, when Allen and Hays peered out, was the body of the assistant engineer, which lay face down in the scuppers. It was a hideous sight. Already flies were busy on it. Hays gagged a bit at the sight, and had to swallow. He was pale as death.

"I saw it happen," Allen muttered. "Nasty business."

"I don't see anybody around now, but there must be some of them in that bridge house. Shall we chance it?"

"Might as well."

Tense, guns ready, prepared for anything, they crossed the deck swiftly and silently. Nothing happened. *Ah King* thudded on, laboriously, wheezily, a miserable craft which ought to have been junked years before. The South China Sea remained smooth and dark, reflecting dark low clouds. Murder, except when they glanced at the body—and in spite of themselves they had difficulty keeping their eyes from it—murder seemed very far away.

There were three entrances to the bridge superstructure. Outside companionways led to either end of the navigating bridge itself, while the third entrance was a plain doorway leading into a passage from which gave, right and left, the captain's cabin and the cabins of the first and second officers.

They went in by this door. The passageway was empty. The captain's cabin, too, and the first officer's cabin, were unoccupied. Allen opened the door of the second officer's cabin—and closed it quickly.

"The rats," he muttered.

"Dead?"

"Never had a chance. Head blown half off while he was in his bunk. They must have thought he was reaching for a gun."

At the end of the passage an inside stairway led up to the wireless room. Windows in the back of this room looked out over the forward deck, while windows in front faced on the bridge.

The wireless operator himself was seated, sprawled over his instrument, arms outstretched. Blood had spurted from his neck, had dripped to the floor, but now the flow had ceased and the blood was dry. Houseflies were busy here too. The operator, they later learned, had disobeyed an order to throw up his hands and had valiantly, if foolishly, tried to send an S.O.S.

A door opened from the bridge, a Chinese entered, calling something over his shoulder. When he turned and saw Allen, who had at that moment reached the head of the steps, he stood an instant transfixed in amazement. Then he reached for a pistol.

ALLEN could have shot him, but a shot meant noise, an alarm. So Allen, perfectly prepared, punched his jaw instead. The Chinese rocked on his heels, staggered back. He was dazed, but he didn't fall. Allen stepped forward and punched him again, right and left. The Chinese crumpled like a wet rag. Allen caught him under the arms and eased him to the floor without a sound.

"That's one more," he whispered. "From the sound of their talking, there must be three or four others out there."

He took the pistol, another Colt automatic, from the Chinaman's holster. He glanced at the windows opening upon the bridge. He jerked his head toward the port window, which was open.

"Stay there with the rifle. Use your judgment. We don't want any shooting if we can help it. It'd bring them on the run. Most of them are probably back robbing the deck passengers right now."

A gun in each hand, he stepped out on the bridge.

He had expected instant trouble, but the bridge was quiet. The first officer stood beside the wheel, scowling. Behind the wheel was a Malay sailor, small, brown, frightened. There was nobody else in sight.

The first officer's eyes opened very wide when he saw Allen, but he had the presence of mind to keep his mouth shut. He jerked a thumb toward the chart room, a room exactly like the wireless room in size and shape, but at the other end of the bridge.

Allen said distinctly, without a sound but making his lips form the words: "How many?"

The first officer raised his hand, all fingers and thumb spread. His answer was that there were five. Allen nodded, passed one of the automatics to the officer, waved the sailor down. The sailor, scared, readily dropped flat.

The officer grinned savagely. He stepped back, facing the door of the chart room.

"Come out of there, you bloody murderers!"

Startled and confused, but not frightened, for they thought they had complete control of the ship and expected no resistance, they tumbled out. Ellis Allen would have liked to bully them into instant submission by the sight of the pistols: this had been his plan. But the first officer, who'd seen his friends murdered before his eyes, had other ideas. The first officer started shooting.

Two Chinese fell. One ran screaming past the white men. From the wireless room Arthur Hays' tremendous Mauser roared, and the runner, stopped in his tracks, whirled around three times and fell.

There was a crash of glass inside the chart room, and when Allen and the first officer charged into that room they found both aft windows broken. The

room was empty. Below, on the deck, a panic-stricken pirate was limping toward the cabin house, while another lay whimpering, his ankle broken. The first officer, purple with the rage of killing now, fired twice at the fugitive, but missed.

The officer swung around.

"They've got the Old Man! Come on!"

Allen cried: "You fool! They'll be running forward as fast as they can come, now! They could pick us off before we ever got back there!" To Hays he cried: "*Aft!* Watch it!"

"Righto!" cried Hays from the wireless room.

From these windows the three of them commanded the whole forward deck, both entrances to the cabin house, and also the shade deck, for the bridge was slightly higher than that deck.

THE first pirates they saw came over the shade deck—or tried to come over it. They clambered up the steps from the afterdeck, pelting past the gate which had been opened for them by Lee Chun.

The first officer had shot out his whole first clip, and he was reloading, cursing furiously as he did so. But Allen, and Hays in the wireless room, missed no opportunity.

A coolie stiffened, rising on his toes. Somebody behind him, not realizing what had happened, shoved him forward and he fell to the deck. Three more coolies appeared almost at once. The Mauser roared, the Colt kicked in Allen's hand.

Their rush—they must have started up the companion in a crowd, not supposing that anything was wrong but simply curious to know the cause of this unexpected shooting on the bridge—carried them so far that two more coolies showed head-and-shoulders above the level of the shade deck. Again the Mauser and the Colt thundered in unison.

The first officer, cursing, clamped a full clip into place and sprang to the window next to Allen. He was not in time to help stop the rush from the afterdeck—that was no more now than a heap of bodies—but he did see a coolie appear, startled, with a raised pistol, at the port entrance to the cabin house. Excited, the officer fired at least seven shots at him. Any one of them would have been sufficient to kill the man. The first probably did the trick.

The first officer, reloading again, started away. Allen grabbed him. "Where are you going?"

"Below. Maybe they've left the Old Man tied up in his cabin. They took him down there somewhere."

"No, he's not there. We looked before we came up."

"But what are we going to do? We can't just stand here!"

"Yes, we can," Allen said. "They might have the engine room, but we've got the bridge, which is the highest shooting vantage on the ship. So we stay here. The next move's up to them. Remember, there are probably eight or ten of the devils left back there."

Ah King shushed heavily along. The clouds, getting lower and darker all the time, did nothing about it. There was one half-hearted spatter of rain, but it ceased immediately as though embarrassed. Flying fishes sailed in swift silvery streaks just above the surface, skittering off a wave now and then, and plopped back into the water.

A massive silence, unexplainable at first, fastened itself upon the ship. The men in the bridge looked at one another, startled.

It was not a silence, it seemed, which

was merely an absence of all sound. It was more definite than that. It was a positive thing, yet ungraspable, like fog, like night.

"The engines," the first officer whispered at last. "They've stopped the engines."

It was as simple as that. For four days they had all been listening to the dull, faraway throbbing and thumping of those engines, until the sound had come to mean nothing. Only when it ceased did they become aware of it.

Ah King hung motionless like an abandoned thing in the middle of the South China Sea.

"Creepy," muttered Hays, who joined the others in the chart room.

"If they've stopped the engines it means they have access to the engine room," said Allen. "Can they get there from the afterdeck? I understood that was impossible."

"It is," confirmed the first officer. "The only way to get down to the engine room, ordinarily, is by a companionway which leads from that port cabin passage, near the chief engineer's own stateroom."

"Then they must be there. They probably have Miss Hays there, and the captain."

Hays squinted across the deck toward the open door, in front of which the startled coolie lay sprawled, a gun in his hand, his chest and belly ripped to shreds by bullets from the first officer's gun. The doorway, and what of the passage beyond it was visible, were empty. There was nothing about it, excepting that body, to indicate trouble of any sort.

"There?" Hays asked. "Well, I'll soon find out!"

He was half way down the inside steps when Allen reached him, grabbed his shoulders, pulled him back.

"Now don't be a fool! If we're ever going to save your sister it won't be by those methods! Why, you'd be dead the instant you stepped out on that deck. And how would *that* help her?"

The Englishman had stood it marvelously well until this moment, when his physical condition was considered. But now his strained, dope-keened nerves snapped. He became hysterical.

"Allen! *I'm* to blame for this myself! *I* let that rat of a Fordyce talk me into holding you in my stateroom while he had the gun stolen from yours. If it hadn't been for me and my beastly rotten habits Alice would have been safe in Hongkong this very minute!"

"All right, all right. . . . Now take it easy."

"Take it *easy?* When she's back there with some of those yellow beasts clawing her! When she's maybe—"

They were back in the chart room, where Allen had dragged him, and now he tried to jump through one of the smashed windows. Allen grabbed him again from behind. Hays fought furiously, fought like a madman. The first officer dived at his legs, and between them they held him motionless for a few minutes until his struggles ceased and he became limp, sobbing like a woman.

"All right," he muttered. "I'm all right . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

They eased him into a chair, and stood watchfully on either side of him. The shock of the thing had somewhat sobered the first officer who until this time had been half mad with rage himself. Bewildered, he looked at Allen.

"I'll explain later," Allen whispered. "Keep watch at one of those windows."

FOR fifteen minutes there was silence except for Hays' gasping, muffled sobs. *Ah King* hung senselessly

in the middle of that bland, blank sea. The painted-ship-upon-a-painted-ocean line went through Allen's head again and again, tantalizing him, an inane melody that would not be chased away. One wounded coolie pulled himself off the pile on the shade deck, crawled to the head of the unseen afterdeck companion, and slithered over, out of sight. Nothing else visible from the bridge moved. Excepting the flies.

The Malay sailor, his eyes ping-pong balls, his face gleaming with sweat, came in from the bridge. He held a revolver taken from one of the dead pirates out there. He looked at the first officer, who with a forefinger over his mouth motioned to the other window. The sailor took his post at that window. He was trembling violently; but he was game, he was going to do his part.

Hays rose. "I'm all right. Sorry . . . Sorry as the devil."

The first officer cried: *"Look!"*

At the open port doorway of the cabin house a white flag showed. It was fastened to the end of a long pole, and the man who held it—held it at arm's length, no doubt—was not visible.

"Risky," Allen murmured. "It might be a trap."

"I'll go down," Hays cried. "It's my fault that Alice is here at all! I'll go down!"

"I'm in charge of this ship," the first officer snapped. "If anybody goes down, *I* do!"

"No, neither of you." Allen shook his head. "Whether it's a trick or not, you'd spoil everything. You're too sore, both of you. You wouldn't be able to keep your heads. Just the sight of Lee Chun or of Fordyce would drive you wild and you'd start shooting in all directions."

"Maybe you're right. . . ."

"I know I'm right. You, Hays, go back in the wireless room and get that Mauser of yours in position. Never mind how you felt before. Keep the old back stiff now, and keep the old eye steady. We'll play fair with them, as far as a parley's concerned, but if they should start anything you know what to do! You other two stay here. Keep me covered, but don't show yourselves any more than you have to."

He went thoughtfully downstairs. He took off his shirt. He placed his automatic, fully loaded, on the floor just inside the door which led to the deck. He opened that door, stepping to one side. There was a moment of silence.

Then, his white shirt held high in front of him, he stepped out on the deck.

Once outside, he did not hesitate. He walked, neither slowly nor too rapidly, toward the port cabin door. Coatless and shirtless, the white flag held high in his left hand, his right hand outspread at his side, it was obvious that he was not armed. He stopped half way to the cabin house.

"All right," he called. "I'm waiting."

Lee Chun pushed past the white flag there, stepped out on the deck. In this whole frenzied business he was perhaps the calmest actor. His tight yellow face was as expressionless as that of an American Indian. His eyes were neither cold nor hot, but blank, like the glassy eyes of a dead man. He spoke in Cantonese, and his voice was low, firm, unhesitating.

"I AM not in command," Allen said when the terms had been set forth. "I cannot give the answer. I will confer with the acting captain and let you know as soon as possible. When you see us wave a white flag again, it will be safe to step out here."

He turned his back, walked away.

He was biting the soft skin on the inside of his mouth and frowning at the deck.

Hays and the officer met him at the head of the steps.

"What is it? What did he say?"

"If we agree," Allen answered slowly, "they will start the engines again and we must sail a course for the south China coast. They don't care where, as long as we come within a few miles of land. It shouldn't take long, according to our present position, which they seem to know. Then the engines will be stopped again—and I fancy they'll be crippled, though he didn't say that. The ones who are in the cabin house will come up on deck, will climb up over the shade deck and back to the afterdeck. We must not disturb them. We must promise this. They'll launch a lifeboat back there. They'll get into it, Fordyce and Lee Chun and the eight others who are left alive, and they'll row for shore. We must promise not to open fire on them as they do this."

"Well, that's nice of them!" the first officer cried. "You can just go back and tell them we don't agree."

"Wait a minute," said Allen. "You haven't heard all of it yet."

His head was low. He glanced through bushy brown eyebrows at Arthur Hays, who was pale as death.

"Besides all the members of the crew except this lad here, they've got some other prisoners—the captain, the doctor, the chief engineer, and Miss Hays. When they cross over to the afterdeck they'll be exposed to our guns, of course, but they'll take these white prisoners along—with pistols on them. When they launch the lifeboat they'll leave all of these prisoners behind except one. That one they'll take along as a hostage, to make sure we don't fire on the boat."

"And that one will be—"

"Alice Hays."

VII

THE first officer took out a handkerchief, wiped his face with it, then blew his nose loudly. The Malay sailor, not understanding a word of English, watched wide-eyed from his position at a broken window. Arthur Hays shifted the Mauser to a more comfortable position. There was no expression on his face. He stood a moment, not moving, not looking at anything in particular; and then like a man who walks in his sleep he turned and started to walk, slowly enough, out of the chart room. Allen was watching him.

Hays seemed numb. His eyes were glazed and staring; his lips were pale.

In the doorway, understanding of this offer seemed to explode inside of Hays like a bombshell. He stiffened. He raised the Mauser, clicked off the safety catch.

Allen stepped forward swiftly, reaching for the rifle.

Hays screamed: "Alice! Alice! I'll get you! I'm coming, Alice!"

He ran out to the bridge, through the wireless room, down the steps.

Allen cried, "Catch him! Stop him!" and ran after him.

The first officer ran after Allen. But they were not fast enough. When Allen reached the passageway the door at the far end was already open and Hays was racing for the cabin house.

He actually got there before a shot was fired. The sheer madness of the thing, its unexpectedness, must have startled the pirates, who had been prepared for anything but a one-man attack. He got there, he dashed inside, he swung open the first door he came to.

"Alice!"

There were two Chinese in the cabin, but Alice was not there. Hays shot one of the Chinese, ignored the other, stepped out into the passageway again. Two Chinese knelt at the far end of the passageway, pistols resting on their raised left arms.

They opened fire at the same time. Hays whirled around, slapped back against a wall, squealed in pain. But he did not stop. The thunder of guns in that narrow place was terrific.

Powder smoke was a sting in his nostrils and eyes—a cruel fog of terror and confusion through which Hays groped blindly, pushing himself against the hysterical fear in his heart.

Now Ellis Allen was in the doorway, the first officer immediately behind him. Allen fired twice, the first officer three times. One Chinese slumped forward, and his chin struck his knee, his arms dangled senselessly in front of him; the other Chinese toppled sideways.

Hays yelled, *"Come on!"* He swung open the door of the next cabin.

Lee Chun had been just about to open that door from the inside. Lee had one hand on the knob, and in his other hand he held an automatic. He held the automatic at his hip. He fired swiftly, unhesitatingly, without stopping to ask questions or even to take aim.

Hays hit the far wall of the passage, hopped sideways on one foot—one hop, two hops, three— and then fell.

Lee Chun stepped out into the passage to finish this job. And Ellis Allen shot him twice through the chest at a distance of not more than three feet.

Allen and the first officer appeared in that doorway at the same instant, the officer foolishly upright, Allen crouching low.

Alice lay in the bunk, her eyes wide with terror. Her wrists were tied around a pipe behind her head, her ankles were fastened to the bunk supports. In a corner, a few feet away, Fordyce was a crumpled heap of wet white flesh, stiff with fear; but he held a pistol.

Possibly Fordyce never would have used that pistol, being too badly frightened to squeeze the trigger. But Allen and the first officer did not wait to find out. They saw the pistol, they saw Fordyce, and each of them did what any other man would do in the same circumstances. The first officer, in fact, fired no less than five times.

Allen only fired once, which was enough.

It finished the fight. They found four more pirates in the other two staterooms, but these fellows came out with their arms in the air, convinced no doubt that *Ah King* had been boarded by half the British Army. There were a few more in the engine room, too, but they advanced no argument against capture. They were very brave fellows indeed, those pirates, when the guns were all on one side, their side. But scattered, and with their leaders dead, they were without any truculence at all.

They came up, hands high, jabbering entreaties to be spared.

"Where's the doctor?" Allen cried, first in Cantonese, then in English. "Where's that doctor? Isn't he down there?"

A tall gray sarcastic man ascended the engine room steps two at a time, yet without seeming to hurry.

"Here's the doctor," he growled. "Thanks for saving my life. I suppose you've given me a whole lot of work though?"

"Plenty."

"All right," the doctor sighed. "Where do I begin?"

"You begin, Doctor, with that man with the mustache, half way down the corridor here. See him?"

"Righto!"

THE weather changed next day, the sky quit glowering, abandoned its futilely fierce aspect, and cleared in submission to the tropical sun. The South China Sea lightened gleefully in response. The air became dry again, and a soft breeze sprang up, while *Ah King* slushed and thudded on toward Hongkong.

The night was lovelier still. The moon extended itself, enlarged itself beyond anything ever seen before, hurling its clean, silvery light in all directions.

"I think you'll live, Mr. Hays," the doctor said. "You don't deserve to, but you probably will. That right shoulder's never going to be the same again, and three of the ribs aren't right yet. When we reach port you're going to have to step into a great big tough plaster cast and stay there for a long while, which won't be any too much fun. But you'll live."

"It just goes to show," said Ellis Allen, "that some men can't commit suicide even if they try."

Hays grinned up at him. "Well, it'll be a long cure, but it'll be a double one. The doctor wanted to give me a shot in the arm before he set that shoulder bone, but I wouldn't have even that."

"He's a fool, if you ask me," the doctor said.

"I *was* a fool. But no more. This is going to be a double cure, I tell you, this time. And they're both going to take."

The doctor grunted, and went out.

Ellis Allen coughed apologetically. "I hate to bring up a subject like this in a sick room," he said, "but honestly, that moon out there's the swellest thing yet. Have you seen it, Miss Hays?"

"No, I haven't." To her brother she said: "You'll be all right if we leave you alone for a while, won't you, Arthur?"

"Righto! Don't mind me. I'll be fine."

"Sure—you'll live," said Allen, grinning.

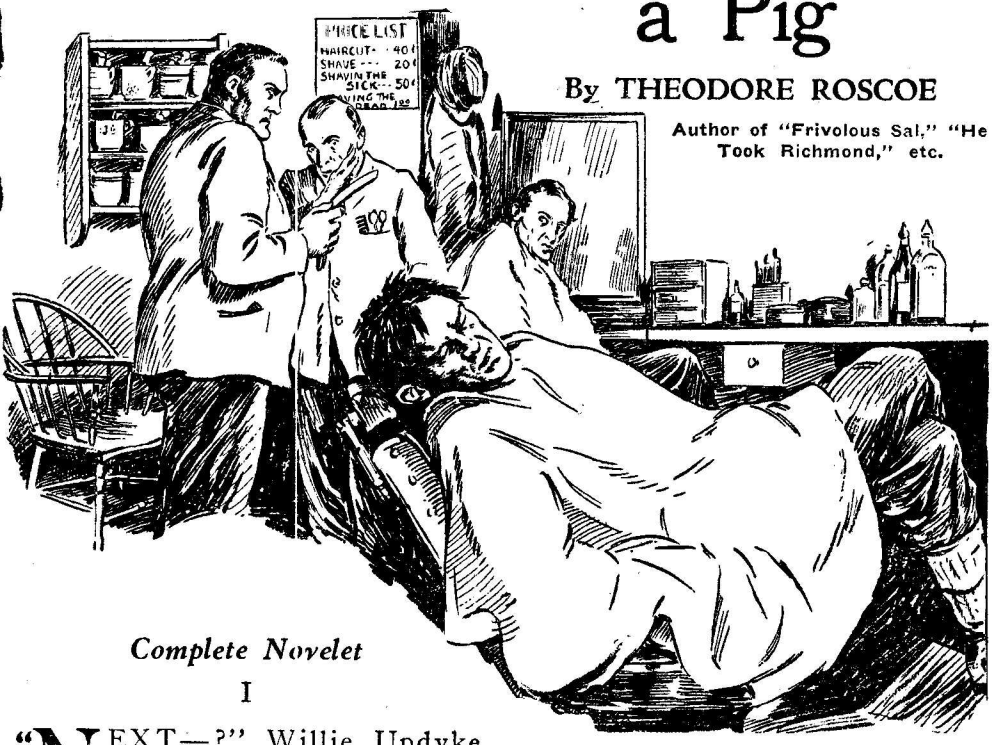
"Righto! I'll live. Have a good time, you two. Don't let the viewing of the moonlight suffer any, but if you should just chance to see the captain while you're out there you might tell him that—"

He stopped, smiled sheepishly. After all, there was no sense talking to himself.

Barber, Barber, Shave a Pig

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Frivolous Sal," "He Took Richmond," etc.



Complete Novelet

I

"NEXT—?" Willie Updyke shook brown needles of hair off the white apron, and confronted the line-up sitting along the sidewall with somewhat the anxiety of a bull-fighter not too sure of his talent. Willie's eyes were timid blue; his chin the kind that retreated a little, as if it didn't wish to intrude. The rest of him was sort of like that, too. He waved the cloth limply; nobody seemed to notice him. The shop was fogged with the haze of cigars, cigarettes and corncobs; in addition, Anton Grunner was talking. When Grunner talked, everybody listened. Grunner's chin didn't retreat. It jutted from the lower part of his face like the prow of a German battleship, and said, "Listen, you!" It was a chin to end chins.

Willie Updyke repeated hesitantly, "Next—?" and Grunner's voice boomed, *"Ha, ha, ha!"* as if his battleship chin were firing. He was shaving himself as he laughed; dexterously whisking the razor around his guffawing jaw. He always shaved right after supper, no matter how many customers were waiting in the shop. Grunner shaved himself three times a day, and he took a lot of pride in the fact.

"Nobody neffer should see bristles on a *barber's* chin," he would boom at Willie Updyke. Especially evenings when he was on his way to call on Martha Teacher. That five-pound jaw would be dampish and rosy, steaming

like something just out of a hot bath, massaged and perfumed and powdered.

"Ho, ho, ho!" He was pushing his great stomach against the bottle-laden shelf to get his face closer to itself in the mirror; twinkling at himself and his reflected audience at the same time. "Yes, sir—!" he roared, lathering his chin with white fluff; then nimbly flashing the big ivory-handled razor. "Vould you belief it? I come into the shop and there's *him!* Standing there! All shrunk up and sweating! *Ha, ha, ha!* Just like a scared little rabbit!"

He was telling a story on Willie Updyke—a story he'd told at least a hundred times in the last two weeks. The whole village knew it.

"But that ain't all. *Ho, ho, ho,* no! You should see Villie aftervards! After they take poor Mister Henry Applegate's body avay. It vasn't like the old man's face had been slashed. Two stabs in the heart didn't show. But ven Mister Sycamore telephones for a barber to come at vonce—"

A sickening dew came to Willie Updyke's forehead. Involuntarily his eyes went to the sign on the barber shop's backwall, the awful sign that had come to seem like a goblin horror held up before his flimsy spirit, a reminder and a taunt.

HAIRCUT—40¢
SHAVE—20¢
SHAVING THE SICK—50¢
SHAVING THE DEAD—$1.00

" '—vy,' I says to Villie, 'The undertaker vants a barber at his parlor right avay. I can't go on account of my hand still bleeding. Take your shaving tools, Villie, here's your chance to make a dollar.' *Himmelherrgott!* I go up there half hour later, and there's Villie sitting by the table all the lights on, poor Mister Henry Applegate's chin all covered with soap—mind you, the coroner had gone and the old man didn't look bad—and Villie vas shaking, yes—shaking so he couldn't hold the razor in his hand. No, poor Mister Applegate vould haff by now a beard so long as Kris Kringle's—so long as the murderer's, I tell you, if he vaited for Villie to shave him. I open the door. *Plunk!* He falls right over on the floor. His face vas the whiter of the two. Yes, sir, the whiter of the two!"

It was the whiter of the two right then, turning toward Grunner in misery-impelled protest. "But I'd just seen him killed. Stabbed to death. Right in front of my eyes. Right there across the street on the steps of County Bank—"

GRUNNER'S face was an inch from itself in the mirror. Admiring its lathered chin. Pleased by its bulk and strength—giant strength that became, when transferred to the fingertips and when those fingertips held a razor, the delicacy of a jeweler. *Whisk!* Shaving a streak through snowy suds. *Zip!* Flicking out an ingrown hair. He slicked the last cream bubble from under his jaw, pinched his Adam's apple, shaped his chin with the moist loving fingers of a sculptor putting the finishing touches on an Apollo.

"Vat good," he bit into Willie's plaintive defense, "is any barber who loses his nerve? Shaving is not only a fine art, a barber, like a surgeon, must always haff a steady hand. Nervous people and razors don't mix."

"But Henry Applegate was my best friend," Willie Updyke told the room desperately. "I was standing right there by the window when I saw—"

"And you vas still standing there," Grunner reminded him affably, "ten minutes later ven I came along." He

paused to swaddle his chin in hot cloths, puffing. Five seconds steaming; then six seconds treatment with the fingertips. Then a dousing with alcohol, salve, cold cream, a final coat of talcum. The chin, when done, looked as plushy, as smooth and plump as a dimpled baby. Three times a day, and always before visiting Martha Teacher. It made Willie Updyke a little sick.

It bore around on Willie now, like some great pink menace, a thing that filled him, had always filled him, with cold dismay. He had never been able to stand up to the thrust of that soft-looking, powerful jaw that made a monumental base to the face of a grown-up Mellon's Food baby— the budlike little ears, the sparkly eyes, the wheat-fuzzed, close-clipped head. To Willie Updyke that round pink bulge of chin was the focal point of everything loathsome. Grunner loved it, tended it so. It was Grunner's personality, the meaty embodiment of his driving character jutting out of his face.

Willie Updyke couldn't explain why something about that chin overrode him, mastered all his inner resistance, pinched something to death inside of him, beat him down. Why it made him stand like a fool before his neighbors as he was standing now, on exhibition for their scorn. A barber whose hand shook. Little Willie Updyke. Little Willie Updyke who stood looking through a window while a bank robber stabbed his best friend to death—

"Anyhow, Villie can still cut hair." Grunner always became genial after a shave, like a tomcat purring after washing its face. His manner toward Willie became more indulgent, the tone an adult might take with a child who wasn't quite responsible. "How about it, Villie?" Palms on his hips, he wheeled, twinkling down. "Do I pay you to stand beside an empty barber chair? Maybe you paint stripes on yourself an' be the barber pole out in front. Customers are vaiting, Villie," he reminded him patiently. "Customers."

Willie Updyke swallowed, "I said 'Next' twice—"

"Sure," Grunner nodded. "They didn't hear you." He blinked at the chair line amiably. "Villie can serve you, gentlemen. Next?"

Nobody in the chair line moved. Like tintypes in a family album they sat, arms folded, legs crossed, expressions rigid in dispraise. Luke Adams was grinning derisively. Simon Tinney openly sneered. Horace Johns looked across the top of the *Police Gazette* at Willie as if he didn't see him. Perspiration broke and ran down Willie Updyke's face. Were these old neighbors of his, these old customers refusing to patronize his chair? From the corner of his eye he could see Grunner, dabbing his muscular arm into the sleeves of his white-starched coat, watching this charade in round-eyed surprise. Grunner might fire him for this; certainly he wouldn't keep a barber nobody would patronize. His stomach ached in panic. He couldn't let that happen; he *had* to stay here—"

"Shave?" his quaver was close to pleading. "Haircut, anybody—?"

Simon Tinney stood up. "Shave!" he said curtly. Then, looping his neckwear on a hatrack, he walked straight for the other chair, Grunner's chair. Passing Willie Updyke, he said across his shoulder in a flat voice loud enough for all to hear, "I'm not chancin' my neck with a guy so nervous he can't run acrost a street to help his friend fight off a bandit."

Willie Updyke felt as if his throat were stuffed with cotton. He wanted

to speak and couldn't. Tears welled in his eyes. Through the blur he could see the faces in that line-up of tintypes approving Simon's outspokenness. Only Mule Lickette wasn't condemning him; the sober gravity on the farmer's gaunt face seemed worse. Reproaching him for not asserting himself, standing up, being, for once in his life, a man.

"Trim," he muttered, walking forward to take the vacant chair. "Just a little off the sides, and some of that quinine tonic. Hurry it up, Willie, I got a date."

Grunner's kindliness was worst of all. "Villie"—his tone now conveyed a strong man's sympathy for another's weakness—"I see no quinine tonic on the shelf here, Villie. Yesterday I told you to fetch out a fresh bottle—Mister Lickette is in a big hurry—go down to the cellar and get some quickly, Villie."

THE cellar door at the back of the room was a thousand Polar miles away. He had to walk the whole distance past a thousand icy eyes. He had to pass under the sign—*SHAVING THE DEAD—$1.00.* As he closed the cellar door behind him, he heard Grunner saying in deep tolerance, "Ve mustn't be too hard on Villie; after all, it's hard to know vat you'll do ven you're up against a killer vith a knife in his hand." Willie Updyke did not dare look back. There were times when Grunner's eyes were like quick blue sparks, and Willie Updyke was terrified lest they might burn their way through to his thoughts.

The hog! The great, smiling, plush-chinned hog! A time might come, Mister Grunner, when that chin of yours—A time might come when that dollar shave—

He had hated the man from the moment he set foot in Four Corners. It wasn't so much that Grunner had come here to buy him out after his own incompetence had forced him to sell the shop (and hired him back with the large philanthropy of someone allowing a bungling old servant to remain on the premises). It wasn't that Grunner was a better barber, a city barber who knew all the new tricks and blandishments, the shampoos, scalp rubs and dandruff-treatments that Willie had never learned. It wasn't even that Grunner, coming here from New York with his sausage accent and hearty confidence, had in eight years built up such a popularity as Willie, in a lifetime, had never commanded. Or even that Grunner had beamed his way into the affections of Martha Teacher to the extent of having first choice of books in her little lending library and candy store on Hill Street.

"I just don't like him," Willie had told Martha Teacher glumly, refusing to attend a party she was giving Grunner. "No, an' I never did."

"After all the things he's done for you—the nice way he's always treated you. Willie Updyke, I believe you're jealous!"

Jealous? The thought of Grunner's laughing big chin draped over Martha's lace collar (as he'd seen it through the porch vines one night) filled Willie Updyke with a sickness greener than any jealously. As for all the nice things Grunner had done — lending him money, asking him to go on fishing trips, buying him cigars and drinks—the man's constant generosities were bitter as wormwood and gall. Always they were forced on him so that he couldn't refuse. From the first, Grunner had seen to it that his beneficiary was the debtor and Grunner the munificent bestower of alms. But the man's attitude of big-hearted Dutch uncle,

laughing at you one minute and sorry about hurting your feelings the next—that was most galling of all.

Like tonight. Guffawing out how he'd fainted in the undertaking parlor; showing him up before his neighbors as a weak-kneed namby-pamby too rabbit-souled to go to the aid of his best friend. Then, after his self-esteem was inwardly and publicly demolished, defending him against the community's scorn.

And what could he do about it? The man was built like Samson, as forceful as an express train. His personality crushed you, the way obstacles were crumpled by his laughter, dangers scattered by his jeers. There was a bull in Jed Rambow's pasture no farmer dared approach; just to show his contempt of such frailty, Grunner used to cross the pasture every Sunday on his way to the ball game. "The trouble vith you is, Villie," he would put an arm of friendly biceps around the shrinking shoulders, "the trouble vith you is, you're afraid. Me, anything I vant I get; nothing stands in my vay. You, all your life you dodge everything. You're afraid of Martha Teacher. You're afraid of bandits. You're afraid of yourself. *Donnerwetter!* you're afraid of me!"

He *was* afraid of Grunner. Terribly afraid. And he *had* been afraid of that bandit; so afraid that he failed Henry Applegate at the moment when he might, with courage, have helped the stricken old man who was his friend.

IT WAS no use telling himself it had all happened too quickly for him to do anything. No use telling himself he couldn't have possibly got across the street in time. He could see it all now on the underside of his pain-closed eyelids as clearly as a news reel running across a screen. The portals of County Bank on the opposite side of the street; the clock over the doors reading ten. Monday night and the curbs deserted, white from a first brief fall of snow. Grunner had gone to call on Martha Teacher, and he'd been alone in the barber shop, standing unhappily by the window like a boy kept after school.

He was honing Grunner's big ivory-handled razor, a shining thick German blade that made him shiver at the touch because of its association with Grunner's chin. It was the devil of a big razor, heavy, sharp as a sin, and he was honing it very carefully on the oily stone, apprehensive of a slip that would take his fingers off like bits of cheese. He wasn't paying much attention to the window.

And it had happened in a flash. Two flashes, really. The doors of the bank bursting open. The old night watchman and his assailant, locked together, stumbling down the steps. Only a moment they grappled; in the dimness of the frosted street lamp they were no more than flitting shadows. Two flashes as the knife struck twice. Henry Applegate's body sinking down, and the bandit crouching over it, fumbling over it like a gorilla over its kill. The bandit turned around for one shadowy moment, body crouched, knife dripping in his lifted fist; turned and looked straight at Willie in the barber shop window.

That was when he should have charged out into battle, rushed to the rescue of his friend. And he had stood —paralyzed by that look—as if his knees were welded together, his boots frozen to the floor. No good to remind himself the old man, stabbed twice through the heart, was instantly dead. He hadn't known it then, and he hadn't budged.

He would never forget that picture —Henry Applegate's shadow stretched on snow, the bandit a pantherish silhouette, the scene in black and white save where, under the watchman's flat profile, there was a single dreadful splash of red. He would always remember that momentary glimpse of the killer's face—not a face, either, but a sloppy black cap with brim low and ear-flaps down, mouth and chin hidden by a turned-up overcoat collar, and between collar and cap-brim, no features but a pair of smoked glasses. It had seemed as if those black glasses were all there was of the face, and his heart had turned to milk when he realized that dark-goggled gaze was directed at him. He couldn't take his own eyes off that red-tipped knife. Too late he remembered the razor in his own hand, and started for the door.

The killer had gone—melted back into the darkness of the bank. Only old Henry Applegate remained, lying there with stark unseeing eyes, two blowouts in his heart, and something clutched in his death-fisted hand. No use telling himself he hadn't chased the murderer because he thought to give Henry First Aid. He had knelt there by the body because he hadn't dared follow an assassin who left tracks in the snow that were merely elliptical blobs, more animal than human—who left such awful evidence in the victim's death-clutch. In that dead fist were strands of human hair. A barber ought to know about hair.

No one would ever know the resolution it took to pick one of those evil strands from the grip of a dead friend; examine it under a frosty light. No false hair, that, but a coarse human residue, oily and blue-black, about five inches long and yanked out by the roots —he could see the pinhead of the root where it had been torn out of the living follicle. It had turned him cold as a tombstone; made him forget the murderer was getting away. Held him in stiff paralysis until he was all at once aware of car-lights coming down the street, sound of a jogging motor, somebody coming.

He was back in the barber shop as if blown by a wind; standing at the window when the flivver stopped at the curb and Grunner jumped out. Grunner didn't do any hesitating. Grunner saw the body and yelled. Grunner did more than that. Shouting for help, he dashed straight for the open doors of the bank; charged through the black-hung entry like a lion going after a tiger in its den. It wasn't quite clear what happened after that; squalls came sailing out to the street, Grunner's shouts, sounds of trampling, a savage howl. Then a trooper's motorcycle was there; the street was an uproar of running men; half the village arrived in its nightshirts; the bank lights blazed on.

THEY found the bank vault looted; the back door jimmied open. They found Grunner cursing and groaning, nailed to the wall by a ten-inch knife through the palm of his left hand. Henry Applegate was dead with some black hairs clutched in his fist; and the murderer was gone. "I almost had him," Grunner was roaring. "I'd 've got him if he hadn't pinned my hand!"

Willie Updyke was glad he hadn't been there to hear the cheers as they pulled out the knife and Grunner only grinned at the pain. No, he could only stand like a clothing dummy in the window while the crowd brought Grunner out a hero and old Henry Applegate was taken away and his own footprints were wiped out by the manhunt

starting after the bandit's tracks. He couldn't tell them how he'd run across the street too late. He told them he'd seen the stabbing and he tried to describe the bandit, but he couldn't explain about the strand of hair he'd kept.

"No, sir, I don't recognize it," he told the trooper when shown the tuft they'd found gripped in Henry's fist. "But I'll tell you something. That bandit had a *cap* on! Wore low with the ear-flaps down. Them hairs couldn't been yanked from his head in that fight, so he must've had a beard!"

"Vy, sure he had a beard," Grunner was positive. "Didn't I grab it ven I was fighting him there in the dark? A lousy thick beard, too, and if I'd only had my razor I'd haff got some more of it, I tell you."

And that was the trouble. That was what had struck him cold there on the steps on the bank. That was why he couldn't talk to anybody, why he couldn't tell the crowd he *had* run across the street, why he couldn't speak up to defend himself from the contemptuous eyes of his neighbors and Grunner's abhorrent pity. That was why, on the dark of the cellar steps, descending after a bottle of quinine tonic, his forehead was clammy at the memory and his knees were trembling.

On the bottom step he mopped his temples; groped for a light-cord; twitched on the electric bulb. Carefully he took from his pocket a small white envelope; plucked from the envelope a single black hair. A thousand times in the last two weeks he'd examined with aching eyeballs that greasy jet-black strand. A thousand times suspicion had grown to certainty—conviction of something he'd suspected from the first.

He'd seen that hair before. At some time in the past it had come into the barber shop!

It could only belong to one man, a low-browed animal of a man who drank clear alcohol and ate weasels, who roamed the woods alone for months of primitive hunting, who fought wolves with hickory clubs and had been known, single-handed and with nothing more than a hatchet, to kill a bear. It could only belong to that man, the one man in the valley Willie Updyke feared even more than he feared Anton Grunner. The black hair quivered in Willie Updyke's fingers; anguish distorted his forehead.

"But it can't be Medicine Joe," he moaned to himself. "There's others in the valley with black hair; I gotta keep tryin'. It *looks* like Medicine Joe's, but it just *can't* be!"

"Villie!" Grunner's hail came down the cellar steps. "Haff you gone into hiding down there? Mister Lickette is vaiting. Customers are coming in, Villie. Customers—!"

HE WAS glad there were new arrivals in the barber shop to create a diversion, and he tried to make his own presence more insignificant than ever, sidling down the room to his barber's chair and hastily setting to work on Mule's trim. Then he almost knocked over the bottle of quinine he'd juggled all the way upstairs. The very thought of Medicine Joe had his nerves as jumpy as popcorn.

Postmaster Crackenbush and Anvil Smith had just come in with excited faces and Albany newspapers, followed by Trooper Eddie McElroy. Attention was centered on the trooper, whose Harley-Davidson could be seen listing on its standard at the curb. Willie Updyke liked Trooper McElroy, but tonight the big fellow's grave countenance and worried tone awakened in him new alarms.

"Not a trace," the trooper was admitting reluctantly. "Nothing new yet, boys." He brushed flakes of snow from his coonskin cap, staring at the window angrily. "Looks to me as if the dirty rat's made a clean getaway."

"Nothing new about his tracks?" Luke Adams asked.

"Except he might've been wearing rags wrapped around his feet or something. The tracks wasn't shoes, boots nor arctics. Anyhow, he went out th' back door, same as he got in, an' waded into that creek flows behind th' bank. Whether he went upstream or down, we don't know."

"Funny he got away like he did," Postmaster Crackenbush observed. "Wasn't five minutes from th' time he nailed Grunner's hand to th' wall that th' hull village was after him. Seems like he just vanished."

"That's it. He musta come outa th' stream somewhere. If he went south, though, he'd 've come to where th' creek runs in a ditch alongside th' highway; somebody'd seen him sure. Went north th' creek runs through pasture, an' we beat every inch of bank without a sign of tracks."

"How 'bout that tramp you picked up in Albany, Eddie?"

"Had a beard all right, but th' hair didn't match."

"That wrestler they had over to Brockton—?"

"Man Monument Sheehan? Time of th' murder, *that* guy couldn't break a scissors hold at a Brockton Legion smoker, much less come way over here and break into a bank. Every bum we pick up with whiskers has an alibi."

Horace Johns flung down his *Police Gazette*. "Then it's gone! All that money from the Dairymen's League. Forty thousand dollars. Half the savings of everybody in Four Corners!"

"Most of that was insured," Trooper McElroy snapped. "Poor old Applegate wasn't. It's th' murder we're sore about, Horace. Old Henry put up a good fight at th' last, when he found the alarm wires were cut. Tried to reach th' street to yell. Tried to save th' keys. It was a cold-blooded killing, all right. That bandit must've known the old man carried the keys to th' cashier's desk where they kept the combination to th' vault. You hear th' Bank Association's offered a ten thousand dollar reward, dead or alive? Th' dirty butcher— I hope it's dead!"

"Say!" Grunner looked up, squinting, razor in butterfly fingers at the top of Simon Tinney's chin. "Ten thousand dollars! Vell, I hopes it's alive. Giff me von chance at him for vat he did to my hand."

"Don't look like we'll see him alive or dead, either," Anvil Smith said acidly, "way the police are goin'."

"All we got to work on are a fishknife you can buy in any hardware store, an' a half dozen hairs," the trooper protested. "Grunner couldn't see him in th' dark; and Willie, here, couldn't give much of a description, what he could see at night from fifty feet off."

Running the clippers around the back of Mule Lickette's thatch, Willie Updyke could feel his own neck reddening. "I couldn't see what he wore huh-hardly," he admitted meekly. "Just a dark overcoat an' black glasses an' a cap. But his cap was on all th' time, hidin' his face—"

"Like you was hidin' yours?" someone jeered; and all eyes in the room were censuring him again; even the oleograph of President McKinley above the row of armchairs looked disgusted. Trooper McElroy was turning in the doorway.

"Well," he said, "Grunner's the only man who got anywhere near him so far. Sure is queer about that bandit's beard. We've canvassed every farm in th' valley an' can't find nobody who's seen a black-bearded man since Garfield's administration. Those hairs turned out to be genuine, an' they wasn't dyed. Killer probably wore th' beard for a disguise, and shaved it off right afterward; but th' point is, a guy with whiskers these days is noticeable, you'd think someone would've spotted such black ones *before*—"

"Ow—!" Interruption came from Mule Lickette, swooping up out of Willie's chair, fists to eyes. "Take it easy with that quinine tonic, Willie, you're pourin' it into my face. Stings like holy calliope!"

Towels. Water. Willie's right knee getting in his left knee's way. "I'm sorry, Mule. Honest I am—" Luke Adams sneering from a corner, "Whatsa matter, Willie? Nervous because Mule's got black hair?" Mule rubbing his eyes and laughing it off, and Grunner apologizing for him, and the tintypes along the wall contemptuous. But they didn't see him slip that hair back into his pocket.

Trooper McElroy had gone out, and Mule Lickette was going; facing that battery of hostile villagers, Willie felt as if his last friend had gone. If only he could shout out what he knew. If only he could tell them how these black-haired suspects were thinning like sand in an hourglass and narrowing down to Medicine Joe. If only the floor would open up and swallow him—Martha Teacher was coming into the shop!

"Bob," she declared herself briskly, smiling at the smoky room.

Somehow Willie managed to get it out. "Next—?"

For the second time that evening no customers made a move. Blindly he saw Martha nodding as if she understood; taking off her hat, coolly shaking out glints of auburn from her wavy warm hair. Grunner blinked up from an examination of Simon Tinney's dandruff, his smile as big as the moon.

"So sorry I am just now busy, Martha. In a hurry?"

She didn't even notice Willie Updyke. "No hurry at all, Anton. I can wait."

WILLIE UPDYKE'S stomach was a hard green apple under his belt, an indigestible lump of cold despair. He couldn't run, back out or hide. He could only stand there ignored beside his ignored barber's chair, neck cloth dangling, scissors out of work, despised, self-conscious and miserable, as horribly exposed as the boy he'd once been in a dunce cap on exhibition in the corner of a schoolroom; only this time it wasn't arithmetic but his whole life that lay around him in Zero—failure. Martha, Grunner, himself—it was as if the three of them were on a stage, with all the village for an audience, and as if suddenly, in front of everybody, he had vanished. They didn't see him. He wasn't there. Martha's glance touched him once with the disinterest she might have given a fence post, a milk can or a yella dog.

So she, too, had ticked him off as a failure. She was going to let Grunner trim her hair. Those moist pink fingers would be patting her auburn waves; that steamy plush chin leaning close. The thought sent a worm of nausea crawling through the green apple of Willie's stomach; he had to turn around, do something, busy himself with a razor strop lest Grunner would see his face. Grunner wasn't looking

at him, though. Grunner was enjoying the limelight. In the mirror he could see Grunner beaming at Martha Teacher.

"Haff you heard the latest on the murder, Martha? Ten thousand dollars if you catch the killer. Maybe I try to catch the killer, myself."

Grunner would say it like that. Offhanded. As if he could just walk out and do it any time, but right now he had to give his attention to Simon Tinney's cowlick.

And of course Martha would gasp. The tintypes along the wall would sit up in interest. Anvil Smith exclaiming, *"Saay!"* Luke Adams staring big-eyed. Horace Johns blurting out, "You don't think you know who the man is—!"

"I don't know anything." Grunner's tone implied he knew a great deal. "But I been thinking. I been thinking the police vaste their time looking the wrong place. Albany. Brockton. Bah. I say it vas a local job."

"Y'don't mean someone right here in th' valley?"

"Vy not, Mister Tinney? Sure I do. Look. It had to be somebody who'd know about poor Henry Applegate carrying the keys, eh? Somebody who vatched the bank and knew ven big money would be on hand, too."

"Yeah," Luke Adams drawled puzzlement, "but how about that there beard? Ain't nobody in th' county with black whiskers, an' I reckon it's like th' trooper says, if anybody'd been growin' 'em, they'd been *seen.*"

Grunner chuckled over a bottle of Bay Rum. "Vich don't mean a feller couldn't go avay and raise a beard. Look. Suppose he neffer vore von before, vat could be a better disguise. Off he goes for six months, ve'll say. Comes back vith viskers. Robs the bank. Kills Applegate. Shaves afterwurds, and who knows him? Case he'd been seen, nobody recognizes him, and—"

Horace Johns was on his feet. "Bill Rambow! He's got black hair! Goes all summer traveling for his old man's lumber comp'ny—"

"Sure," from Anvil Smith, "only except the night old Henry was killed, my sister seen Bill at a movie show over in Boston."

Martha put in breathlessly, "But that doesn't mean Mister Grunner may not be right. Oh, Anton—if only *you'd* been in the barber shop that night instead of at my store! If *you'd* been here—"

Grunner told the room cheerfully, "I'd haff gone after him vith my razor, I told you. *Ha ha!*" He made brisk pantomime with his big ivory-handled blade, carving crisscross flashes through the smoke. "Instead of hairs for a clue ve might haff got the feller's head. Anyhow—you're next, Mister Adams—shave? Not too close? I giff it free if I nick von smallest drop of blood—Anyhow, I tell you von thing, my friends. Eight years I been shaving everybody in this neighborhood, eh? Giffing shampoos and massages, too. Chins I know like my own. Faces. *Shapes* of faces!"

There was a dramatic pause. In the mirror Willie Updyke could see the shapes of the faces in the chair line, eyes on Grunner, expectant; Martha leaning forward, lips parted a little.

"Shapes of faces," Grunner grinned, letting it sink in. "And I had my hands on that bandit's face, see? For fifty seconds, maybe, but long enough. Even vith a beard, I tell the shape of the chin, the jaws, the cheekbones. Somewhere, I think, I haff felt that face before. Sometime in the past it vas in my barber shop. Sooner or later, it

comes into the barber shop again. I can vait"—Grunner chuckled—"but I don't forget vith my hand. That feller thinks I vouldn't know him. Shave? *Ho ho!*" Slowly he drew the razor through a wisp of cigarette smoke. "A ten thousand dollar shave, eh, Martha? That vould be something!"

NOBODY noticed the man who stood in the doorway. Everybody was looking at Grunner, enthralled by the pantomime of that ten thousand dollar shave.

Like a shadow the man was there, coming in as quietly as the little gust of snowflakes that followed him through the door. Like the shadow of a low-browed animal of a man, a man who drank clear alcohol and ate weasels, who roamed the woods alone for months of hunting, fought wolves with clubs and had been known, with nothing more than a hatchet, to kill a bear. Feet apart, thumbs in belt, he made no interruption, but stood there, squat and bow-legged, dumbly watching the room, swaying a little. His eyes were cups of whisky in a face of jerked beef; the crimson flush to his complexion tinged the old knife-scar on his beardless chin with purple malevolence; a bottle jutting from each pocket of a ragged mackinaw told of the alcohol in that swaying stance.

Nobody noticed him. Nobody but Willie Updyke, who had felt the breath of that opening and closing door as a wind from Alaska blown through the marrow of his bones. He saw the mirrored image of that smoldering, scar-jawed face as a visage of Satan conjured in the glass. He saw the blood-circled eyes aimed blearily at his barber's chair. He saw the man shake snow from his wicked uncut mane of blue-black hair, and move forward like a panther, implacable as Fate approaching in a dream.

Back turned, Grunner was lathering Luke Adams' jowels, talking loudly to an attentive audience. No one seemed aware of crisis at the shop's front, least of all the big Dutchman who was telling the world in general and Martha in particular just what he could do to someone he didn't like with a razor. Between Grunner and the newcomer, Willie Updyke felt as if he were squeezed in a vise. The creature advancing on him made no sound. His prowling tread was silenced by flappy hunting moccasins that left a splayed elliptical track which dried as soon as it was printed on the linoleum.

"Haircut!" The low-growled word hit Willie's face like a gust of gas. Flinging a crumpled mass of bills on the mirror-backed shelf, Joe grunted, "Just sold heap of fox furs—more where that came from!" He sat down in the barber chair.

"Gimme," he grunted at Willie Updyke, "everything."

Willie Updyke brought his hand from his pocket and dazedly reached for the scissors, but even before he could match that uncut mane with the single strand cupped in his palm, he knew it was the same hair!

HOW he went through the motions of the next half hour, Willie Updyke never knew. Clippers. Scissors. Shampoo. Wildroot. Lilac water. Pomade. Somehow he was doing it, giving that foul mop of hair everything—not just everything from Dr. Tarr's Scalp Elixir to a dandruff singe, but everything he had left inside of him, the last ounce of self-command he could summon from a shattered nervous system.

The room was going round and

round, and he had to think. Grunner's voice was going on and on, and he had to forget that huge jaw. Martha was in the room, not ten feet away, and he had that to think of, too. And he had to hold this drunken devil in the chair somehow, hold everything in delicate balance because that wicked black head was as dangerous as a smoking bomb; and he must think of something, think fast before the explosion came off.

With Medicine Joe's squat body hidden by an apron, and the chair swung to face the front window, so that Willie stood between his customer and the sidelines, the job was only begun. "Little more off the top? Want it short, Joe?" Another handful sheared from that scalp and the man would resemble a convict, but the *snip-snip* of scissors was a screen for his low voice and his customer's grunted answers. "Sure. Got plenty money. You gimme everything."

"When—when's th' last time you were in for a haircut, Joe?"

"Spring. Other man, big man cut it. Twice a year. Okay?"

Then Willie asked huskily, snapping the scissors to keep the room from hearing, "Where you been all this fall, Joe?"

"Hunting. Woods." The answer came indistinctly through an offside roar of laughter from Grunner and Martha saying something and through the smoky air full of talk. Blood pounded in Willie's ears as he murmured, "Were you alone, Joe?"

"Don't I always hunt alone? Huh. Know where foxes go. Deep woods. Plenty foxes. I hunt alone."

"More quinine, Joe? Some of this here tonic?"

"Sure. Plenty perfume. I got money. Plenty everything."

Hair tonics. Lotions. Eau de cologne and mange cure. If the brute wasn't loggy from his liquor-bulged stomach, he must certainly pass out from all this sousing on his skull. But the fumes of that rich anointment made Willie's own head swim. He could feel his heart chugging like a threshing engine; as usual, in emergency, his mind had become a panic-stricken blank. He couldn't think of anything, and time was going, time was running away from him, he didn't know what to do and if he stalled too long he would lose his chance. Splashing hair tonic, he closed his eyes in a desperate effort at concentration, but all he could see was the portals of the bank across the street and a remembered dark figure crouched there with a bloody knife in its fist. It wore a cap and dark glasses; its overcoat collar was turned up to hide the lower half of its face. Henry Applegate lay dead with a tuft of hair in his fist, hair torn out by the roots. It couldn't have come from the killer's head because of the cap, so it must have come from his beard. Grunner said he'd had a beard. The murderer had raced back into the bank, and a few moments later Grunner had come up in his car, dashed into the bank, battled someone in the dark. Someone who'd knifed his hand to the wall. Someone bearded. Grunner said he could feel the shape of that face in the dark; said he could tell it again—

Willie Updyke's eyes stared open. The drumming in his ears had become so loud the vibrations were shaking him. He had to wait ten seconds for his hands to stop trembling. Then he wrapped a hot towel around his customer's head, draped a steamy cloth across his eyes, and said, tilting the chair to a reclining slant, "How about a massage, Joe? Like a massage?"

No answer.

"Joe—?"

A gentle, alcoholic snore.

WILLIE stepped to the shelf and picked up his razor. Deliberately he began to strop the blade. *Clippety-clap—clippety-clap.* Working with an industry that brought beads of perspiration out like blisters on his forehead. Mirrored in the long glass, the room assumed a weird perspective; Grunner's back, stooped over the next chair, seemed gigantic; the line of waiting customers far away. He could see mouths going, but the hammering on his eardrums muffled the talk to a meaningless drone. But he saw that Martha was watching him, now, frowning a little, her eyes going from him to the man wrapped up in the chair. He drew a long breath, and faced Grunner.

"Mister Grunner—"

"Vell, Villie?"

He must have interrupted a story, for the big pink face pouted irritably as it steered around, and he had to clear his throat to go on. "That bandit—in the bank you was fighting him in the dark—are you sure he had a beard, Mister Grunner?"

"Vat's this? Sure? Sure I'm sure. Didn't Applegate pull out some hairs? Didn't I grab it, myself? Vould a barber know a beard or—"

"And tonight. When you said you could tell a face after you'd felt it once. People you'd barbered and such. You said you could tell that bandit's chin again, even if it did have a beard. You mean that, too?"

"Mean it? Vouldn't I remember faces I've worked on? Vouldn't my fingers feel? Every face and head has its own shape, not so?"

Willie wondered what the shape of his own face was like right then, the way everyone was glaring at it. Could they see his hair was on end? Words stuck in his throat, then stumbled out across his tongue in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"This man in my chair here, Mister Grunner—he'd like a massage—maybe you remember Medicine Joe. Comes to town about twice a year, spends th' rest of his time runnin' trap lines up Canada way. You're a better barber'n I am, Mister Grunner—reckon Joe'd like you to do it, if you understand me. Maybe you'd better massage his face, Mister Grunner—"

He saw a grin of understanding spread across the red plush countenance, the spark eyes glinting like points of flint. He saw the tintypes against the sidewall go rigid in astonishment; Luke Adams sitting bolt upright in Grunner's chair; Martha with one hand to her throat, startled and white. He saw Grunner slip the big ivory-handled razor into his pocket, reach for a jar of cold cream, walk slowly to the front chair and set to work with those dexterous fingertips, as if moulding the stupid clay of that sodden face. He saw the big man stare and bend lower and stiffen up.

"It's him!"

In the stunned silence of the next thirty seconds every breath in the room might have stopped—every breath except the whisky snuffle of Medicine Joe that exhaled an impervious snore. Grunner jerked the towel from the man's slumped head, and muttered, glaring down, "It's the bandit, all right— Look at that black hair! By golly, for vat he done to Applegate and me, I ought to cut his throat vere he snoozes, the dirty murderer!"

Willie Updyke gasped, "Are you sure?"

And Grunner snarled, "Didn't I haff him on the floor that night? Didn't I haff my hands on his face so I might recognize him in the dark, maybe? It's the same man, I tell you, I'd know him anyvere. Even if he's shaved like now every hair off his chin there vas something I could feel under his viskers that he couldn't shave off. That *scar!*"

Then the barber shop was swimming in circles again, and everything was out of perspective in Willie Updyke's focus. The effort to speak seemed to stop his heart. "Grunner," Willie Updyke whispered, "you're a liar!"

IT grew. It swelled. It puffed and grew in Willie's vision until it seemed to loom over him as giant-sized as a storm cloud, all streaky maroon and purple, held in electric suspense above his head. In the blur of that apoplectic face the eyes were darts of lightning, the voice a mutter of thunder gathering to crash.

"I said I felt that scar under his viskers that night. Vat do you mean, I'm a liar?"

Willie felt like Jack at the foot of the beanstalk looking up at the ogre. Whispering. "Medicine Joe ain't the murderer. He was never in th' bank that night. Them hairs in Henry Applegate's fist belonged to Joe, all right, but they didn't come from his beard. Medicine Joe ain't got any beard."

"He's shaved it off, Villie," the thunder was coming nearer. "He had von the night he killed Applegate, and I grabbed him by it ven—"

"Medicine Joe was off in the woods that night, hunting alone. Like he always goes around alone. Like you know he always goes alone—so he can't have no witness for an alibi."

Willie cleared desperation from his aching throat. "Grunner," he panted, "where were *you* the time of the murder?"

It seemed a hundred years before Martha Teacher's voice came from somewhere. "Willie Updyke, have you gone crazy? Anton was in my store that night when—"

"It was ten o'clock," Willie panted. "The clock over the bank—it was ten o'clock when Henry was killed."

Martha's voice: "Anton was in my store at ten o'clock. I remember he showed me his watch and said he ought to be getting back and—"

"Maybe he'd set his watch a few minutes fast," Willie husked out. "Maybe it wasn't really ten o'clock till he busted in th' back of th' bank. He could've left his car up th' road a piece, hidden in th' dark where th' creek flows along th' highway. He could wade th' creek to around behind th' bank—"

"Willie Updyke, what are you saying?"

"I'm sayin' it couldn't've been Medicine Joe, but it *could've* been Grunner. I'm sayin' he could've stabbed Henry out in th' front, run back out th' rear, waded th' stream back to his parked car. I'm sayin' he could've shucked his disguise and driven up in front of th' bank and pretended—"

"Pretended?" Grunner screamed. "Didn't they find me nailed by a—"

"You could do it yourself," Willie Updyke whimpered. "You could've pinned your own hand to the wall. Make it seem like someone else done it, and a guy who'd murder a poor old man an' try to throw guilt on somebody else—yeah, to get a reward along with forty thousand dollars—"

"Herr Gott! Villie, haf you lost your head—?"

THE words were sure to be his own death warrant, but he sobbed them out before fear could stopper his throat. "Who else could've pulled them hairs outa Medicine Joe's scalp some time when he was in here gettin' a haircut, drunk? Saved 'em in a bottle of hair oil or something to keep 'em fresh so's to plant on Henry to throw suspicion? But you forgot you was wearin' a cap, and so you had to agree they come from the bandit's beard—and since Medicine Joe hasn't any beard, why, you're lyin' about that scar and—"

He couldn't stand it. Always to Willie Updyke that round pink bulge of chin had been the focal point of everything loathsome. For eight years it had overridden him, mastered all his inner resistance, pinched something to death inside of him, beaten him down. Made him stand like a fool before his neighbors, as he was standing now. Little Willie Updyke who stood looking through a window while a bank robber killed his best friend. Little Willie, the barber, afraid of a chin—

If Grunner had kept on scowling—But the sparkly eyes twinkled. The mouth went wide in an enormous mirth-spread grin. The storm that broke from that apoplectic face was a tempest of laughter, broadside after broadside, jovial, tumultuous, thrusting the chin and convulsing the red-muscled throat. And something broke in Willie Updyke like a dam going out suddenly.

He was thinking of old Henry Applegate when he leaped. He swiped out madly as he sprang, and saw red. But the slashing fist missed the jaw, nipping only one of those bud-like little ears, and the storm was on him in hurricane fury, bowling him over backward, thundering as it rushed, driving him back stupefied and appalled before a dazzling aerial display of light. Blades of light. His own, and Grunner's big ivory-handled blade. *Ziff! Swish!* Hiss of shiny steel, keen-edged, murderous. Lightning that would abolish what it touched.

He wanted to charge, but his legs carried him back, and Grunner came at him eagerly, making quick, agile cuts with his monstrous blade. Willie Updyke fled around the barber chair in which Luke Adams was cuddled, head in arms, and for a while it was ring-around-the-rosy, Grunner after him and the room like a merry-go-round, voices screaming, shadows going forty ways in whirling smoke.

Grunner got him in the cheek the third time around. Grunner was squalling, "I'm going to kill you, Villie! I'm going to kill you!" The gash down his face only numbed him, and Willie spun, striking out. A band of scarlet appeared as if by magic on Grunner's roaring chest, and he screeched and whisked his blade at Grunner again. *Zaff!* The wall behind Grunner, then, was striped like the barber pole out in front; Willie fled in horror from that streaming jaw. Around the front chair. Around the back chair. Dodging, ducking, reeling and stumbling to escape that crimson face, that horrible persecuting crimson face.

It came after him. Followed him into corners. Back and across the floor. His left arm felt gone at the shoulder, and his right sleeve fluttered in scarlet rags. There was a terrible moment when they were on opposite sides of a chair, dodging left, right, left, right, like people trying to avoid bumping each other. The air was alive with razors; everywhere he turned to duck there was that big ivory-handled blade, biting at his ears, nipping his wrists and

elbows, trying to get his head. Everywhere he turned there was Grunner's face, Grunner's savage eyes, Grunner's squalling jaws.

Somehow he fought back, stroke for stroke. Laid open the big man's bandaged palm. Breath sobbing, heart bursting with strain, fought his way out of corners and around chairs, fending that deadly razor, staving off certain execution. Grunner's razor didn't bring him down. The floor did. A place where the linoleum was slippery. He shrieked as his heels went out from under him. Shrieked and shot headlong into the shelf of tonic bottles where he struck at Grunner's reflection in the mirror; went down plunging.

Everything came down on top of him. Plaster from the ceiling. Grunner. The shelf in crashing rainbows of colored bottles. Cyclone of shaving mugs, talcum, scalp elixir, mange cure. In nightmare terror he grabbed to save himself; dropped his razor; caught a bottle in his out-thrown hand. Red fingers clamped on his throat as he fell, and he corkscrewed desperately, fighting in the grip of death, hitting at a razor with a bottle. Meant for his own neck, the flashing blade cut the bottle's. The quinine tonic was luck. Glass exploded and liquid flew. Blinded, Grunner rolled backward with an elbow across his eyes.

Willie Updyke couldn't remember how it ended. Somehow his razor was in his hand again, and he was mowing the air around him with wild, uncontrollable strokes. He couldn't see Grunner. There was a sickening perfume of tonic and bay rum; his eyes were shut, and he was seeing old Henry Applegate stretched out in Seymore's undertaking parlor.

When he opened his eyes the air seemed filled with rubies.

NOBODY in the chair-line moved. Nobody on the floor moved, either. Nothing moved except the silent red tide creeping sluggishly toward the door which was standing open to a soundless infall of snow.

Martha, sitting among the tintypes, was whispering, "Willie—Oh, my heavens—! Willie—"

Willie Updyke tried to smile, and couldn't. He knew he was dreaming a nightmare. Borne on that red tide moving toward the door there was a thousand dollar bill. The linoleum was scattered with blood and thousand dollar bills. Willie Updyke swayed; shook his head. Grunner couldn't be bleeding money—

The room tilted and wheeled at crazy angles, and Luke Adams sat up in Grunner's chair and looked at Willie and fainted again. In the barber chair near the door Medicine Joe snored, *"Ugh."*

A shadow in the snowing doorway snapped, "What the—!" and choked off; and Trooper Eddie McElroy walked in behind a pointed gun. Holding the bead on Willie, he leaned over and picked up a thousand dollar bill, making queer stifled sounds in his mouth, staring at Grunner, at Willie.

Martha cried out in a choky voice, "Don't shoot him, Eddie! Grunner was the murderer! That money was hidden behind the mirror over that shelf!"

Willie Updyke caught the arm of a barber chair and hung on. Postmaster Crackenbush was yelling at him, "Lord-A-mighty, Willie, how did you *know?* How'd you know it couldn't be Medicine Joe? How'd you know Grunner was lying?"

He mumbled, "Knew it from the first. If th' bandit had a beard it couldn't've been Joe. Medicine Joe's an Onandaga. Can't give an Onandaga a

beard. Any barber'd know that, except some foreign-born Dutchman never heard of it before. Indians," Willie Updyke finished with a swallow, *"Indians don't have beards!"*

His eyes caught hold of a sign on the barber shop's back wall; hung on, and steadied his legs.

HAIRCUT—40¢
SHAVE—20¢
SHAVING THE SICK—50¢
SHAVING THE DEAD—$1.00

Willie Updyke reached down and took a dollar out of Grunner's pocket. Then he walked with Martha Teacher from the barber shop.

Imaginectomy

ONE hopeful sign in these parlous times is that brigade of scientists which is carefully taking the machine, Man, apart and finding out what makes him tick. Through the efforts of this corps, Man now has a rough idea of some of the springs, pistons and fly-wheels that make him the ambulate, animate creature he is. And it is precisely because of this knowledge of their own mechanistic nature that most men worry. The best worriers have always been the best informed, because, of course, they have more to worry about. But now, it seems, even the apparatus of worry (which is really the imagination) has been discovered and may be snipped from the machine as easily as the tonsils or appendix.

So at least, declares Dr. Walter Freeman, of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, who in the past year has successfully removed twenty-one imaginations from discontented brains.

Just as the capacity for imaginative thinking differentiates *homo sapiens* from the lower orders, it is also his plague: the asylums are full of people with imaginations that functioned *too* well. Horses or sheep can't imagine or worry; but they don't become schizophrenics or paranoiacs either. And it is these "highly imaginative" members of the race that the new operation is supposed to benefit. Let us hope that the physician of the future will perform "imaginectomies" on the Napoleons and other dictatorial gentlemen, but will have sense enough to leave the Shakespeares and the Steinmetzes alone.

—*Eric Sharpe*

Drink We Deep

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

THE Helderbergs, geologically the oldest mountain range in North America, save one, were the arena for the weirdest struggle between mankind and the beings of the other world that has taken place since the unrecorded dawn of time. The menace, indescribable as it was, seemed to center in the darkling yet luminous waters of Lake Wanooka, bottomless column of azure that sank like a jeweled shaft down into the black pit of the earth . . .

Witnesses of that struggle were Dr. Courtney Stone and his nurse, Edith Horne. They saw the beginning of it although they did not then understand its full significance. Its protagonist was Hugh Lambert, explorer, paleontologist, and at the moment, chief councillor of Camp Wanooka for boys.

It began on the night when Hugh Lambert was injured in an automobile accident, and Dr. Stone discovered that

This serial began in last week's Argosy

Start this absorbing, fantastic novel now

Lambert had a blood-type unknown to science. By a cruel and unplanned coincidence, to Dr. Stone's clinic came a ragged tramp in whose veins flowed the same unheard-of type of blood. To save Hugh's life a transfusion was performed—and Dr. Stone, paralyzed by fear and disbelief, watched the tramp literally disappear—before his eyes . . .

FROM that night on a strange longing stirs in Hugh's veins. The lake seems to call to him. He dreams of a little people, so small that a multitude of them is no more to human eyes than a cloud of the dawn's gray mist.

On the night the camp breaks up, the yearning is so strong in Hugh Lambert that he can no longer deny its summons. Robbed of volition, he wanders down to the shore.

Last man on earth to see him is a councillor who afterward made an affidavit to the effect that Hugh Lambert had passed him on his way to the lake.

"There was an odd look in his eyes—a strange, weary look. When he spoke, I couldn't make out exactly what he said, but it was something about saying goodbye to the lake. I thought it was sort of funny at the time . . ."

From this point the narrative follows Hugh Lambert's account as he set it down, much later. Reaching the lake he fell into a kind of coma, and dreamed that he had diminished in size until he was no bigger than the little people of which he dreamed. One of them led him to the margin of the water—now, in seeming, a vast and tumultuous sea. Together they plunged in, sinking down through a purple brilliance,

motionless, floating at the will of some irresistibly magnetic, downward pull. Dreamed this? But it was no dream . . .

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

Continuation of Hugh Lambert's Narrative:

THAT stupendous descent into the chasm of Lake Wanooka continued endlessly. I was aware that I dropped, at a rate far too rapid to be called sinking, straight down into a water-drowned valley whose floor was miles beneath. By the eerie violet light that permeated those infernal depths to which the brightest sunlight never had penetrated, I could see Vanark's blurred form below me, always below me. I was even conscious that instant by instant the distance between me and all that was familiar tremendously increased.

Yet, incredible at it may seem, I felt neither amazement nor fear. Not, understand, because of any courage or any superhuman stoicism of mine. The fact is that, for an unmeasured period, my mind was literally numbed by the enormity of the experience, my brain unable to apprehend it.

That suspension of thought, that stasis of emotion, must have blocked off the mental chaos in which I had been lost since the auto accident, for when I recovered the power to think, I knew, definitely and beyond question, that I was and always had been wholly sane. I knew that nothing, the tramp's vanishment of which Edith had told me, the tug of the lake, the Little Men visible only to me; had been other than actuality. I was not, I never had been, mad. I wanted to shout it: "I'm sane! I'm *sane!*"

Strange reaction of one who minutes before had dwindled to a sixth his normal size; of one who even then was gripped by some occult force that dragged him at appalling speed down into an awesome void of liquid light!

I had lost all sense of elapsed time. Of distance. There was only myself, and the limitless lavender light all about me, and the darker shape of the Little Man beneath me.

Outré as the week's occurrences had been, I now began to realize there was a weird inner consistency among them, a macabre pattern fitting them each to each.

The nexus of that design seemed to be the tramp. I had been wholly normal till his blood had been mingled with mine, then Lake Wanooka's strange attraction had begun to manifest itself. What was the power that clutched me now, but that attraction became irresistible? Jeremiah Fenton had felt it, too—and was there not his vague yet definite resemblance to the tramp to tie Fenton into the pattern?

Edith had described the tramp as shrinking to nothingness. I also had shrunk, except that the process had been halted when I was a foot high. The violet light . . .

My speculations were halted, abruptly, by a subtle, but ominous change in my surroundings.

IT was at first merely an intangible adumbration of bounds to a space that hitherto had been boundless; insubstantial as that which might bring to a blind man awareness that he was within, say, Madison Square Garden; but almost at once I descried walls sloping in under me to make a roughly elliptical funnel still so vast I could not discern its lower limits.

I now had something by which to gauge the speed of my descent, and it

was breathtaking. Those slanting sides of rock fairly leaped up at me!

Vanark was suddenly *beside* me, instead of below. Our course had changed. We were moving horizontally now. We were shooting toward one precipitous facade, the fanged rock now so immense its concavity was no longer perceptible. We were hurtling toward that jagged cliff at a speed that would smash us to pulp!

I flailed the water with frantic arms and legs, in a frenzy to brake that suicidal swoop, to swerve it. The effort was as futile as an aviator's catapulting parachuteless from his plane and attempting to halt his fall. In a final terrible moment every detail of that cruel wall etched itself on my retina, the last thing I was to see in life. . . .

We darted through an opening where no opening had been. There was a flash of solid rock slitting, gulping Vanark and me, and then there was only the water again and the sickening feel of the fluid compressing me, cushioning me, robbing me of motion!

My feet found some solid footing, but I still swayed with the eddying of the currents set up by our sudden halt and Vanark was a blurred shadow swaying beside me. I made out rock ahead of me, on either side of me, a yard or two above me. I turned to gape at the sudden aperture through which we had been swept.

There was no opening. It had closed again, swiftly and silently as it had appeared. Intelligence had chiseled the smooth rocky walls out of the submarine mountain. Intelligence had constructed the gateway in the cliffside, had opened it to receive us and had shut it behind us.

Vanark moved. I saw his arm reach out to touch the wall nearest him. It must have been a switch that he touched, for at once the flooring on which I stood and the liquid mass that engulfed me were pulsing with the slow, ponderous *throb-throb* of some gigantic machine.

The water tugged at me, pressed against me. I braced myself against its force, realizing that it was seething to some drain I could not perceive, was rushing out through it. Rapidly, for there was distance at once between the water's surface and the inwardly luminous roof of the carved-out cave, distance that grew from the moment I was aware of it.

The surface of the water came down to my head, to my chest, swirled down along my sides. The machine was emptying the enclosure. I realized that it was a water-lock, permitting communication between the lake and—and *what?*

There must be another, greater hollow within the mountains. A cavern? A labyrinth? Some open space, at any rate, that needs must be protected from the incursion of the lake, some space inhabited by living beings.

This much I reasoned out while the water seethed away. I was right, as events proved. But my wildest imaginings could not have predicted what lay within the bowels of the Helderbergs!

ii

A SUCKING noise proclaimed the rock floor almost dry. "Hughlambert!" Vanark's voice said sharply. I turned, saw his gnomelike head, too large for his body, uncovered and projecting from his skin-tight garment. It leered at me, its thin lips twisted in a mocking smile. "Doff your hood!"

"What is this?" I demanded. "Where is this?"

"Obey!" His tone, an inflection such

as is used only to members of a subject race, ridged my jaw with sudden anger. I had used it myself to yellow coolies in Suiyuan, to black-skinned bearers on the slopes of the Mountains of the Moon. "At once!" It was the impersonal contempt, the gloating triumph, in his beady eyes that seared me.

I snarled back at him, an iron band constricting my forehead, my thigh muscles cording.

He made some slight movement. Perhaps I thought he was about to attack me. Perhaps my latent wrath at what had been done to me, at myself for the meekness with which I had responded to Vanark's earlier commands, needed only the tiniest of sparks to bring it to full flame. I launched forward, clutched his shoulder and slammed him against the wall

"Answer me!"

Vanark's countenance darkened with malign fury. "You dare touch a Surahnit,"* he said, whitely angry. "Taphet!"*

I didn't know what the epithet was he spat at me, but I knew its intent. He had called me, "Pariah!" It put the final touch to my blind wrath. My arm jerked back, my fist knotted to smash that hateful face . . .

And stayed that way! I couldn't deliver the blow. I could not move at all for one nightmare moment of paralysis!

In the next instant I did move, and what I did was infinitely more terrifying than doing nothing. The fingers I had on Vanark's shoulder loosened and dropped away. I stepped back, my shoulders bowed. My left arm, the one that jerked back to hurl hard knuckles at the swarthy man, threw itself horizontally before me, fingers spread.

"Gor Surah." The syllables came from my lips, but I swear they were not formed in my mind. Nor those with which my voice followed Vanark's brief acknowledgment of the strange salute, "Your pardon, master." *Master!*

I lifted my hands to my head and stripped back the hood that had covered it. I detested myself for the humble gesture, the spineless apology, the gesture of obedience to the glowering Vanark's command. I, the real Hugh Lambert, had nothing to do with them. Some substanceless compulsion had hold of me; a will not my own had begun to replace my will up there on the borders of Lake Wanooka. My rage had momentarily released me from it, but now it had regained possession of me. I came now to the full realization of its strength, because now for the first time I had come into direct conflict with it.

Conflict? There was no more conflict than there is between a marionette and the puppeteer who pulls its strings. Save only this: Whoever, whatever, it was that dominated me had stolen my body from me; my muscles, even my tongue; but it had not vanquished my brain. There, within my skull, I was still Hugh Lambert.

And my soul. Appalled I might be, filled with dread of this strange thing that had come to me. But not conquered. Not conquered yet, nor till reason itself should be blotted out. I swore that to myself, standing there powerless to defy another's will.

MY fingers were still stripping off the metallic fabric that had acted as gills through that terrific dive, when

*Note: Some time after this incident I realized that from the moment I had been reduced in size I had understood, and spoken, a language utterly new to me, comprehending it as though it were my mother tongue except for terms, such as these, that have no counterpart in our lexicon. Sometimes, in what follows, I shall substitute for the names of objects, functionaries, their nearest English equivalent, translating for the reader of these lines (if they ever have a reader).

the scrape of rock on rock jerked my head around to the cave-wall opposite to that through which we had been swept. A vertical gash appeared, rapidly widening until the lock chamber was open on the side away from the lake.

"Gor Surah!" A figure, poised where the vanished wall had been, flung out a horizontal arm in salute, its webbed fingers close together.

"Gor Surah." We responded, imitating his gesture in unison. Vanark added a name, "Talim!"

This second of the Surahnit with whom I came in contact was young, a mere lad. Except for the strange misproportion of his head and limbs, he might have been one of my own senior campers. He had about him the same air of lithe eagerness, the same joy in a life just taking on meaning. There was a quick dart of his dark eyes to me; curiosity and some obscure excitement glinted in them. Then they were cast down, and Talim was backing away from before us as we wordlessly advanced.

But there was a more fundamental difference between Talim and my lads than mere appearance. Not even the youngest of them would ever have manifested quite the subservience that subtly cloaked Talim as he backed into a niche in the wall of a long tunnel while we went past him.

I forgot Talim, I forgot even my resentment at the stolid submission with which I followed Vanark, as the tunnel ended and we came out on a narrow, shelflike ledge that clung to the side of a colossal cliff.

High as the towering rampart of the [illegible]erbergs had appeared, it shrank to [illegible]ificance in contrast with the ver[illegible]us fall of this mighty escarpment. [illegible]ar above me the precipice tow[illegible]lid not immediately observe for I gazed down over the brink before me and my senses reeled with awed wonder.

A landscape stretched below, mile upon distance-dwarfed mile, to another tremendous wall hazily remote. I saw hills and valleys and ruler-straight roads. I saw isolated dwellings, structures clumped into small clusters that might be villages, and two larger groupings one of which might well be the city of my dream.

I was too far above all this to discern the detail of even the largest building. But I did have an impression of *difference* from the world above.

That difference was not alone a matter of shapes and contours. For an eye-blink of time I sensed only a dream-like, eerie quality suffusing the scene, a weird *wrongness* that was infinitely ominous. Then I saw what the difference was.

There were no shadows. Nowhere, not where a sharp-sided mesa jutted from the ground nor where, to my left, a tremendous tumulus of splintered, rectangular boulders was piled against the distant wall of this hollow within the earth was there a single shadow.

I glanced down. There was no shadow on the stony shelf where I stood. I myself cast no shadow. Vanark cast none. . . .

"Come!" Vanark said, and was striding away along the ledge. I followed him, impelled by the alien will to which I was subject. My gaze returned to that vast stretch of terrain beow. Everywhere upon it tiny specks crawled. Though I could make out nothing of their form, they moved too purposefully to be anything but animate, intelligent creatures.

This was no cave, no mere subterranean cavern. Here was a nation, a world within a world, inhabited by

thousands, perhaps by millions of the Little Folk whose messenger was Vanark.

And I was their captive.

iii

IT is difficult to select out of the welter of thoughts and speculations and fears that seethed in my brain at this time the ones which are most significant. Perhaps, since its nature was then becoming a little clearer to me, I should discuss the spell that dragged me so helplessly in Vanark's wake.

I obeyed it, wily nilly, as one obeys some post-hypnotic suggestion, unconscious of its source. Yet it did not continuously control me. The jerk of my head toward the sound of the lock's opening inner portal had been my impulse, as had been my pause just now at the edge of the ledge. My command over the movements of my body was not obliterated, but superseded.

I resolved to remember that. Some time I might have a chance to use it.

There was more. The fact that Vanark had *spoken* his order to me, just now, seemed to indicate it was not he to whom I was enslaved. But when I had been halted in the very act of striking him there had been no one else in the chamber, and we had been enclosed by solid rock. Even now I could locate no one near enough to make me out as anything but an almost microscopic animalcule crawling along the looming cliff. Were there invisible eyes upon me, watching me every step? How could that be?

I decided upon an experiment. I would whirl, run off in the other direction. Vanark was ahead of me, could not see me. I would take good care he did not hear me.

Now I would do it. *Now!*

I kept right on going, a half dozen paces behind my leader. There had not been even a twitch of my smallest muscle in response to the fierce effort I had made, or tried to make.

Quod erat demonstrandum! I was master of myself only when what I wanted to do did not contradict the Other's commands.

I was not, you see, beaten yet. I was testing the forces arrayed against me. I was preparing myself for rebellion against my captors. I had no plan as yet. I had no semblance of a plan. To make one I must know what it was I schemed against. I must know my own weaknesses, my enemies' strength.

I must also gather every iota of information I could about my surroundings. The weird world below was a map without detail from this height. I turned my attention to the face of the looming cliff.

There were other openings in it, intermittently along the ledge. Some of them were roughly framed, the exits of natural caves Others were manifestly hewn, as the lock had been, out of the perdurable rock. I tried to glance into one of these as I passed it. I saw nothing. My sight was blocked by a screen of *living light!*

It was a curtain of radiance, an impenetrable sheet of coruscant purple fire, so shimmering that it seemed endowed with some other-worldly sort of sentience. It was made up of sparks, of tiny explosions, of darting violet infinitesimal stars, and all of them streamed incessantly, endlessly, out of the very substance of the cliff.

The rock itself, the towering precipice, was aglow with light. And only the rock. Vanark himself, hurrying ahead of me, was visible by same intrinsic radiance that g from within his very flesh.

My own hand, too, was softly lambent. To its qualities of form and color another had been added, as inherent as these. Light!

That was why there were no shadows in this amazing terrestrial hollow! There was no sun, no moon, no external source for its pervading illumination. Everything here, living and inorganic matter alike, shone with its own brilliance. Light casts no shadow.

There was infinite beauty in that omnipresent luminance, and—infinite threat.

THAT threat was vague, a product simply of strangeness. But there was nothing vague about the terror that struck at me seconds after my attempt to peer within the opening had failed.

We had gone by a half dozen of such light-screened portals when the ledge curved around a jutting fold in the cliff face. The protuberance hid Vanark. I went around it.

There was no one on the ledge. It ended abruptly, a scant three yards in front of me, and beyond was nothing but a sheer dizzy drop, without hand- or foot-hold, to the base of that incredible precipice.

Utterly impossible for a man to take more than three strides more and live. I gasped—*and paced on, utterly unable to halt!*

One step I took. Two. All of me, every shuddering nerve and cell, recoiled from the fearful plunge. The third stride brought me to the very brink. A scream formed in my throat as my foot lifted for the step that must be my last. . . .

I turned, *was turned,* toward the cliff! My foot came down on solidity! I was within the arch of an opening the sparkling motes of whose curtain parted to let me through. I was in a tunnel once more, and Vanark was a dozen feet ahead of me, and the sound of our footfalls reverberated hollowly in my ears.

The passage pitched downward for a space, twisted sharply to the right. I reached the turn, went around it, came out on a gallery running along one smooth concave wall of a huge cavern.

Still moving swiftly, I contrived to look down to the floor of this great cave, fifty feet below me. It swarmed with the tiny creatures of this outré world.

The *tiny* creatures. Though they were no smaller than myself, my perspective was restored! For, lying there below me, row upon ghastly row, were the corpses of humans, human-size; the cadavers of men and women and of little children, gigantic by contrast to the ghouls bustling about them—busily, purposefully.

They were human beyond question, and by unmistakable, gruesome signs I knew them to be long dead. Then they were screened from me by hulking machines that whirred and clashed violet-gleaming rods, that spun cogged wheels and hid the grisly morgue. But far at the other end of the vaulted space there was a raised platform, and this I could see over the tops of the machines as I was hurried along, unable to stop, unable to cry out, unable to do anything but gape at what was happening on that dais.

A half-dozen Little Men were clustered about a naked human corpse lying there. There was something grotesque about that recumbent shape, something clumsy in its formation. It was too far away for me to be sure of what there was about it that troubled me, but it was not too far away for me to see that a foot-high creature lay beside it, and that there was some connection

between the opposed arms of each, something that dimly resembled a transfusion apparatus I once had seen Courtney Stone use.

The group af Little Men swirled with some obscure excitement. And then—and then . . .

The dead human quivered! His free arm rose, moved across his chest and fumbled at the other, as though his first sensation were discomfort of which he must be rid.

A WALL cut off my view, the wall of another tunnel into which my swift course had taken me. I tried to convince myself I had been mistaken. The human had not been dead. He had not come to life again as I watched him, life pumped into his veins from the veins of a Little Man.

Why should I have thought, just then, of a tale I had heard, was it days or eons ago? A tale of a drowned farmer returning to his home and moving a piece on a dusty chess board? Why should the fingers of a gelid dread have tightened on my heart?

Was it only because I had seen, screwed to a dead lad's moldering, green-scummed* shoe, a rusted ice skate? Or did there already glimmer in my mind some inkling of the fearful truth, some suspicion of the ghastly scheme that was maturing in that balconied cavern?

I think it was then that, for the first time since my plunge into the lake, I thought of the world above and wondered how my disappearance had been taken there. How had Ann Doring reacted to it?

Editor's Note: Observe that from this point on Mr. Lambert begins again to mention colors other than violet in his descriptions. This is not because there was any change in the character of the illumination in the strange underground universe, but because his brain had learned again to interpret in terms of the normal spectrum the retinal impressions it was receiving. A. L. Z.

CHAPTER II

Letter from Richard Doring, Senior Bunk, Camp Wanooka, Cadet Major U. S. Grant Military Academy, to Ann Doring, c/o World Pictures, Hollywood, Cal.:

Camp Wanooka, Thursday,
Aug. 30, 1934.

Dear Sis:

I guess you're surprised to see that I'm still at camp. Well, you're no more surprised than I am.

I woke up in the dark, last night, which was queer in the first place, because it's usually hard enough to wake me in the morning. I thought it was just because of all the skylarking on account of Break-Up, and I lay there thinking about all I was going to do in New York the three weeks before I had to leave for school.

Pretty soon I began to see, through the open window over my cot, lights flashing in the tree-tops. There was a lot of whispering too, and it was all very mysterious.

The night seemed full of a hushed sort of excitement. I looked at my luminous watch. It was almost one o'clock, which is awfully late for here. I knew, then, that something was up.

Well, it wouldn't be like me to have anything going on and not stick my nose in it. I slid out of bed, slipped into my bathrobe and sneakers and tiptoed out.

Catfooting out of the door, which was open, I stumbled on something and had to grab the jamb to keep from falling. Funny thing was, when I looked to see what had tripped me there wasn't anything there. Nothing at all.

I was real scared for a second. Creepy scared. Then I decided I must have tangled my leg in the skirt of my robe. It hadn't felt like that, though. It had felt as if my shin had been bumped by something solid—and alive.

The flashlights were flicking around up at the north end of camp. I went toward them, keeping in the dark as much as I could, got past the office shack and stopped dead in the edge of the woods just beyond it. Ed Hard and Bob Falk were prowling through the brush, their flashlights shining on the ground.

"It's funny," Bob was saying, "that we can't find his tracks anywhere."

Then Ed said that somebody'd been acting upset lately and maybe he'd jumped in the lake.

I saw Bob's torch shake a little. They were talking about Mr. Lambert, and Bob said that he'd never do a thing like that, and look at the way his clothes are piled on the ground.

Then I heard Nurse Horne yelling at me, and Ed and Bob came running, and before I could answer they started to bawl me out.

But Miss Horne told them to let me alone. She said as long as I was there they'd have to tell me what'd happened and depend on me to keep my mouth shut. Her face was tight, kind of, and awful pale.

I know I can trust you not to repeat a word of what follows. So here goes.

Mr. Lambert had disappeared. He'd gone down to the lake about an hour before and then had vanished clean off the face of the earth!

We looked for him a while longer, but it was no use. Bob Falk had been on patrol at that side of camp, Ed Hard on the side along the road, and Miss Horne had been awake, packing all the medicines and stuff in the infirmary. Mr. Lambert couldn't have got out of camp without one of them seeing him, but he wasn't *in* it. We gave up at last, and they started to talk about what they should do.

The councillors wanted to notify the police, but Miss Horne wouldn't let them. She said they mustn't get the boys excited. They'd go home and tell their folks and that would ruin the camp next year. There really was nothing to worry about. Mr. Lamber must have his own reasons for going off like he had, and if he'd been able to take care of himself in the wilderness he certainly could in America.

That's the way she talked, but I had a funny hunch she had more on her mind than she was saying, and that she was frightened to death.

Well, I went back to the bunk and I was so tired I fell right asleep. When the get-up bugle blew I dressed in a jiffy and rushed out, but Mr. Lambert wasn't anywheres around.

The bus that came, right after breakfast, wasn't big enough to take all the bunch, so it was decided that the four seniors in my bunk were to be run down to Albany in the camp sedan. That's why it wasn't till the bus left that anyone noticed Charley Dorsey hadn't showed up.

Ed Hard went to get him. Charley was still asleep, *and Ed couldn't wake him up!*

Dr. Stone, whom they 'phoned for right away, said that Charley has a queer disease, something like sleeping sickness only it isn't. There's two cases like it in the Albany Hospital, both from around here, so it may be contagious, and Doc has quarantined our bunk.

Charley is in the infirmary here, and the rest of us; me, Roger Norton and Percy White; have to stick around. Besides us fellows there's just Miss Horne, Ed, Bob, and Morphy, the cook, left in camp.

Morphy's a queer duck. He's an old Irishman, with a face like the ones we saw cut out of toast in that store on Lexington Avenue. We all ate lunch in the kitchen, except Charley of course. By that time Rog and Perce had started asking questions about Mr. Lambert and Ed decided it was best to tell them what had happened, swearing them to secrecy.

"It's the leprechauns has got him," Morphy said. "We won't see him no more."

"Leprechauns!" Rog asked. What's that?"

"Them's the little people that's older than the hills themselves," Morph said. "The little people that owned the Earth when it was young and we wasn't yet thought of." He had a frying pan in his hand. There was a queer, faraway look in his eyes just then that made me shiver a little. "They never die, and some day they're going to take the Earth back for themselves."

Rog laughed. It seemed to make Morphy angry.

"You can laugh, young fellow," he said. "But I seen them myself, coming out of Lough Neagh. They was a queer purple light on the water and—"

"That will be enough of that," Ed interrupted. "We've got enough on our minds without your Irish fairy tales."

"Fairy tales, is it? Irish, is it? What about the trolls the Germans tell about? What about the black pigmies of Africa no explorer has ever seen? What about the

gnomes that carried Rip Van Winkle away right in these here very mountains, the ones the Dutchmen used to say made the thunder? And what about the fairies and the elves themselves? There's good and evil among the little people, just like there is among us."

"I said that we'll have no more of that sort of talk," Ed growled, and that shut Morphy up. Perce said something to me, but I didn't hear him. I was watching Nurse Horne. She just sat there, staring at the cook, and her face was like it had been the night before, pale and tight and awful scared.

This is a long letter but I didn't have anything to do except write it. Camp is awful empty with almost everybody gone, and those who aren't worried sick and trying not to show it. I'll have to close now, though, because Doc Stone's going to town and he's going to air mail this for me. He's coming back later. He's going to spend his nights here. He says that's on account of Charley but I'm pretty sure it's on account of Mr. Lambert.

I've asked Doc to bring back some games, like Mr. Ree and Pick Up Sticks. Will you be a good sis and wire him the money to pay for them? My balance in the camp bank is all used up.

Your affectionate brother,
Dick.

ii

Hugh Lambert's Narrative, resumed:

THE tunnel that led from the great cavern where I had seen, or thought I had seen, a human corpse weirdly revived, ended abruptly in a circular, dome-ceilinged room some ten feet in diameter. I came to a halt beside Vanark.

This cubicle was entirely bare, and there was no exit from it. *There was no entrance!* Following the rounded walls with my eyes, I was aware that they had made a complete circuit and had encountered no break in the gleaming rock. Startled, sure that this must be illusion, I put out my hand to feel for the opening through which I had just come.

A sharp cry of warning from Vanark was drowned by a whistle that leaped high in the scale to a tremendous, humming roar. The wall rasped the skin from my fingertips, flung my hand up and away from it, so violently that I was thrown off balance!

I did not fall. I was poised on one foot, my body canted at an impossible angle, but I did not fall!

I stared, bewildered, at the wall. It was not speckled with light-points as the face of the cliff or the tunnel sides had been. It was striated by multitudinous vertical lines of brilliance that wavered and were never still.

No! The walls were motionless. It was we who were flashing downward, so fast that we were weightless; so fast that I gasped with sudden fear lest the floor drop away from beneath me and I crash against the ceiling. I cowered beneath that threat, looked upward.

There was no ceiling! There was only a tight-lined cone, coming to a point immensely far above me. I was in no enclosed car. I was on a platform and the cone up into which I stared was the shaft down which it shot.

Somewhere in that shaft there had to be a vent for the air beneath the close-fitting stone disc that carried us downward, and that was the source of the unbearable roar that beat in my ears.

The shaft, the platform, vibrated with the fearful sound. It took hold of me and shook me, so that every separate atom of body was in its grip. In the next instant, or the next, they must disintegrate. The pain of it was excruciating. I was all pain, all agony. I could hear, see, nothing.

I threw out my arms, wildly, actuated only by some instinct of self-preservation, some brainless impulse to combat the terrific vibration that was tearing me to pieces. My hand struck something soft, warm. Flesh, Vanark's flesh. Vanark's throat.

My fingers closed on that throat. Somehow the fingers of the other hand joined them.

I was stripped of sight, feeling. I was stripped of reason. I was suffering torture. But I knew my hands were on the throat of my enemy. For this one moment he was at my mercy.

Mercy! A savage laugh ripped from me and my fingers closed on the neck they clutched. I felt flesh squash beneath them. I felt windpipe-gristle crumple.

Hands seized my arms, my waist, dragged me from my victim. Silence throbbed in my skull, silence that was like thunder after the roar that had accompanied that awful descent. The fall was ended. There was a door again in the wall of the great shaft, and men were crowding in through it. Men had taken hold of me, had dragged me erect, their froglike fingers digging into my flesh. One knelt to Vanark, whose face was blue with strangulation, the bruises my fingers had made livid on his throat.

I wrenched an arm free from the clutch on it . . . and then I was rigid. I stood meekly, abandoning the struggle. Not because of resignation. Because once more the Other had seized control of me.

"ANOTHER Taphet bustin' out," a low voice muttered, behind me. "They're sure looking for trouble these times."

"Yeah," another responded. "If I was the Council I'd quit tryin' to bring 'em to their senses in the labor squadrons. I'd line 'em up and *coret* the whole crowd." He touched a short-barreled device at his belt, fashioned from some dull red metal, beyond doubt a weapon of some sort.

"Well this one won't get to no labor squadron if I know Vanark. Not after what he done to him."*

There must have been a dozen of these men crowding around me, youths like Talim. They were all dressed alike, in queerly cut costumes of what appeared to be a dark green, pliable leather, evidently a uniform. The one massaging Vanark's throat was probably their officer. He was older, his uniform better fitting. Some insignia decorated its sleeve and his belt supported, instead of a *coret,* a short-handled, flint-headed ax. An ax of the Stone Age!

"Silence!" he commanded, not turning his head. "There's too much chatter."

Vanark spluttered. He thrust hands against the floor, shoved himself up to a sitting posture. The officer helped him to his feet, stepped back and saluted him with horizontal arm, spread fingers, and the inevitable: *"Gor Surah."*

Vanark responded perfunctorily, turned to me. His countenance was a frozen, expressionles mask, but his eyes were red balls; worms of rage crawled within their lurid depths.

"Coret this man," he blurted out, thick-tongued.

The officer straightened. I think he clicked his heels. "There has been no court," he protested. "The decree—"

"May at all times be superseded by a member of the Council," Vanark in-

*Editor's Note: Mr. Lambert here evidently attempts to convey by elisions and ungrammatical construction some difference in the speech of these men from that of the more cultured Surahnit. A. L. Z.

terrupted. "You know that, Subaltern Hafna. I will cover you. Obey my command."

"Very well." Hafna wheeled crisply to face me, jerking the ax from his belt. "Attention, men!" he snapped. Feet shuffled. The green-uniformed men were ramrod-stiff. "The execution detail will be Fator, Latra, Kut. March the prisoner out."

"No," Vanark countermanded. "I want him slain at once!" His urgency seemed not to be wholly due to his desire for immediate vengeance. I caught a flicker of his glance to the entrance. "Here!"

"The concussion may injure the shaft mechanism, Councilman Vanark," Hafna objected. I rather resented his temporizing. I had no chance of escape, no chance even to die fighting. The quicker it was over and done with the better.

"Have him taken to your guard-room," Vanark yielded. "But no further."

The subaltern gave the command. I was marched off the platform through the doorway. This side of the guard-room was the lambent rock of the cliff, the others were of a whiter, softer appearing stone. The room was sparsely furnished with appointments queerly shaped out of the same alloy as the guards' weapons and the handle of Hafna's ax. A rack of corets hung on one wall. A door of that strange, red metal hung in an embrasure of the one opposite the shaft entrance.

I was paraded to the third wall, and stood against it. The detail Hafna had named lined up, facing me. The officer strode stiff-kneed to the end of the line. *"Corets!"* he barked. Three hands snapped to three belts. "Draw!" Three hands jerked in unison. Three dull red barrels snouted at me.

"Wait, Subaltern Hafna!" I exclaimed. "Nal Surah has need of me and even Varnak cannot save you from his wrath if you destroy me."

THE words came from my lips, but I swear I did not say them. How could I? I had not then yet heard the name, Nal Surah, was unaware of its transcendant power. It was the Other who had spoken with my tongue. The Other, invisible, intangible, but aware of what was happening here.

Hafna hesitated, his head turning to Vanark, his eyes questioning. I could not read the latter's expression, but what he said was clear. Too clear. "He lies."

"But," the subaltern began, "would it not be wise to make certain. I think. . . ."

"Your duty is to obey, not to think. Am I not of the *Ratanit?* Do I not know Nal Surah's mind? Give the command!"

Hafna shrugged. His fleshless lips parted. Now, I thought. This is it. This is the end. . . .

"Who is it that knows Nal Surah's mind?" It was a woman's voice, indolent, low, almost intonationless. "What passes here?" But there was something in its timbre that spoke of assured power.

Hafna spun to it, his arm flinging out parallel with the floor. *"Gor Surah!"* Vanark's gesture was this time no mechanical acknowledgment of an inferior's salute. It was a greeting to an equal. Or a superior? I could not be quite sure. "Nalinah!" one of the guards muttered.

She leaned against the jamb of the outer doorway, open now, flicking a lithe thigh with a thin silvery rod that was tipped by a filigree representation of the same insignia that was on

Hafna's sleeve. There was a pantherine grace to her small body. A short-skirted, rainbow-hued frock was kirtled at her waist but tight about her bosom so that it did not conceal the soft curves it covered. Her head, crowned by an aureole of flaxen hair, was canted slightly to one side, like a curious bird's. The curve of her lips, the color of old rose, hinted at a smile but there was no smile in her blue eyes.

"What goes on here?" she repeated. "Answer me, Subaltern Hafna."

Against the sun-brightness of her hair her complexion was oddly dusky. Her features had the racial sharpness of these Folk, yet in some evasive way they brought to mind not the vulture Vanark's resembled but the parakeet. There was the same pastel beauty there, the same fragile loveliness.

"We execute this Taphet, Ra Nalinah," the officer spoke up. "He attacked Rata Vanark and would have slain him had the elevator been but an instant slower in its descent."

Nalinah's face hardened. "Why is he not delivered over to a court, as the Council has decreed, that the execution may be a public warning to others of his ilk?"

"Rata Vanark commanded to the contrary."

"Ah, Vanark! That was why you claimed to know Nal Surah's mind. But I recall that in Council you cast the deciding vote for the public punishment of rebel Taphetnit, when I opposed it. Strange you should forget the decree."

"I did not forget it," Vanark responded. "Nor did I forget that at my suggestion authority was reserved to us of the Council to order instant execution at our will. I am exercising that authority now."

I listened to all this with a curious detachment. There seemed no question but that one way or another I was to be executed. It made little difference to me whether I died at once, or a little later.

Nalinah smacked the rod against her skirt. "You have the right! Get it over with. I have been informed of a new experiment, the most successful thus far, and am in haste to inspect it."

"Thank you, Nalinah," Vanark said, and I thought there was a mocking undertone to his voice. He turned away from her. "Subaltern Hafna!" he said. "*Coret* this Taphet!"

The officer saluted, wheeled smartly. Well, I thought, that's that. I should have preferred to have seen the sun once more before I died.

Facing those strange weapons of the green-clad guards, watching them lift to blast me with whatever lethal charge they held, an odd speculation drifted across my mind. *Could* they kill me, these macabre Little Folk? Or was I not so different in structure from them, so definitely from another plane of existence, that the effort would merely result in returning me to the world whence I had come, the world of green, growing things, of limpid, rippling waters?

In that moment of final threat, my only emotion was a nostalgia for all that was my own, my birthright!

iii

Account of Courtney Stone, M.D., resumed:

THERE could be no doubt that the boy, Charles Dorsey, was affected by the inexplicable malady that had struck down the two natives in the hospital, Adath Jenks and Job Grant. Driving down from Camp Wanooka,

I tried to force myself to concentrate on that problem, tried to review once more the little we had learned about the wasting disease of which there was now a third victim. I found it impossible, however, to keep my mind from straying to other problems, that were hardly therapeutic but no less pressing.

There was, for one, the question of the quarantine I had imposed on the few left at the camp. There would be no trouble about the Dorsey lad. He was an orphan and the ward of a Trust Company. A wire to the proper officer would forestall inquiries. I carried letters from the other three youngsters to their relatives which I hoped would delay an incursion of these for at least a week.

What bothered me in this respect was whether I had been right in permitting the other campers to scatter to their homes, when a 'phone call could have caught them at the station. Were they carrying some epidemic broadcast?

The three cases of that coma during which the vitality of its victims seeped slowly away were definitely endemic to Lake Wanooka. That spoke of a focus of infection in that locale. We had isolated no germs, no filterable virus, by which we could transmit the affection to any of our test animals. This, I concluded, justified me in my course of action.

Perhaps it was a bit of sophistry. I wondered what I should have done had I not been aware that an investment of several hundred thousand dollars depended on my decision. Big Money is scary, and irascible. Not five per cent of Wanooka's clientele would return next year if I insisted on a general quarantine.

I persuaded myself that this aspect of the situation had not influenced me but I could not deny that I had agreed to keeping Hugh Lambert's disappearance secret for any but personal motives.

The reputation of the camp had entered also into this equation. The fear of kidnapers is a peculiar affliction of the wealthy, and certainly Wanooka's patrons would be justified in arguing that if its director could vanish mysteriously from its precincts, their sons would not be safe there. This was not, however, the clinching argument for silence.

Edith Horne had put it like this. "Whatever's happened to Hugh is tied up with what we did the night of the accident. It's useless to bring the police in on this unless we tell them about that. And we dare not."

"You mean—the tramp?"

"I mean that they won't believe us if we tell them what happened to the tramp. Nobody would. They'll think that he died as a result of the transfusion and that we—we—"

"Disposed of his body somehow. To hide—"

"Murder."

I KNEW a moment of terror as she said that word, quietly, without perceptible emotion. Then I rallied. "But Edith," I protested. "We can't let that stop us. We've got to do everything we can to find Hugh. If it means trouble for us we'll have to stand the gaff. I'll try to cover you up somehow, but he's my friend and—"

"Your friend!" she broke in. "What do you think he is to me?"

Her hands were at her breast. Her eyes held mine. I looked into their agonized depths, and read her secret there.

"Do you think there's anything, in the world or beyond it," she asked, "I

would not do to help him? But we can't. We can do nothing.'

I didn't understand. I said so.

"Doesn't the way his clothes were found mean anything to you?"

I perceived her drift. "You think that—"

"The same thing happened to him as happened to the tramp, or something very like it. What else can I think?"

"Then he's gone," I groaned. "Hugh Lambert's gone. We'll never see him again!"

Thinking it over as I drove down the road, I realized what utter nonsense it all was, but with Edith's eyes upon me I had believed it. Strange how a man trained in science could have been swung so far off his base by a superstitious woman!

"No," Edith had responded to that hopeless exclamation of mine. "I have a strange feeling that he is alive, somewhere. And a strange faith that he will win through and come back to us. But we can only wait; and hope that sometime, somehow, we shall find a way to help him. If we're to be ready for that, we must be free to act. That is why we must act like criminals, with a secret that would put us in the chair if it were found out."

A criminal with a secret that would put me in the chair. That was what I felt like as I reached New Scotland Road at last and saw my home ahead of me, at the end of a long block. Waiting for a red light to turn, I actually cringed inwardly at the sight of the blue-uniformed traffic cop who manipulated it, gasped with relief when he released my car.

A man stood looking at a pile of débris on the edge of the sidewalk in front of my gate. I recalled that Mrs. Small had started one of her periodic convulsions of housecleaning that morning, remembered that the 'phone from camp had caused me to forget to call the rubbish cart.

It was Jethro Parker who looked at that heap of papers, broken curtain poles, pots that had outlived their usefulness. I braked the car.

"What brings you here?" I asked. "You look pretty healthy."

"I am," he answered. "I come to Albany to see Marthy, my wife, off on the train. She's goin' to Providence to visit her brother for a fortnight. I was kind of at loose ends and I thought I'd drop by and ask you how that tramp made out, that had the accident up near my corn lot."

"The tramp?" I hoped nothing in my face showed the sudden panic that leaped within me. "Oh, yes, I remember now." To hide my confusion I fumbled with the car door, stepped out on the sidewalk. "He—wasn't hurt badly at all. He was suffering from shock. Surly chap. He refused to let me do anything for him. Got up and went out without even telling me his name. I've got a notion he was afraid to. Maybe the police were after him."

"Got right up an' went out," Parker drawled in his nasal twang. "Just like he was?"

"Yes."

"That's funny."

"What's funny about it?"

"Well, I could swear that them rags," he pointed at the heap of my housekeeper's off-scourings, "is the very clothes he wore when I picked him off the road."

They were! When Ann Doring had come into the surgery I had stuffed the filthy, moldering garments behind an instrument cabinet, and forgotten them. I stared at them now, wadded on the very top of that mound of debris; tattered, mud-slimed, and accusing!

CHAPTER III

Hugh Lambert's narrative, resumed:

TIME has a way of slowing up at moments of stress. I saw the little muscles at the corners of Subaltern Hafna's mouth gather themselves to open it for the command that would blot me out. I saw the trio of green-uniformed guards waiting for that command. I saw the girl in the doorway, her look bent on Vanark, studying him. I had time, even, to recall that not once, while they had discussed my fate, had she glanced at me.

"Ra Nalinah," I was surprised to find myself saying. "I am no Taphet. I am the one who has so long been sought in the Upper World. I am the one whom Nal Surah awaits."

The words were gibberish to me, but they brought a sharp, "Hold it, Hafna!" from her. She sprang erect, stepped into the room to stare at me. Her eyes widened. Her lips parted, showing a white gleam.

"He is fair-skinned," she murmured, thinking aloud. "But he has not the look of a Taphet. It may be. It may well be."

"It not only may be, but is." Weird sensation, that, to hear my own voice saying things I not only did not think, but did not comprehend. "Ra Vanark is no subaltern of the labor squadron guard. Ask him how he came to be alone on the platform with me, if I am a Taphet. Ask him why I am clad in this suit of *sibral,* as he is. Ask him."

Nalinah did not take her gaze from my face. "What say you to that," she purred, "Rata Vanark?"

Realization flashed upon me that the unseen wielder of that ineluctable control over my acts and my speech was fighting for my life, had been fighting for it from the moment the guards had seized me. With the omniscience of which he had proven himself possessed, he had known Nalinah to be on her way here; had spoken, through me, exactly at the proper instant that would delay my execution sufficiently long for her arrival to interfere with it.

"What concern is it of yours?" the man responded to Ra Nalinah's demand. "For what I do I am answerable to the Nal alone."

"And to the Folk!" She turned to him, her brooding eyes upon him. "The Creed seems to have faded from your mind. 'The Folk is all'," she chanted, "'I am nothing. The Folk will is my will, the Folk weal my weal. I die, the Folk exists forever.'" There was a religious, almost fanatic fervor in her tones. "The Folk is the master, Vanark, the Ratanit but its voice. Even the Nal. Even Nal Surah."

Vanark's swart lip trembled, as if it would lift in a sneer, but dared not. There was a long minute of silence, electric with tension, with bristling antagonism.

I sensed, from the amazed look on Hafna's face, from the startled glances among his men, that this strife was new in the relations of these two, or if not new then newly manifest. Was it to bring this about that the Other had delayed speaking through me again till Vanark had committed himself to a lie?

Had even my attack on him been directed and not, as I had thought, a voluntary act of my own, freed from control by the swiftness of that descent?

IT was Vanark who broke the silence. "This is he for whom I searched in the Upper World," he admitted. "But I have found him imperfectly controlled, more likely to defeat our

purpose than serve it." He was desperately trying to convey the impression that he was explaining his act, not apologizing for it. "I decided it were best to destroy him and return to our first design."

"*You* decided!"

He spread his arms wide. "Perhaps I was too hasty. Perhaps it were better to place the matter before the full Council. I shall conduct him . . ."

"*I* shall conduct him to my own quarters," Nalinah cut in, "and hold him till the Ratanit convene. You consent, Vanark? Or shall we refer the matter to the Nal, repeating to him all that has passed here?"

Vanark didn't like that. I could see he didn't like it at all. He hesitated.

Nalinah lifted her silvery rod. A low hum came from it. The device at its tip seemed to glow more brightly. With some surprise I perceived that its pierced pattern showed a central orb and nine others, smaller and of various sizes, circling about it. It looked amazingly like a representation of the Solar System. But how could that . . ?"

"There is no need to disturb the Nal!" I was almost sure Vanark's exclamation was edged with a quiver of fear. "No need for him to know there has been any dispute between us. It is a matter of small moment. You may do as you wish."

The humming stopped. "Thank you, Rata Vanark," Nalinah said it gravely, but as she turned to me I surprised a dancing light in her eyes, of impish amusement. With somewhat of a shock I realized that she was little more than a girl. She had been so dignified, so almost regal, until then.

"What are you called?" she asked me.

"Hugh Lambert."

"Hughlambert." She ran the syllables together, as Vanark had done. Evidently there were only single names here, terms such as *Nal, Ra, Rata,* being titles. "It is too difficult to say and to remember. I shall call you Hula. Come then, Hula." She turned and went out through the doorway.

I strode across the floor. As I followed Nalinah out into the open I felt Vanark's eyes on my back. They seemed to bore into me. I knew that whatever the attitude of the others here might be to me, I had one implacable, malignant enemy.

ii

IF I seem to have related these events in too great detail, I have this excuse. From every word that had been spoken, almost from every shadow flitting across the countenances of the swart speakers, I had gleaned some bit of information to add to my pitiful store. I was commencing to apprehend the weird web in which I was entangled, the nature of the strange internecine strifes.

Most of this was still tantalizingly vague, but one fact stood out clearly. There was nothing accidental about my being brought here for some definite purpose. Though that purpose was as yet hidden from me, I knew somehow that it affected not me alone but the world from which I had been snatched. Somehow dread crept sluggish through my veins, seeped blackly into my brain.

How terribly justified that dread was, what the amazing intent of the Surahnit was, and how; desperately, hopelessly; I strove to defeat it, will appear as my narrative proceeds to its astounding climax, the issue of which I do not yet know.

Will appear, I write. I smile, wanly, bitterly, as I set those two words down.

No human, no man or woman of the Upper World, will read this narrative if the die I have cast rolls against me . . . and *them.*

iii

I STRODE out of that guardroom where I had so nearly met my end.

Somewhere over me there was a roof upon which great mountains rested but I was aware of it only as a murky, clouded sky. I was more immediately conscious of the loom of rock towering just behind me, yet even this was so incredibly altitudinous and ran to such sightless distances on either side that I could no longer conceive of it as a precipice. It was, rather, a limit to space, a boundary to reality itself. To all intents and purposes I was in the open.

The ground across which I was being impelled was not earth but stone. It was imbued with the eerie glow that permeated all things here, but here the luminance was dark and secretive, and the uneven surface within which that glow seemed imperceptibly to pulsate was the surface of a frozen flow.

This was rock that once had been molten, rock that was rigid now in whatever queer twisting of shape the fading of its heat had left it. It was igneous rock. It was the naked primal matter of our whirling planet.

I knew now how very deep this land must lie, how close to Earth's heart I had penetrated, and how remote I was from the world I had known."

It rolled away from me, this plain of congealed stone, and it lifted as it rolled so that its cresting ridges circumscribed my vision within a radius of perhaps a hundred yards. Motionless now, some twenty feet ahead, Nalinah awaited me, her dusky lips curved in a half smile, and beside her was something new to my experience.

I guessed this thing to be a vehicle of sorts, because, and only because, it was poised in the center of a wide swathe of rock evidently artificially smoothened to make a road running off, straightaway to some unguessable destination.

At its highest the contrivance rose barely above the golden glory of Nalinah's hair. From there it curved forward to a bulbous nose and pitched backward to a pointed tail. Its sides and its bottom duplicated the curve of its roof so that, albeit with an amazing appearance of rigidity, it was balanced on a single point of its under structure.

Puzzling me almost as much as how this could possibly be accomplished, there was no aperture visible anywhere in the dull red walls of the device; no door, no window.

"Have you then, Hula, no *lusan* in that Upper World of yours," Nalinah purred as I came up to her, "that you appear so bemused?"

"Is that what you call it?" I asked, inanely. "How do you get into it?"

"See." She twisted to it. Her heel caught in some inequality of her footing and she stumbled against me. I threw an arm around her, to save her from falling.

A pulse pounded in my wrists. She was crushed against me, soft, and yielding, and ineffably feminine. The fragrance of her was in my nostrils. Her hair brushed my cheek and her warmth enfolded me, an aura of exquisite allure. My arm tightened. . . .

I HEARD—I distinctly heard, I tell you—a strain of music, *within me!* The blast of a warning horn. Full-throated arpeggios, like the blast of a

soaring wind. The rush of wings, of the wings of the Valkyries. The twittering calls of the harpies, beautiful as heaven—and *evil* as hell itself.

Abruptly I was back in Wanooka's rec hall, poignantly conscious of Ann Doring's nearness. . . .

I set Nalinah firmly on her feet, releasing her.

"See," she said again, and it seemed to me there was a quiver in her voice. She touched the *lusan's* side with her wand. A circular hole appeared in the metal wall, widened from the point of its first appearance as a camera shutter's iris diaphragm opens to uncover its lens. At once there was an aperture large enough to admit a man. Within I glimpsed a cushioned seat, a brightly gleaming lever.

Queerly I still heard the rush of wings, the twittering, faint now, and trilling sweetly. But it was no longer music and it was no longer within my skull. I looked up to whence the sounds seemed now to come.

The sheer, unearthly beauty of what I saw caught me by the throat. High above, a covey of white birds paralleled the cliff in graceful flight. Their bodies were chastely white, but their outspread great wings were a shimmer of iridescent color, frail webs woven from light that had splintered into all the infinite hues of the spectrum. They filled the air with multi-hued facets of jeweled motes. Each was a glittering glory in itself, the whole was a sparkling rainbow, a congeries of a million rainbows, sweeping across the sky.

Over them arched the drab vault of a gloomy sky. Backgrounding them was the ominous gray of that gigantic wall.

A single bird veered, abruptly, out of the flock and darted for that wall. The twitterings rose to a chorus of alarm. A pencil-thin, scarlet beam streaked up from the ground.

The bird's shriek was a scream of human agony! One of its marvelous wings had vanished! Its companions shot away, too evidently abandoning it to its fate. It side-slipped, plummeted downward.

The remaining wing caught it, held it suspended for one heart-breaking instant. I saw—

"That's no bird!" I gasped. "It's a woman!"

The slender, delicately formed body, contorted now in agony, was a white-clad human shape. Long hair, lustrously black, cascaded about a staring, tortured face. "It's a girl!" I cried, appalled.

The wing's momentary hold was gone. She went down, was hidden by a jutting vertical fold of the precipice. I heard a sickening thud.

iv

A GREEN-UNIFORMED man left the guardroom entrance, his coret in his hand. He strolled leisurely along the base of the cliff, toward the spur that hid his victim from me.

"Kut's aim was poor," Nalinah said behind me. "I must have Hafna instructed to send him back to the ranges."

I whirled to her. "That was a girl," I exclaimed. "A flying girl."

She seemed mildly surprised at my perturbation. "A Taphet, Hula," she shrugged. "Their women are the worst." Then, as if that was explanation enough for the murder, she said, "Come. Nal Surah awaits us." Her hand gestured to the *lusan*. I had to enter it. I squeezed past the gleaming lever I had noted, sank into the cushioned seat.

V

Account of Courtney Stone, M.D., resumed:

I WAS uncertain whether Jethro Parker's questions had been as casual as they seemed, or whether he had deliberately trapped me. Whichever it was, I knew that I could not now deceive him by any hastily contrived tale of having given the tramp one of my old suits before he left. Parker would have known instantly that I lied, if only because in that case, I should have at once gotten rid of disease-breeding rags he discarded and not kept them around for two weeks.

They may be uncouth, these farmer folk of the Helderbergs, and ungrammatical in their speech, but they have a native shrewdness most scientists might well envy. They have also insatiable curiosity and a straight-lined honesty with which it is impossible to tamper.

Parker, I was certain, would not stop now until he had unearthed exactly what had happened to the tramp, and he could not be kept from reporting the occurrence to the police.

"Yes," I said. "There isn't any doubt those are the tramp's clothes. Come inside and I'll tell you about him."

I took the farmer into my office and shut the door. "Sit down, I said. I always take a snifter about this time in the afternoon. Will you join me?"

Parker rubbed his great, bony hands on his knees. He was perched on the edge of the chair I had indicated and he was looking about him uncomfortably. Laymen are always ill at ease in the purlieus of a physician's office.

"That was grand liquor you give me the other day," he said. "Sure I'll have some."

I went into the surgery and brought back two medicine glasses filled with the dark amber liquid. I gave him one. He downed it at a gulp.

I thumped my own emptied glass on the desk, and said. "All right, now, Parker, I'm ready to confess."

"Confess!" He was so startled his glass fell from his fingers.

"Yes!" I leaned over him, my palms on the desk. "Remember you thought there was something queer about the tramp, that night, and I laughed at you? You were right and I was wrong. He was queer."

The man's eyes widened. "Queer," he said huskily. His eyes widened, but the irises did not. My gaze shifted to his forehead, where the throbbing of the sinistral temporal artery was quite visible. "As how?"

"I don't know how," I whispered. "I don't know. But wouldn't you call it queer if a man vanished right in front of your eyes, if he got smaller and smaller while you watched him, till he wasn't there at all?"

"The tramp did that?" He mumbled the words, thick-tongued. "Got smaller. . . ." The pulse in his temple slowed perceptibly, his pupils were shrinking to pinpoints.

"And vanished. You believe me, don't you?" I whispered. "You believe what I am telling you?"

"No." I had expected that reaction. "No." He shoved himself up out of his chair. "You—you're foolin' me. You're lyin' to me. You did somethin' to him and now you're tryin' to lie out of it."

I threw my arms wide. "All right, Parker," I murmured. "You can't blame me for trying."

"I'm—I'm goin' to—the cops an' tell 'em." He started for the door. "Let them figure out what to do."

"Wait," I called quietly. "I'm going

with you. I thought I would try the story out on you. If you believed it maybe everybody would believe it. But I see it's no use. I might as well go with you and give myself up."

I had my hat and coat on and I was going out through the hall with Parker. He stumbled a little and I caught hold of his arm just as I saw my housekeeper's face peering over the upper railing of the stairs.

"Mr. Parker is ill." I called to her. "I'm taking him home. Please phone the hospital I will not make rounds today, and mail the letters I've left on my desk." To the farmer I said, low-toned, "No use telling her yet. She will know soon enough."

I had to support him as he went down the path, had to almost lift him into the car. I got around to the left, got in behind the wheel, and he slumped against me.

"Straighten up," I snapped at him, savagely, as I let in the gears. His obedience to that command was almost purely reflex, but he sat erect enough to attract no attention from neighboring cars, from the traffic officer at that light on the corner. When he finally slumped down in the seat and went frankly asleep it did not matter any longer. We were on the open road and I was driving, as fast as I dared, toward Camp Wanooka.

The dose of chloral I had measured into his glass had been exactly right. I had distracted his attention from its distinctive taste by startling him. With exact timing, guided by my ocular taking of his pulse, I had contrived to have him walk out to my sedan under his own power before the sedative took full effect.

I would satisfy the men at the camp, when I drove him up to the infirmary, by saying I had stopped at his home on the way down and finding him in coma had decided to bring him there so that I could give him more of my personal attention than he would receive at the hospital. After that Edith and I could keep him asleep until—

Until when? That was as far as my plan had formed. The rest was in the lap of the gods.

I had done all this, I, Courtney Stone, M.D. In the parlance of the underworld I had doped a man and shanghaied him. It wasn't pretty. But, given all that had gone before, what else was there for me to do?

Edith Horne had convinced me, you see, that for Hugh Lambert's sake we must both be at liberty, free to help him when he should call for our help. If I had not silenced Jethro Parker we should both have been in prison by night.

It needed no imagination now to make me out a criminal. I was one in very truth. Curiously enough, I rather liked the idea. My life till now had been so much a matter of stodgy, deadening routine.

CHAPTER IV

Narrative of Hugh Lambert, resumed:

NALINAH came into the *lusan* and took her place beside me. The opening shut itself. I have said the strange shell had no window. That is true. Yet enclosed within it, I still saw the smoothed road ahead.

No, the metal was not transparent. A screen was suspended vertically before us, and on this the road was pictured, vividly and in its natural colors, as though on the eyepiece of a periscope; except that this image was right side up and not reversed.

I wondered why the builders of the vehicle had gone to the trouble of contriving what must be an intricate optical device when a pane of glass would have been so much simpler. Nalinah touched the lever, moving it minutely away from her, and then I knew.

The ridge at which I was gazing flashed down and out of the screen. The long, straight road seethed toward us out of a vast, dreary plain. On either side of us there was only a rushing, featureless gray blur. No glass thin enough to be transparent could have withstood that incredible speed.

There was just room enough for the two of us between the *lusan's* curving walls. I was clothed only in that single, tight garment of *sibral,* and it was evident that under the girl's rainbow-hued frock there was not much more.

Recalling Nalinah's shrug, her unfeeling comment on the death of that gorgeous creature of the air, a steel plate might as well have intervened for all effect her closeness had upon me.

"Why did she have to be killed?"

"It is forbidden for a Taphet to approach the wall," Nalinah replied, "except under orders and closely guarded."

"Was her crime so great that she had to be killed?"

"There is only one crime in Mernia, disobedience of the Law. There is only one punishment, death." The harsh statement seemed utterly incongruous coming from those tender, girlish lips. "The Folk cannot tolerate unsocial conduct, no matter how slight."

"Is life then so cheap in your Mernia?"

"Only the life of the Folk matters, only its weal. The guard who flashed her with his *coret* did not slay that Taphet. She slew herself. From the moment she violated an edict of the Law, she was dead. Kut merely disposed of a body that had forfeited its right to existence."

I shook my head in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

Nalinah's brow wrinkled. "Look you, Hula," she said, speaking slowly and distinctly, as if explaining something to a child. "Do not some cells in the body of one of your kind, having been injured or altered by some disease, sometimes cease to perform the function for which they are designed?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And do they not then become a danger to the body of which they are a part, at first latent and then actively as their nature changes and they become maleficent? Diseased?"

"Yes."

"Do you permit these cells to corrupt other cells, till the whole body rots and is destroyed?"

"Naturally not. We get rid of them, cut them out or burn them out, or destroy them with some—some antiseptic."

"Is not the Folk, the state, a living organism composed of a multitude of smaller living organisms, just as your body is composed of cells?"

"Yes."

The small oval of Nalinah's face lit up with triumph. "Then why is it not right that when some of these smaller organisms, these individuals, fail to function properly for the welfare of the whole body, the whole Folk—why is it not right that they too should be destroyed, mercilessly, lest remaining they corrupt other individuals till the whole state is rotten and is destroyed?"

IT was a ruthless philosophy, I thought, gazing into the screen. My eye followed the streaking ribbon of road till, infinitely distant, it narrowed

to a point. The landscape there was too far off to be veiled by our speed, and I was able to make out some of its details. There were nowhere any trees, any greensward. There was only the dead rock; barren, infertile. Desolate.

"Your argument is specious," I said slowly. "But the analogy on which it is founded is a false one. The important thing in the conglomerate of cells that compose a human body is the body itself, and the soul it houses. The important thing in a nation is the individuals that compose it. Cells exist to serve the body. The state, the social organization, exists to provide for the well-being of its citizens."

A gray mass jogged the horizon. It grew rapidly as we neared it, became a high-piled, frowning wall. We topped a rise higher than most and for an instant I saw over that wall. There were buildings within it, streets swarming with traffic.

"Calinore," Nalinah said, answering the question in my eyes. "Home of the Taphetnit." She returned to our discourse. "You have no laws, then?"

"Yes. Of course we have laws, but they are made and administered for the greatest good of the greatest number. I heard you repeat what you called your Creed, a little while ago. We too have our fundamental Law, and it states its objects thus: 'To establish justice, insure domestic tranquility . . . promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. . . .'"

There was a wistful quality to Nalinah's smile. "'Insure domestic tranquility, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty. . . .' How beautiful it sounds. Does your Law do all these things, Hula?"

"It was so intended."

"I asked if it *did* them."

I thought of two lines of men I had seen, on the docks of San Francisco, grimly facing one another; those composing one gaunt-faced, pinch-bellied, and bitter-eyed; the others blue-jowled, stalwart shouldered, their gnarled fists grasping tear-gas bombs, waiting for the word to throw them. I thought of hollow-eyed, dull-faced little children bent over the treadles of a spinning mill, the sun not risen yet; and I thought of a court that had said the law of which I boasted forbade the stopping of this crime. I thought of a Man worshipped because nineteen centuries ago He preached that His brothers must live in peace, and I thought of another man imprisoned because nineteen *years* ago he preached that his brothers must not make war upon one another.

I thought of all this, and far more, and I said: "The Law would do all these things if we lived according to the spirit of the Law. It does not wholly succeed because; of the men we choose to interpret and administer it; some are selfish, some venial, some merely fools."

"Selfish. Venial. Fools. Are there none among you who are unselfish, unbribable and wise?"

"A great many."

"But why permit the others to carry out this wonderful Law of yours?"

How naïve that question was! And yet . . .

ii

I KEPT silent, the changing images in the screen my excuse. We had flashed past Calinore and now there was a change in the plain. It seemed softer, warmer somehow in hue. There were crops of some kind growing upon it.

What those crops were or how they were induced to grow out of the rock, I could not make even a guess, for when they were near enough for me to have examined them closely they were swallowed up in the streaking gray blur of our speed. Nevertheless their being there at all was yet a scientific miracle.

"I am convinced." I realized that Nalinah was no longer speaking to me, but thinking aloud. "Nal Surah is right. We have tarried here too long, in this barren and desolate land. Our place is in the sun."

"You will be welcome," I said. This then, was for what I had been brought to Mernia. I was to be an ambassador from the Little Folk to the Upper World. My forebodings had been unwarranted. "I am sure I can arrange permission for you to come among us." My mind was already busy with plans. Although the fertile regions of Earth's surface were overcrowded, a people who made livable a land of bare rock would find in our deserts, our tundras, a veritable Paradise.

"Permission?" Nalinah seemed surprised. "We shall *take* what we wish."

I didn't get it, at first. "Take!" I chuckled. "Maybe we'll have something to say about *that*."

"Your people will have as little to say about it as you have had abo coming here, my Hula, and what y have done since you came here." The was nothing grim, nothing threateni about the way she said it. Her tone w quite matter-of-fact. "When we a ready to bring the blessings of Mernia civilization and science to your ba barian race, your benighted race wh do not know even how to govern then selves, we shall do it, and you sha be helpless against us."

She is talking nonsense, I thought What can they do against us, these tiny people against the giants that we were to them, these few against our hordes?

And then I recalled what I knew already of their powers. I recalled how the tramp had vanished. I recalled how utterly unable I had been to struggle against the grip they had upon me. I remembered the corpse I had seen brought back to life. . . .

"We need only to learn a little more about those whom we shall conquer," Nalinah was saying. "It is you, Hula who shall tell us what we need to know."

"I'll be damned if I will!"

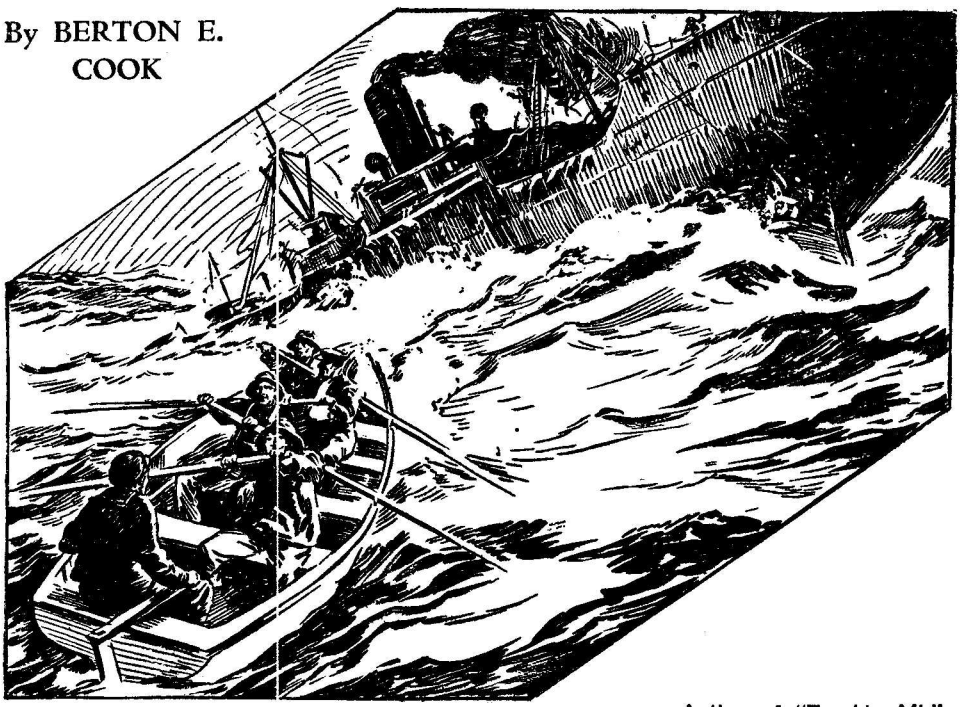
She laughed at me. The *lusan* was filled with the trill of her girlish, merry laughter.

There was something horribly sinister about that laugh.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Reunion in Liverpool

By BERTON E. COOK



Author of "Trouble Aft," "Ghost Ship," etc.

Reasonably certain your brother is Capt. Lett now master *S.S. Cargo Prince*. Docked Liverpool 15th inst. Will sail 21st noon.

CAPTAIN FRANK GERRISH read again his copy of the cablegram received in New York before sailing. He paced his cabin with the paper snug in one fist. Again he held it to the light and repeated the words aloud. He folded it deliberately, now, saying fervently, "After twenty eternal years, Jeff Gerrish, I've found you. I shall talk with you face to face. We twins will reunite . . . for a homecoming to Old Skipper. Thanks to the Padelford-Bruns Detective Agency!"

The freshet of emotion lifted the captain of the *Grosbeak* out of his narrow cabin . . . out of the *Grosbeak*. It swept away his inborn steadiness and carried him back two decades to look again into the face of his twin brother.

"And my twenty-year search is ended," he said in low, triumphant tones. "With any kind of luck we'll dock the *Grosbeak* at noon, the twentieth. At the latest. I shall jump ashore, and into a cab. . . ."

Once in Jeff's presence, he knew he could break down the barrier of twenty years. He had to; he had to persuade Jeff Gerrish to come home. The Old Skipper was fading fast and in his decline he continually asked for his twin sons, for Frank and Jeff.

Letters had failed to bring a direct response from Jeff. Through the years a multitude of letters had gone out from both Frank and Old Skipper. They had crossed the line to the antipodes, they had pierced the Orient. Letters had reached out for Jeff in Liverpool, Rotterdam, Port Said. Surely, they had thought, some of them must have reached Jeff—although it had been doubly difficult to grope by mail for a man whose present name neither Old Skipper nor Frank knew. Nor did they ever get the names of the ships Jeff had been in.

But now! "Captain Lett—the *Cargo Prince.*" This was definite indeed.

Of course, there still lingered the possibility that they had not really found Jeff yet; other clues had evaporated. But this time Captain Frank Gerrish had gone about it thoroughly, he had engaged the worldwide organization of Padelford-Bruns with its access to Lloyds. They had combed the seven seas, the seventy times seven ports of the earth for sailing masters with obscure pasts—and they had that twenty-year old picture of Jeff.

Yes, twenty years old, that photo, but even after two decades a man must retain certain resemblances. Why, Captain Frank himself resembled the likeness of his twin and in their youth the Gerrish boys had been as alike—in looks—as two coils of new heaving line. Both with the sea born and bred in their blond shocks, in their ranging blue eyes and aquiline noses.

The resemblance, however, ended with their appearance and Captain Frank wondered, this biting cold day, what success had done to Jeff. Had success compensated him for that one early blunder? Was Jeff as bitter toward Old Skipper these days? He couldn't be. Deeper than his stung pride must lie a strong filial affection, else why the numerous, anonymous messages covering two decades? He could readily have vanished completely, hundreds of others had done so.

Was it sheer pride that had impelled Jeff to chronicle his rise a second time to a captaincy, his progress from coastwise to deepwater commands, from obscurity to bigger and better ships? Pride? Had Jeff been slapping Old Skipper's words back at him or was there, in the cryptic messages he had sent, the desire to reassure Old Skipper that one mistake need not ruin a man?

CERTAINLY Jeff had demonstrated it. He had made good. Frank, at least, had always expected he would. Frank, the plodder by contrast, who had all but worshipped his brilliant, ambitious, impulsive twin. Time and abiding affection had effaced the truth—that Jeff had been egotistic, unstable, selfish. But those had been boyish faults, they had been suppressed long since by responsibility and success.

"What do I care for family tradition, or for the whole family of Gerrish captains!" Jeff had shouted it that fateful morning just back and smarting in defeat and shame. "Old Skipper, I'm only starting. I don't need your name or anything else you could hand me. I'll carve my own name, see? I'm goin' up so almighty far and fast my backwash'll swamp the little ol' tramps you Gerrishes sail. Smoke that."

Smoke it they had, both Frank and Old Skipper. Cards at first from French ports, from north Africa; second mate at first, chief mate in a

few months. Then, by the accidental death of his captain, master of a ship once more. This last boost had rated a cable. Jeff was master, but of what ship, under what houseflag, he never revealed. He was indeed carving his own way. Nor had he once disclosed his new name.

Came a card from the West Coast. Followed a long letter strangely like the boy who had flung out and away in high rage years ago. Master of a spanking new ship, climbing fast. Some fine day when his command should rate among the biggest of ships, he'd come home. Not yet, however; he had yet a way up to go. "You can read my name occasionally these days in the New York port news," he had boasted tantalizingly.

Captain Frank had indulged a lenient, understanding smile; Jeff simply had to brag. Frank had scanned the port news ever since. Every likely ship he passed in the Narrows might be Jeff's.

Meanwhile Frank had prospered, too. Slowly, yes, and not so greatly, but his career had led upward—until the Great Depression. That dour event had completely retired Old Skipper on the profits he had made in wartime shipping. Hard times had melted away his accumulation as ship after ship had eased off her beat to a mooring, tied up. In the worst of it, the firm Frank sailed for had collapsed and Frank walked the beach for six barren months. That was in 1933.

Late in the same bleak fall, Jeff had written from China. Captain, now, of a real ship was Jeff. He was in the firm, to boot. He was a man of consequence on the seas despite the times.

Frank wondered, soon afterward, whether Jeff had been instrumental in the call he got from the Scollay Line. Oh, they had vowed that no outside influence had been exerted, they were hiring Captain Frank Gerrish on his record alone. Nevertheless, Frank wondered. It was not like his twin to hide his light of importance under a bushel, but time might indeed have altered him. Or possibly, from his heights of importance, Jeff had not felt the impulse, at the moment, to rub it in.

Anyway Captain Frank had donned again his blue uniform and gold-braided cap. This was his fifth trip to Liverpool in the *Grosbeak,* shipping was picking up at a swift pace; Jeff must have a splendid ship by now.

Must have? In a few days Frank would see her! The connection would be close, the *Grosbeak* at best would dock about noon of the twentieth. First officer Kane could look after her, for Captain Frank must get away at a flying start for the *Cargo Prince.* And how would Jeff look at the height of his career? How was Jeff going to receive him? How would—

There was a rap on the cabin door, a jerk at the knob, and Kane's beard came poking in. "Got an SOS, cap'n. Small freighter's in a bad way."

A sudden change came over Captain Gerrish. "Know her?" he demanded stiffly.

"No, sir, but her name's the *Moreland.*"

"Got her position?" The captain was turning pale.

"Forty-seven north and thirty-five west, sir. Almost on our course, ain't it?"

"What's her condition?"

"Why, SOS—bad, cap'n. Little old tramp on her last legs, 'cordin' to the messages comin' in. She reports seams openin' up for'd and a gale o' wind

rippin' the devil out of 'er. Says the seas 're somethin' awful off there."

"Any other ships answered her SOS? Anybody nearer than we are?"

Kane was dumbfounded. This was not the skipper he had known—or thought he knew—for four trips across. The Captain Gerrish he knew wouldn't have hemmed and hawed over an SOS.

"We're nearest to her, sir," he finally replied in measured tone. "Two others took the call, but they're 'way west and south of us."

Captain Gerrish was pacing, now. He stopped solemnly to speak with much less asperity. "Then we have no choice, mister. Wireless them we're coming. It's barely possible we can get the survivors off her and still manage to make Liverpool by the forenoon of the twenty-first . . . in time. Talk with the chief, tell him to crowd on steam. Every minute counts."

Kane left the cabin murmuring, "Liverpool 'fore noon on the twenty-first huh?" He scuffed through the snow to a slippery companionway and descended, saying, "What's got into 'im, tryin' to squirm out of this rescue job? And why Liverpool 'fore the noon of the twenty-first?"

THE snowstorm had blown itself out. The wind had backed into the north in a thunderous roar. Waves out of two quarters met, pointed high in air and lost their crests in a flying spoondrift that hazed away to leeward. Wind howled through the stays, it screamed in the funnel guys, it laid the long main deck under a sheet of foam.

High in the reeling, pounding ship, Captain Frank and Reagan, his Second, bent over a chart with dividers. At the radio compass in the wheelhouse, close by, stood Sparks with extension phones to his ears. "Here comes another one!" he cried.

Our bridge has gone. Whole seas smashing onto us. SOS. Edward Moore, master.

"Here 's our position, Sparks. Give it to him and say we're coming fast as we can in this sea running."

Sparks hurried below to send the message.

"Cap'n Edward Moore, huh?" Kane had returned forward to stand to an open window.

"Never heard of him," Reagan replied.

"No." Captain Gerrish seconded him absent-mindedly, for his mind was filled with "Captain Lett" and the *"Cargo Prince"* out ahead, beyond disasters and wild weather, in Liverpool.

They set the *Grosbeak* on her course to the *Moreland*—"Nothing to lu'ard." They slatted and swayed to the ship's gyrations, they hung in open windows: Captain Frank with his thoughts on Liverpool, Jeff, and reunion; mate Kane making a new, lesser, estimate of his skipper.

The *Grosbeak's* bows throbbed up a long slope of blustery indigo and green. She surmounted it and seemed to pause for breath, trembling to the punishment she had endured. Then down she nosed for more and Captain Frank cleared his throat. This sound was a characteristic that struck a gong in Kane's memory. Something emerged out of his subconscious mind, making him smile.

"Mr. Kane," the skipper was saying thoughtfully, "you must be wondering why I'm so anxious to make Liverpool."

"I was, sir, at first, but—don't tell me you've found *him!*"

"I'm not dead sure, but it looks

promising. The Padelford-Bruns people seem reasonably certain that a Cap'n Lett in the *Cargo Prince* is my brother. In Liverpool now. Sails at noon, the twenty-first. So you can see why I—"

Kane whistled through his teeth. "I can that!" he agreed, for not only Kane but the entire crew knew about the long search for Jeff Gerrish. "No wonder you set yerself when the *Moreland* called. She's not far off the course, though, cap'n. In spite of this quarterin' sea, we're makin' time. I'll jog up the first assistant—maybe the chief 's standin' by, considerin'. Huh!"

He blew a lungful into the speaking tube to the engine room, blew so fierce a blast that Captain Frank chuckled. He could almost hear the stream of blasphemy it provoked, down there aft.

"Hüh? . . . Oh, then y' ain't deaf. So hark to this: The cap'n 's located his brother in Liverpool, but this distress call has come along and we've got to hustle to make time . . . Naw! Dig the grease out of your ears. His brother 's not on the wreck, he 's in Liverpool. I said Liverp— Just so, but he won't be there f'rever and we've got to take the crew off'n the *Moreland* . . ."

PROMPTLY the sheathing started to squeak, and the deck underfoot seemed to crawl. The whole ship thrummed and vibrated to a vicious burst of speed—and in came Sparks panting, "Their receiver must be gone, cap'n. They can send okay, but I get no answers to my questions."

"What're they sending now?"

"It 's a jumble of stuff. All I can gather is that their cap'n 's gone off the hooks. Apparently he doesn't know we're getting his calls and coming."

"He'll soon know better," Captain Gerrish retorted. "Do all you can to keep up contact—and tell bosun to send us two men on lookout. On the bridge. The *Moreland* ought to heave in sight before very long."

No sooner had Sparks departed than Gerrish's thoughts reverted to Jeff.

"We were alike in looks, that was all."—He spoke as so many sailing masters will when the only thing to do is stand by and watch out ahead and wait—"Always smarter than I was, always chock-full of schemes. Made him mad to be laughed at or punished.

"Old Skipper set us both aboard a schooner on our sixteenth birthday . . . I rather fancied that old wind-jammer, but Jeff was fierce to go on a schoolship and Old Skipper said no. He's never had any use for schoolships.

"Time we turned eighteen, we had our A.B. tickets. Got our Third's papers together, too. That separated us, but we both kept pushing on up till, when the War came along, we were first officers."

"Yeah. Plenty of berths them days," Kane reminded him. "Anybody with a mate's papers could easily get his master's ticket and jump aboard of a command, what?"

"Ah, but Old Skipper would have none of that haste," Captain Frank resumed. " 'You go First a few years,' he said, 'you're young fellers, you lack the experience a good master needs, 'specially where most of your officers 'd be those blamed school-ship runts that can't tell whether the soundings on their charts 're in feet or fathoms.' So I stayed on as First in Dobson and Wright ships. Used me well, too, till hard times broke them."

He fell abruptly silent, while the *Grosbeak* boomed throughout to the force of a wall of water against her weather side.

Kane turned in his open window. "What did your brother do about it?"

"Jeff do? Huh—he went patriotic with a whoop. He declared that if his Uncle Sam rated him fit to command a ship, he was going to. And the ink wasn't dry on his ticket before he was stowing his bag in the master's cabin of the *Lake Wriston*. Old Skipper was fit to be tied, because in our family he'd always given the orders. Believe you me, Kane, we'd always taken them, too, with a smart 'Yes, sir,' to boot.

"He blew up, I recall, and came down to earth with a piece of advice for Jeff. Says he, 'She's an old tub, it's the dead o' winter, and you'll always have a lee shore to keep off—and that's an eelgrass run, don't you forget. So handle her easy, Jeff. I'm telling you, take no chances in her.'

"But Jeff wasn't taking advice from anybody, those days; certainly not from the Old Skipper whose authority he'd just broken. I can see him now, laughing as though he pitied Old Skipper and his caution. Say, he shoved that *Lake Wriston* like a racing yacht. Made two trips in record time, dodged a U-boat and rated bonuses for his speed.

"But one night a no'theast snowstorm caught him broken down—and no wireless aboard."

"Ye gods! Where was he?"

"Off the Jersey beach. Rough? It was awful. He laid an oil slick and took to the lifeboats, and by some miracle got clear of her without smashing or swamping. Made the beach and stove his boats, but nobody was lost—another miracle."

AT this point, Captain Gerrish turned to capture his mate's eye and said, "A few hours later, an ocean-going tug got a line aboard the *Lake Wriston* and towed her to New York! His owners went up in the air and the insurance people refused to pay one cent. Naturally so, I must admit, but that old hulk had earned her owners her price several times over.

"They jacked Jeff. He came home to crawl away and heal his feelings. And Old Skipper happened home between trips. He told Jeff all over again that he was too green to command ships. Gave Jeff the devil for abandoning a ship while she stayed afloat—'You had no right to abandon at all!' he yelled. 'You've disgraced the whole line of Gerrish cap'ns that's commanded ships ever since—' He was wild, that afternoon."

"Just so," Kane agreed, "and how'd Jeff take it?"

"Like a licked dog—until that talk about disgraced Gerrishes. Then he shook his fist and yelled back, 'So it's your Gerrish name that's hurt the most, is it? And I'm all washed up, am I? Old Skipper, I'm only starting. I don't need your name. I'll carve my own name, see?' He said a lot more and slammed out of the house.

"When he'd gone, it was deathly still until Old Skipper said, 'Now he'll knuckle down, Frank. He'll learn the things a man has to know 'for he takes out another ship. I'll take him to Boston with me in the morning.' "

A sailor brought another of Sparks' messages from the *Moreland:*

Both boats gone. Somebody get here and take us off before we swamp.

The *Grosbeak's* skipper quietly pocketed that message. He stared more intently out ahead, now, and another silence set in.

Finally Kane cleared his throat several times and asked cautiously, "Did he go to Boston with your father, cap'n?"

"No"—in repressed emotion—"we have never laid eyes on him since.

"He's kept his word, though. He's climbed into big ships just as he vowed he would, and without the Gerrish name or help. His first messages came spiteful, but I've noticed of late years, since he's gone higher they sound more self-assured. Important man nowadays. Promises to come home when he reaches the peak. Ah, I'll wager he's h'isted that peak more'n once; no roof to his ambitions."

"Twenty years—and never saw him!"

"No. He saw me once in Baltimore and mailed me a card right there. I looked up all the big ships in, but there were too many of them; some got to sea before I could speak them. All I had then was the little collier *Pacoa,* must 'ave looked grubby to Jeff. Ever since then I've entered port in the best shape possible, might run afoul of him again."

Kane went to a window in the after side of the wheelhouse to gaze along the foam-filled main deck to the stern house and lifeboats. "He couldn't find fault with us this time, cap'n, we're shipshape for Liverpool."

Captain Frank's weathered face softened. "Liverpool! This time!" he repeated with feeling. "I can hardly believe it—but I've a lot of faith in Padelford-Bruns, they're not apt to go wrong. High time, too; Old Skipper's failing fast. The more he wastes away, the more he keeps calling for his twins. Jeff's absolutely got to swallow his old-time pride and come along home, it'll make the old man so proud! That's why I've got to make Liverpool before noon of the twenty-first." As though musing aloud over a difficult problem in prospect, Captain Frank added, "Got to talk face to face with Jeff, got to convince him—got to."

Presently he turned to Kane, this time completely back in character as master of the *Grosbeak.* "Have a look at our boats yourself, mister, see if the Second's got them all ready to swing over. Pick your oarsmen stout, too. I don't want to lose men or—there's the *Moreland!* Dead ahead. What on earth 've those two lookouts been doing . ."

IT was two long minutes before either lookout caught the flash of two reeling, slatting mastheads in the hard sunlight and the skipper chuckled. He prided himself on his eyesight.

Meanwhile the *Grosbeak* swung into the north to stand to windward. The *Moreland* grew from a pair of mastheads downward to a rust and black hull mostly under water, a funnel in the midst of waving guys, bent davits and twisted stanchions, like gargoyles on the deck from which the lifeboats had been torn away. The dingy little freighter's main deck rarely emerged from the sea and the monkey bridge over it was broken away in two places, making it useless.

Thanks to the skill of Kane and Reagan at sweep oars, the *Grosbeak's* boats got away without mishap. Immediately they were whisked on by the wind and seas toward the wallowing hulk in the trough.

Captain Frank edged the *Grosbeak* closer to make a lee for his boats. It was a bold move, but those were his men in the two chips that shot upward to dizzy heights, flecked sunlight off fighting oars, and vanished deep down into dark hollows on their perilous way. He maneuvered the *Grosbeak* so close to the *Moreland* that his third mate broke into a nervous sweat.

At long last, with the very seams of the *Moreland's* forward plates showing

their rivetheads plainly, Captain Frank put his ship east, then south, then west in an arc. She hove-to directly below the *Moreland* to wait for her boats. And those boats would be loaded, this time, deep down into the sea that would lick at their gun'ales. Captain Frank struck his fists together and paced the bridge with the binoculars under one arm.

By prearrangement, Reagan headed for the lee side of the *Moreland's* stern to take off the men who plainly were cornered there aft, while Kane made for the lee of the forward house—what remained of it—to get Captain Moore and the others up there.

Kane hailed the derelict as soon as he was ready to receive. The men above made for their rail and were lowering away rope-ends when a strange thing happened. Quite suddenly they turned away from the rail, left their lines dangling and shook their fists at—Kane could not make out whom. But he distinctly heard their bedlam of yells.

And not a soul came off that ship. Kane looked away in bewilderment to Reagan's boat; not a man had left the stern to be rescued.

Through his binoculars, Captain Frank saw the situation and tried in vain to fathom it. He was still staring at those marooned, excited unfortunates when up came a radio from Sparks. The *Moreland's* captain wanted a tow. Had the *Grosbeak* suitable gear for it? And the *Moreland's* receiver was dead!

Since Sparks' messages to them could not be received, Captain Frank sent his bosun onto the wheelhouse with flags. The bosun flagged, in reply: "We have not bunkers enough to tow you."

Back came the weak call from the *Moreland's* fast fading battery impulse:

Will *Grosbeak* stand by few hours while we try make repairs to go on to Azores?

"Stand by for hours. Hours!" Rage choked back the answer that Captain Frank Gerrish would have made. That old hulk, obviously doomed, risking the life of every man aboard her, wasting precious hours — precious minutes. Should he entertain their request for one instant? Was he to be cheated out of that reunion in Liverpool, all because of some obstinate fool?

Sparks stood there, somewhat as Kane had stood when he had broached the first call in the skipper's cabin. And Sparks was just as puzzled by the violent changes that swept over the Gerrish countenance. Anger, rebellion, a deep agony of spirit all registered in turn as the battle raged within him.

Finally, in a splendid calm and in a dead sort of voice, the captain of the *Grosbeak* spoke. Not to Sparks, but to the bosun up top. "Flag them we shall stand by them," he ordered. "Then flag the boats to come back."

CAPTAIN FRANK waited on the bridge for Kane to report. The first mate came in over the *Grosbeak's* rail, soaked to the skin with icy brine and sweating withal. He was bewildered and he was outraged. He stomped up to the skipper and growled out, "That's the worst mess I ever see. There we was, ready to take 'em off—"

"We're standing by," Captain Frank cut in quietly. "Their cap'n thinks he can make repairs enough to limp into the Azores."

"Azores? He's plumb crazy. She'll go to bottom 'fore midnight. We've got to take 'em off sooner or later and here we mark time instead o' hurryin' to Liverpool. Cap'n, I tell you, if you wait for those birds to tinker, you'll dock too late in Liverpool."

"I fear so, Kane."

"She ain't worth it. Why, she's doomed, I tell you. I've just been over to her. She'll go under in a few hours. I can't understand what's got into her skipper. He sure was ready enough to abandon, then all at once they started quarreling. I s'pose that's when he changed his mind. But that crew'll mutiny, sure's preaching, it's certain death for 'em, sir. Cap'n—why not flag 'em we can't wait? We haven't the bunkers."

The bunkers idea was plainly a hopeful suggestion, an inspiration, for Kane had not seen the flagged refusal to tow the *Moreland*. And since it drew from the skipper no denial, Kane persisted with, "Comin' on dark plaguey soon, now. Unless we step along lively we'll not make Liverpool on time."

Captain Frank emerged enough from his pondering to shake his head. "Don't tempt me, Kane. It's hard to resist, but I think I understand what's going on in that captain's mind. So long as there's the slightest chance to save his ship, he'll not abandon her."

Kane swore under his breath.

"She's his command, Kane. There still are masters like that. Maybe . . . maybe if some one had stood by Jeff when he had that trouble in the *Lake Wriston* twenty years ago off Jersey, maybe he wouldn't have abandoned her. He was young, unseasoned; had a panic, too, the way I think this fellow did. But no wireless. He couldn't see anything else to do, so he left her. This cap'n evidently has steadied down, so . . . I'm standing by."

The chagrined Kane stamped back and forth in the rolling, slatting wheelhouse to mutter, "As though 'twill do any good! Throwin' away the one chance in twenty years to meet that brother o' his. . . ."

Muttering failed to relieve his emotions. He whistled into the tube to the chief and told him he'd better go lean on his coal. The chief gave him blasphemy for his unwelcome advice and Kane met him halfway—and felt better.

THE wind went down with the sun, but the old sea came right on. Only the whitecaps vanished. Those black, lowering hills redoubled the vigilance aboard the *Grosbeak* when she resumed her position to windward and the wallowing hulk below her hung but one warning light aloft.

Captain Gerrish sent a wireless to Padelford-Bruns:

Delayed at sea. If not arrive Liverpool in time, get in touch with that captain and put my case to him best you can. F. Gerrish.

He hung there inside the wireless shack doorway until Sparks assured him the message had been picked out of the air and relayed on from an Irish station. He lingered there in moody disappointment until the *Moreland's* radio operator took to the air on his own initiative. Said he:

Nothing is going on aboard here. Settling deeper into the sea all the time. Please come take us—

The break lasted a full minute. Five minutes ticked away on Sparks' clock —ten. Then it resumed!

Capt. Moore orders abandon. Boats. Hurry.

Cargo lights flooded the *Grosbeak's* lee side, the same boats and crews got away. The searchlight cast a bright disc on the sea, the boats passed through it, the *Grosbeak* fetched a lurching upward heave and slid down behind a black wall that hid Kane and

Reagan and crews at oars from sight.

The *Grosbeak* circled to leeward. Before she took her new position, Kane was in difficulties. Men jumped off the *Moreland's* bridge deck. Men came scorching their hands down ropes. A white life ring, hove from the rail, nearly knocked him overboard at a time when men were flaying water all around his boat. And Reagan was up ahead yelling out orders against a similar situation.

Somehow Kane and his men got them all—except one. High above, to a rail, he stood. Kane asked the drenched, shivering fellows who would be hanging back like that.

"Who?" one chattered in the cold. "That's the Old Man, he's nuts."

"But we can't come here again—ahoy, up there! Jump for it . . . I say, come if ye're comin', we're not makin' another trip. Jump!" He was shouting through cupped hands with the sweep oar between elbow and ribs.

The last word was scarcely out of him when the boat, momentarily unguided, took her head, turned on a long slope and rolled a gun'ale under. She all but swamped. She knocked Kane off his balance. Simultaneously the crew's oars were obstructed by rescued men who sat up to watch their Old Man who had ruled them with a gun.

Kane came back with the swift instinct of a veteran seaman. He set one man to bailing. He ordered the *Moreland's* men down flat to permit rowing. He yelled one last time, "You can't be saved unless you come now. Jump!"

But the derelict's captain said not one word, made not a move. He hung to the rail up there, a black blotch in the darkness. Even when the *Grosbeak's* searchlight almost found him, he did not move.

But Kane was loath to leave the dark, ghostly figure behind. He cupped his hands again. He started to yell, but this time the figure raised a hand and swung out an arm and the gesture plainly said, "Farewell. Be on your way."

The *Grosbeak's* boats pulled clear while Kane growled out, "No call to drown hisself."

The next voice came from one of the *Moreland's* men. " 'E says, sez 'e to the mate, 'We gotta make this look natural,' but hang me if 'e had to drown hisself to do it."

Kane caught the jist of it and his back stiffened. In the spirit that reserves to the bridge the right to think, he barked at that man, "You say so, do you? You know nothin'. How can you tell how a cap'n feels to lose his ship?"

A chorus of scornful laughter was his answer. That, and another voice in the dark crying, "Him? That bum? Say, mister, he's shipped a dozen shady cargoes, been at it fer years. Had it all fixed up to scuttle this one for th' insurance—but that storm beat 'im to it! 'Got to make it look natural,' sez 'e. Yah, and listen—"

"Quiet!" It came from an authoritative voice away up in the bows. "Someone's talking too much."

"Yes, sir," but the cackling voice merely lowered to go on with: " 'E was daft when 'e didn't git no answers, wa'n't 'e, now? Sez 'e, 'Sparks, raise someone or I'll blow a draft clean through yer brains.' Yah—we hadda make this look natural—but why's 'e hafta drown hisself? That's wot gits me."

"Remember when this ship shows up?" another took up the discussion. "Sa-a-ay, he was red hot to abandon, and I hears the Second say, 'Her name's the *Grosbeak,* sir, shall we abandon right away? And hanged 'f

he didn't 'boutface and drive us from the rail. After her boats has come all the way. . . ."

Kane felt sick. All the way back to the *Grosbeak,* he reviewed the miserable delay that had ruined the chance to reach Liverpool by the morning of the twenty-first. When he saw the boat-falls coming close, he said, "Listen here, you men, every one of you. It's plain there's something shady connected with affairs aboard your ship and our attempts to get you off of her. I don't know what's straight and what's fo'castle gossip, but Cap'n Gerrish has lost something very important by hanging round here for you men. A million dollars in cash couldn't have bought it —no money could have. He's sacrificed all that for you fellows. The least you can do is to let him think he didn't do it all for nothing. Is there a mate aboard here?"

"Jewett, second mate," came that authoritative voice from up forward again.

"Then see to it that your men don't talk after we get aboard the ship. Let your story wait till you're gone from us. The same to your men in the other boat."

"You bet I will!" the mate in the bows replied, and his words were more threat than promise.

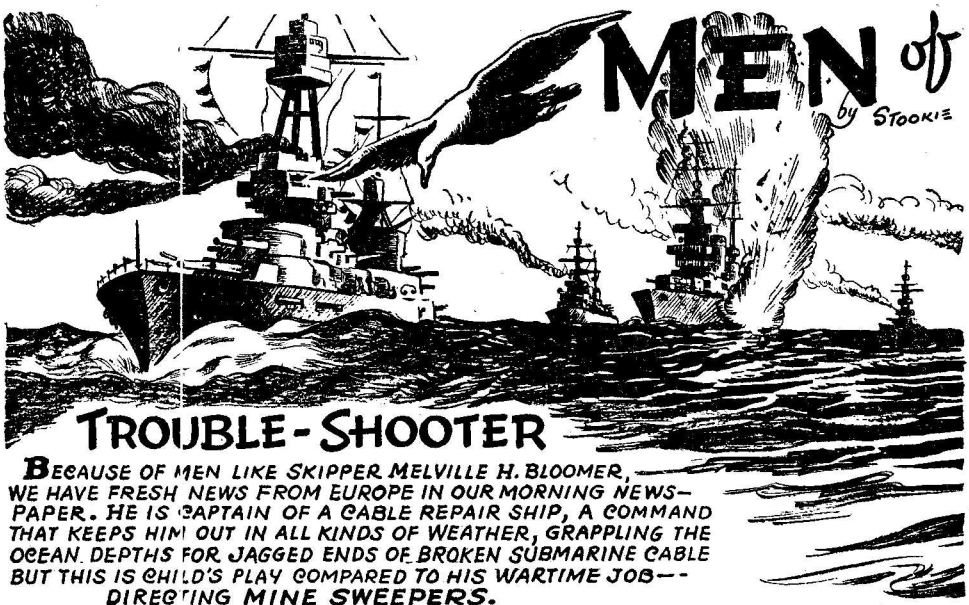
CAPTAIN GERRISH was deeply moved when they told him that Captain Moore had determined to go down in his ship. He braced to the bridge rail, staring solemnly off over the dark waters toward the wreck, toward a master who had sealed his own fate in that of his ship.

Kane waited for the moment to pass, for the skipper to turn away. He waited as long as he could, then he said, *"Full Ahead* on the telegraph, sir? *Cargo Prince* might be delayed getting to sea, we might still catch her in."

Captain Gerrish turned so that his face came full in the searchlight's beam. It was a tired face tonight.

"No hurry, Kane," said he patiently, resignedly, "I've just received a message from Padelford-Bruns. That Cap'n Lett is not Jeff. But there's a cap'n in a passenger liner from Cairo that they say resembles Jeff's picture. Even after twenty years there must be some resemblance."

Down on the main deck, rescued men were being assigned berths. One of them suddenly crossed himself and pointed—"Look at 'im. Barney, me lad, look at 'is face up there in the light. If 'e wa'n't so slicked up, and a stone lighter, I'd swear 'twas Cap'n Moore hisself. He's the livin' image of 'im!"

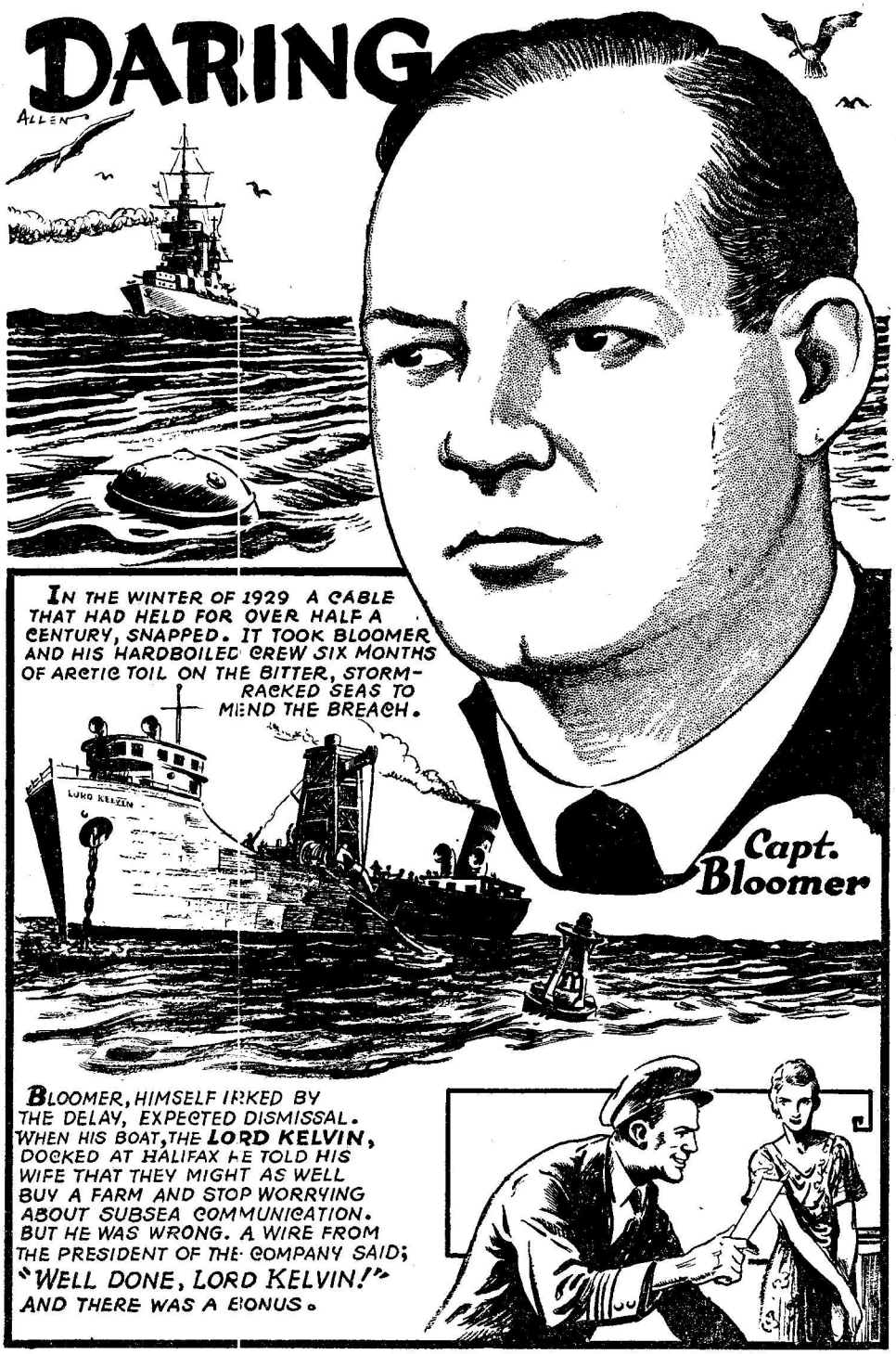


BECAUSE OF MEN LIKE SKIPPER MELVILLE H. BLOOMER, WE HAVE FRESH NEWS FROM EUROPE IN OUR MORNING NEWSPAPER. HE IS CAPTAIN OF A CABLE REPAIR SHIP, A COMMAND THAT KEEPS HIM OUT IN ALL KINDS OF WEATHER, GRAPPLING THE OCEAN DEPTHS FOR JAGGED ENDS OF BROKEN SUBMARINE CABLE BUT THIS IS CHILD'S PLAY COMPARED TO HIS WARTIME JOB— DIRECTING MINE SWEEPERS.

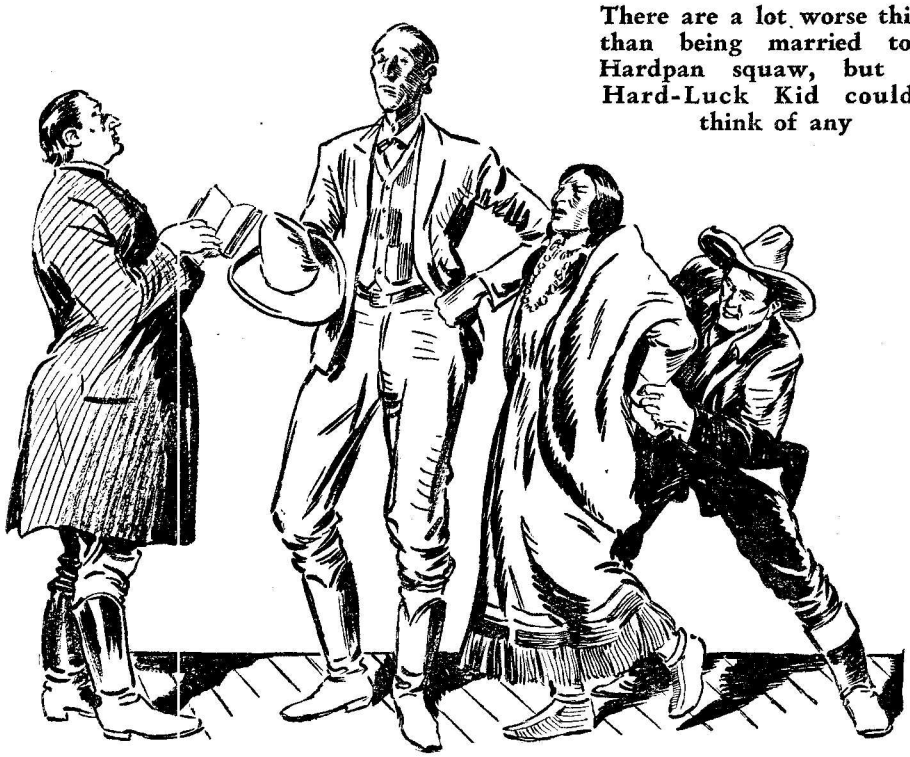
IN THE DAYS OF SAIL, BLOOMER, AN ENGLISH LAD, WENT TO SEA. HE BECAME MATE OF A WINDJAMMER BEFORE HE WAS OF AGE AND ACCEPTED DANGER AS HIS DAILY RATION. LATER AS AN OFFICER IN THE ROYAL NAVAL RESERVE, BLOOMER POSSESSED JUST THE BRAND OF INTREPIDITY REQUIRED TO COMMAND A FLOTILLA CHARGED WITH SWEEPING THE NORTH SEA CLEAR OF MINES. FOR 4 YEARS HE RISKED ANNIHILATION SO THAT ENGLAND'S FLEET MIGHT ESCAPE IT.

AFTER THE WAR, CAPTAIN BLOOMER SIGNED OVER HIS UNDERSEA TALENT TO A CABLE COMPANY. THE ENTIRE NORTH ATLANTIC IS HIS BEAT. BREAKS MUST BE REPAIRED IMMEDIATELY EVEN IN THE WORST KIND OF A GALE.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Next Week: Hammond and Griswold—World-Wanderers



There are a lot worse things than being married to a Hardpan squaw, but the Hard-Luck Kid couldn't think of any

Desert Saga

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Mail Boat," "Sourdough," etc.

JUST in case anybody gives a hoot—which they prob'ly don't—my maiden name is No-Shirt McGee and this business I'm goin' to tell you about happened when I was sheriff of Hardpan County down in the Southwest. Times was pretty hard in them days and anybody worth gunpowder to singe their britches with had pulled his freight for greener pastures. I was lookin' for a soft place to light and the sheriff's office was it.

About all I had to do was to polish the jail doorknob so visitin' citizens and taxpayers would think it was used a lot. Once in a while the judge would give an Indian buck thirty days for beatin' his squaw, but that was the extent of the legal business done by the clink.

Well, sir, one mornin' I'd finished my polishin' and was sittin' in the sun without no shirt, as is my custom. Strength from the sun was pourin' through my hide when all at once I spots a mirage. It was a dead ringer for a lake set down in the desert. And movin' smack over the water was a man on a burro. The burro's legs looked about ten feet long, and sank hock-deep in the water.

"That cuss is the spittin' image of Eddie Bassett," I says to myself, and I goes to get my spy glass to make sure. When I comes back, the mirage is gone. A couple of hours later Eddie Bassett ties his burro up to the hitchrack in front of the jail. Eddie's jaw is set, his chest is out, his ears are pinned back, and he has the expression

of a man who's decided to do the right thing after a long struggle with Satan.

There's only one Eddie Bassett in the world and if you don't believe they busted the mold after they made him, listen to this: In his socks, when he has any on, he stands an even six feet six inches. He has a smallish head on the end of a skinny neck which sets on shoulders that're as wide as a barn door. He has a kind of ingrowin' face, if you get what I mean—long pointed nose and under-slung chin which curves up at the point.

His nose has a high bridge, one of the kind that looks as if it got a couple of extra pinches when it was made. When he talks, his washed-out blue eyes are deep sunk under black, bushy brows, his Adam's apple is the liveliest thing on the desert. It runs up and down at least four inches—or very near. It's as interestin' a thing as ever you did see, and men watchin' it for the first time have been known to forget to go home for supper. I've seen cryin' children dry their eyes and smile over Eddie's Adam's apple.

He wears a red shirt, which same is a heirloom handed down from father to son. He tucks his pants into his boot tops, and most usually there's a parrot he calls Confucius on his shoulder. It's lost nearly all its feathers, and its skin is as wrinkled as an old man's neck. . . .

There you have a rough sketch of Eddy. There ain't time to get out my brushes and finish the portrait.

THE parrot was the first to speak. "G-r-r-r-k," he says, "I've lost all my feathers, but I've got personality, b'gol."

Bassett twists his head around and eyes the parrot with deep love and pride. "Now, Confucius, you mustn't interrupt papa when he's worried," says he.

"If I had a couple of feathers I'd fly b'gol'," Confucius retorts.

"Sheriff," Eddie blurts out, while Confucius uses my roll top desk for a corduroy road, "I'm here for one of them marriage annulments you read about. And I guess I'll have to plead guilty to contributin' to corruptin' the morals of a Hardpan squaw."

"I wouldn't let that worry me none," I said, "the whole Hardpan tribe's done without any morals f'r quite consid'able. Ain't one of 'em paid their taxes in four five years. Excuse me a second, Eddie, this is goin' to be a long sad story, I can see that. I've got a prisoner I'd better take a look at."

I SNEAKS into the best cell for a look at a Hardpan Indian the whites call Princess Helen. Now this'll knock your eye out. Princess Helen is a him. Not a her. It seems like some years ago the Hardpan braves had a fight with the Mesquites. One of 'em showed a yaller streak and high-tailed it out of there when the Mesquites begun playin' for keeps. When what was left of the Hardpans got back home they held a council and tried the coward. They found him guilty and sentenced him to be a woman. As long as he lived, they said, he had to live with the squaws, dress like the squaws and do a squaw's work.

That decree sure made a lot of grief for the whites. The cuss was always goin' places that was no place for no man to go into, and scarin' seven kinds of hell out of th' women folk.

The town marshal had brought Princess Helen in, the night before, tighter'n a hoot owl. She—I mean he—was sleepin' it off in the cell we called the Governor's Suite. Princess Helen was snorin' in three keys and workin' in little trills and runs like a hooched-up harmonica artist. So I went back to Eddie Bassett.

"It's a long story, Sheriff," he began again in a voice that was sorta chokin' with emotion. "All my life my fertile brain"—he paused and tapped his peanut head—"has been furnishin' bright idears fer the profit of other men. And it's brought me nothin' but trouble."

"Me and you both," Confucius interrupted, fussing with the cork in the ink bottle.

"About the time Bill Jennings Bryan come out with his sixteen-to-one proposition," Eddie continued, "I developed a

silver bug. You know what happened to silver. McKinley's full dinner bucket won th' election and I didn't *have* any dinner bucket—only just a hole in the ground runnin' medium-fair in silver value. I worked for ten years at one thing and another, saved my money and bought an Orange grove. Frost wiped out the grove and wiped me out with it. And on top of that Confucius crossed me up by layin' an egg."

That kinda surprised me and I looked at Confucius. "Bluebells on a pump handle," he said, splatterin' a billful of ink all over the desk. I tossed him a blotter and paid attention to Eddie.

It seems the World War didn't do Eddie any good, either. He was too old to fight, didn't own any wheat land or ammunition factories or shipyards. He got by with a little dry placerin' and that brought him down to the Coolidge prosperity era.

"I figgered at last we'd get a break, Sheriff," he continues, "and my fertile brain remembered a lot of domes near the Hardpan Indian Reservation. Them domes was plenty like them I'd seen in the Signal Hill field near Long Beach. And I mind the time, I could've bought a chunk of Signal Hill for a thousand dollars. But nobody dreamed oil was underneath."

"Sure seems like when Old Man Opportunity knocked on the door you weren't around," I said sympathetically.

"I got some money jaspers interested in them domes, we raised some dough ourselves, bought a rig and we started drillin'. About that time a rich outfit decided to blow money wildcattin' so they wouldn't have to pay the gov'ment so much income tax. You'll pardon these tears, Sheriff, but danged if they didn't make a dicker with the Hardpan Indians and sink a well on the reservation."

I knew all about the Hardpan reservation. Politicians had shoved the tribe off onto worthless land so the good land could be sold to big cattle outfits. The tribe had dwindled down till nothin' was left but the old folks, a bunch of married braves, and twenty-five or thirty young squaws who fought amongst theirselves to see who'd marry the half dozen single braves.

"WELL, sir, Sheriff, it become a race to see who'd strike oil first. At the thirty-five hundred foot mark we brought in as fine a salt water well as you'd care to see," Eddie continued. "I was lower in spirits than a toad's breadbasket, and the other boys was lower. They come to me in a body and says, "Eddie—"

"If I had a couple of feathers I'd fly b'gol'," the parrot interrupted.

"No, Confucius, they didn't say any such thing," Eddie said sharply. "They said, 'Eddie, you're the Moses of this outfit, it's up to you to lead us to the land of plenty. You never've failed us yet. And you can't now.' "

"They put it right up to you, eh?"

"The next day I was still wrestlin' with the problem and gettin' nowhere fast when word come they'd hit a gusher on the Hardpan Reservation," Eddie went on to say. "An hour later a Hardpan squaw rid by on a paint hoss and the idear of my life hit me smack between the eyes. 'Come here, boys,' I said, 'we're in the money.' "

"Well, they wanted to know how, so I points to the rig, drippin' oil and says, 'Every dollar that oil brings in—and it'll bring in millions—will be split between the drill outfit and the Indians.' "

"I can't say as I get you, Eddie."

"Then you're as dumb as they was," Eddie answered. "They couldn't figger where the oil royalties would do 'em any good, so I says, 'Boys, this is our last chance. We've got to marry them squaws and marry 'em before somebody else does!' "

"What'd they say to that?" I asks.

"Well, Sheriff, you know there're a lot worse things than bein' married to a Hardpan squaw, 'specially when you're along in years," Eddie explained. "They're good-lookin' and if a man has the money to hire a diet doctor they might even keep their shape after they're twenty-five. Some of 'em were a quarter or eighth white and they wanted white husbands, naturally. The boys wanted to know what my plans

was and I told 'em to dig out and marry the first one they saw.

"Just to be on the safe side they figgered we should talk it over with the parson and justice of peace at Padre Caliente. The parson had been tryin' to grow a grape vineyard for fifteen years and was busted flat. The J. P. wasn't doin' well, either. They listened to the proposition with whole-hearted enthusiasm, traded understandin' glances, then left town like bats out of hell. The parson swiped my horse and the J. P., ridin' another feller's dapple gray was two lengths behind. The stampede was on and when the dust had settled all that was left was me and a burro."

"Gr-r-r-k! If I'd had a couple of feathers I'da flied b'gol'," Confucius said.

"Yes, and if you'd had four feathers we'd have both flied," Eddie continued. "Sheriff, the boys' actions hurt me. It was my idea. My last chance to settle down and try to make suthin' of myself. I felt as if I should've had first choice of the willin' squaws. . . . The shades of night had fell when I got there and a man couldn't see what he was gettin."

"The sailors have a saying, any old port in a storm," I ventured. At the same time I felt sorry for Eddie. I know most of his history and he ain't never had no luck. Hard Luck Bassett, some called him.

I listened a moment and from his—her cell, Princess Helen sang a chant in dialect. I didn't know whether he was sober or out of his head.

"What happened when you got there, Eddie?" I said, beginning to worry some about the possibilities of Princess Helen choking him—herself to death.

"In all my borned days I never saw nothin' like it. Children cryin', dogs barkin' and young squaws gigglin' and runnin' in every direction. I spotted my horse and made a beeline for it, only to run slap-dab into a weddin' ceremony. The Justice of the Peace had just married the parson to a smirkin' squaw he'd known for a long time. Then the parson turns around and marries off the J. P. Plenty of other couples was talkin' things over and gittin' readied up to take the plunge. I stood up in my stirrups and looked around for the future Mrs. Bassett. There wasn't a single squaw of marryin' age in sight. Just like my usual run o' luck!"

"It is tough," I agrees.

"JUST when I decided luck was treatin' me like a stepchild, I catches sight of a squaw headin' into the mesquite. The Hardpan Indians never was much for styles so this squaw's dress drug on the ground. I figgered she couldn't run fast and took after her. Well, she hikes up her dress above a pair of solid ankles and runs like greased lightnin'. She headed into rough country where a man on a horse couldn't make no time, so I jumps off and takes after her on foot. Her wind weren't as good as mine. I makes a flyin' tackle and brings her down. Her head struck a loose rock per-flam; but it didn't knock her out —only calmed her down a little. I could see by her hands she was no spring chicken, but she was my last chance.

"When she comes around and starts to claw me I pops her on the jaw," Eddie continued, "and she sorta sags down. It's the first time I ever hit a woman deliberate, but they claim squaws like to be treated firm. I looked around wonderin' what to do next. The parson and his bride was just leavin' on their honeymoon, but the J. P. was makin' out a marriage license for one of the other boys. I let out a yelp and he came gallopin' over.

"It was darker'n a miser's pocket and my squaw was sullen, and groggy, too. One of the boys grabbed her hand and scrawled a name on the bottom of the license then pinned her arms to her sides while the J. P. performed the ceremony.

" 'Bless you my children,' " he says, then hightails it away on his honeymoon.

"Well, I was legal wedded, which was the main idear; and I figgered time, the healer of all things, would smooth the little woman's injured feelin's," Eddie concluded. "One of the boys brought an extra hoss and a pack of grub. He helped me git my blushin' bride aboard and we started on

our honeymoon. About all I could see was my weddin' ring on her finger. It was a ring I'd made from a horseshoe nail. A mile from the reservation I stopped to talk things over. I told her it was only a question o' time before she might even get fond o' me and that—"

"What happened?"

"She got her hands loose sudden-like and rolled off'n that nag like a barrel with springs on it and went after me with both fists, Sheriff. It was sure a ringtailed squealer of a scrap while it lasted. But it stopped awful abrupt. First thing I knowed the sun was risin' in the West. I must've been out hours. That was five days ago."

"What do you want me to do, Eddie?"

"I come here to get a annulment on account of maybe there might be su'thin' queer about a forced weddin'," Eddie answered. "But the Bassett fightin' blood is stirred up. I want you to find my wife. I'll tame that barrel-chested, two-fisted wild woman if it's the last thing I do. Danged if I'm goin' to give up a Indian heiress and go back to livin' from hand to mouth."

"What does she look like, Eddie?" I asked.

"Danged if I know. It was too dark to see, but you'll know her by the weddin' ring—a horseshoe nail with a *B* scratched on the head," he says. He looked up and grunted sorta soulful. "Here comes a bunch of Hardpan Indians now. Mebbe they'll know where to find her."

I watched the Hardpans arrive. Each was drivin' a brand new, high-powered car some high pressure salesman had sold 'em against the time they'd get their oil royalties. Traffic was leavin' the road—streakin' across country and goin' into ditches. Them Hardpans hadn't learned to drive yet. They busted bumpers and fenders stoppin' in front of the jail, then climbed out, wearin' war bonnets, and approached me.

It seems they wanted to bail out Princess Helen. From what I gathered Helen had distinguished himself by triumphing over an enemy in hand-to-hand encounter. So, he was to be restored to all rights of manhood.

As she—or he emerged from the cell, the chief ripped off the woman's dress and hung a war bonnet on his head. He looked kinda funny as he stepped onto the sidewalk and blinked at the sunlight with bloodshot eyes.

I saw Eddie stare hard at Princess Helen's left hand, then he squawked, "My—wife!"

For the first time I noticed a horseshoe nail ring on the third finger of Helen's left hand.

* * * *

That's Eddie Basset, the Hard Luck Kid, over there in the Governor's Suite now. In a day or two they're goin' to take him to the State Insane Asylum. The doctors figger he'll be cured in about a year. Confucius is goin' with him. That object settin' in the horseshoe nail ring on top of my desk is an egg Confucius laid that day amongst my papers.

Strike

By JOHN HAWKINS

FINDING life as the son of the Governor of the state a little too prosaic for his liking Duncan McCann has come to Industrial City and taken work in the Falcon Motor Car plant under the name of John Duncan. And almost immediately, he finds more excitement and trouble . . . and tragedy, than he bargained for.

For the Falcon plant is in the throes of a labor conflict that bids fair to paralyze half the state. The independent union, under the control of a big-shot racketeer, Mike Finn, cares for nothing but the opportunity to extort a fortune from J. N. Falcon by using its labor activities as a convenient shield.

When Falcon forestalls the first attempted strike by a wage raise, Finn trumps up another *casus belli* and the sit-down is called, a fight to the finish that neither Falcon nor the workers can win.

DUNCAN McCANN has seen enough of Finn's operations to know that the men in the plant are simply victims of the labor boss' crookedness and greed. Kim Saddler, one of his few friends at the plant, was killed eight hours after he had defied Finn in an open meeting and dared him to give an accounting of the union money already collected. Saddler's death looked like an accident, but Duncan McCann and Kim Saddler's brother knew different. And because of that knowledge *their* lives are in danger.

Duncan himself has been framed so that his fellow workers think he is a company spy, and when the sit-down begins, he and Matt Saddler are driven from the plant.

Thinking that if he can expose Finn to Falcon, a State investigation will be started, Duncan goes to Falcon's house. He has reason to believe that Davork, his father's secretary, is mixed up with Finn, may even be the man behind him, but he doesn't suspect that James Stanley, political czar and Governor McCann's advisor, has anything to do with Finn or his phoney union.

FALCON is not at home when Duncan arrives, but McCann has a chance to renew his acquaintance with Helen Falcon, the industrialist's pretty daughter who, in a muddled sort of way, is interested in the class struggle. She, too, has heard that Duncan is a spy, but he manages to correct that impression. In fact when she drives him back to town—just as they are saying goodbye—he takes her in his arms and kisses her . . . and an alert news photographer gets a picture that will be front-page news.

This story began in the Argosy for July 17

Duncan, a little worried about the picture, both for Helen's sake and because he is sure he will be recognized, goes out to the plant to see how the sit-downers are coming out. Company "guards" gas the workers, drive food trucks away, use everything from square-toed boots to leather blackjacks in subduing the crowd.

Just as Duncan moves to interfere, he is hit over the head by one Montana Fells, a Finn gunman, and taken to Finn's headquarters, where Finn explains to his subordinate, Ryan, the reasons for the kidnaping.

"This guy is the Governor's own son," he tells Ryan. "If the old man starts anything cute, we got the son here to hold him in line. I always play my bets safe and double-safe, Ryan. It's the only smart way. . . ."

CHAPTER XV

ONE SOLUTION

DUNCAN McCANN didn't know what time of day it was—if it was day—or how many hours he had slept after Ryan prodded him through the door into the windowless room.

He had tried—at first—to batter down the door—tried until his shoulders ached from slamming into the wood—tried until three chairs splintered into kindling in his hands. And still the heavy panel held. After that he dozed and waited.

Once he had heard laughter and voices. An hour of silence then, before the faint sound of music seeped through the walls. Now the music was louder, and brisk footsteps came toward his door.

McCann's lips pressed tight across his teeth as a key grated in the lock. His fingers tightened around a heavy chair leg, he flattened beside the door. There was just a chance—a thin one . . . if there was only one man outside the door . . . if he stepped full into the room before he looked around. After that it was in the lap of the gods.

McCann jerked taut as the door swung inward. He went up on the balls of his feet. His arm was drawn back, ready.

"Just bring the tray in here." The woman's voice hit McCann like a thunderous blow over the heart. Marcia Dubois walked into the room.

The sight of the littered floor brought her to an abrupt stop. McCann heard her indrawn breath, saw the color drain from her cheeks. She took a full backward step before she saw him.

"You—you here?" One hand went to her mouth. He remembered the two previous times he'd met her, how she'd tried to warn him, this secretary of Mike Finn's.

McCann's arm dropped heavily to his side. Dark anger ran deep within him. His face was set in stiff planes. A white-jacketed waiter came into the room with a laden tray which he placed upon a low table. He backed out hurriedly.

"Finn *would* have to send a woman," McCann said. "He wouldn't—" Anger crept into his voice, blurred his words. "Tell him I'm coming out of here—and then you get out of the way! Tell him it will take a—"

Marcia Dubois' proud shoulders came up. Her eyes flashed. "I'd suggest that you tell him yourself. Mr. Finn wants to see you as soon as you finish breakfast."

"*Breakfast!* Why that—" McCann stopped. He was talking to an empty doorway. Marcia Dubois was gone.

McCANN stood there a moment, caught in indecision. Then he swung, strode down the hall, rammed through the door. He shut it with his heel, and backed until his shoulders were against the wood.

There were three men in the big, dark-walled office—the same three men who had been there the night before—and Marcia Dubois. Mike Finn smiled from the desk. Ryan was slouched deep in a chair, his hat tilted over his eyes, a tall glass in his hand. Montana Fells stood near the windows.

"Duncan." Finn got up and came around the desk. "There's no use wasting words. You're angry because you were locked in, and because Montana brought you here. Well, you and Montana are just about even. You broke a bottle over his head, and he used a sap on you. I'm not going to ask you two to shake hands, but

you've got to let things slide till this strike's over. I—"

McCann said, "I'm leaving," in a tight, raw voice.

"Sure." Finn smiled. "Sure, and my car will take you wherever you want to go. But first I want to talk to you. For about five minutes."

Some of the stiffness went out of McCann's body, and a quizzical light came into his eyes. "Talk to me?" he said. "What for?"

Finn turned, picked a newspaper off the desk, and pushed it into McCann's hands. "That picture is one reason."

The foot-square picture, centered just under the headline, seemed to hit McCann full in the face. His jaw clamped. He had forgotten about the photographer, had forgotten the booming white glare of the flash bulb as he had kissed Helen Falcon.

"As a portrait," Finn said, "it's not so hot. Your hat hides part of your face, and the cameraman wasn't in the best spot. I wouldn't have known it was you if it hadn't been for that strip of tape over your eye. That made it easy."

"And now that you do . . .?" McCann asked.

Finn laughed, but his eyes held their gun-metal sheen. "This will take a little explanation," he said. "I'll put it this way: Falcon is a business man, and so am I. Falcon's business is automobiles, and mine is this union. My job is to get the most I can for the union members. I am doing that and—"

McCann said, "Maybe."

"Look. Since the union was organized the men have received one pay boost, and will receive others. Working conditions have improved."

"And"—McCann's voice was low, bitter—"they're on strike now. They'll lose everything they had gained and more."

Finn shook his head. "We won't let that happen. So far the men have lost one day's pay, and nothing else. Everything hinges on a quick settlement of the strike. And that's where you come in."

"Where I come in?"

"Sure. Falcon has refused to discuss any settlement of the strike. He is at home, but he won't answer the phone. Not even reporters can get through the gate to see him. But you can."

McCann frowned. "What makes you think so?"

"I know it." Finn's strong teeth gleamed. "Just like I know that Helen Falcon is pro-union. It's part of my job to know those things. If you can kiss Helen Falcon, you can get through the gate into Falcon's place, and you're the only man in the city who can. That's all I want. I'll give you a message to deliver to Old Man Falcon, and the girl will help you. You can help the men plenty, and net yourself a little cash besides."

McCann choked back his anger, stifled the words that sprang to his lips. This was the chance he'd been waiting for, a better chance than he'd expected. If he could work for Finn he would be allowed around union headquarters, and sooner or later he'd get enough evidence to smash Finn's grip on the union.

McCann held his voice level. "I'd like to help end the strike," he said, "but I don't want the money."

Finn said, "You might as well take it. That's what a strike fund is for."

"No thanks."

Finn shrugged, and Ryan's low voice said, "There was another guy like him. A guy that wore a tin suit and went around picking fights with windmills. Don Quixote."

Montana Fells growled, "I don't like this. He's got a good chance to wreck the—"

"Shut up!" Finn's low but somehow penetrating voice carried a chill authority. "You don't get paid to think. I told you last night what would happen to you if you didn't sew that mouth of yours shut."

Montana's big hands opened and closed. Red hatred looked out of his muddy eyes but he didn't speak. Finn took a long envelope off the desk.

"Here is the message, Duncan. It's sealed, but I'll tell you what's inside. The

letter tells Falcon that all we want is union recognition, that the men will go back to work the minute he gives us that."

McCann said, "I'll go right out there."

Ryan lounged to his feet. "I think," he drawled, "that a breath of fresh air wouldn't kill me. I'll drive Duncan out." He drained his glass, lit a fresh cigarette, and moved toward the door. "Come on, Quixote, let's go find windmills."

RYAN'S hand shook as he unlocked the small coupé. Once inside he got a flask out of the dashboard compartment; and he drank before he spoke. "I wouldn't know what you're thinking, but I've seen a lot of guys try to outguess Mike Finn. They all have that same shine in their eyes, at first."

McCann said, "Yes?"

Ryan turned to look at him. For just a moment the cynical brightness left his eyes. "Don't do it, Mister. Don't even try. Montana is bad medicine, and Finn—"

"You make a pretty speech," McCann said. "Did Finn tell you to say that?"

Ryan said, "Sucker! I told you once to leave town and not to stop till you hit the ocean, and then to swim. I'll tell you again. Leave town—now—and don't come back. Grab the first bus you see an' keep going."

McCann's mind ticked off an ominous little warning. This could be a trap. Probably was. "You're good," he said, "but if you start crying I'll know you've got an onion in your handkerchief."

Ryan yanked his hat low, shoved his cigarette between lips that were thin and stiff. The lines around his mouth were deep now, hard. "Okay, Quixote. Okay." He didn't speak again until the coupé nosed into the narrow lane. Then he waited until McCann had climbed out before he said, "Got your lance?"

McCann spun, said, "What?"

Ryan was laughing at him as he shot the coupé back.

There were reporters, and photographers around the gate. The big-jawed uniformed guard was standing just inside, his broad face twisted into a scowl. McCann elbowed close to the gate. The guard said, "You again?"

"I want to see Miss Falcon," McCann said.

"Oke." The guard unlocked the gate.

McCann went along the curving path to the house. A maid let him into a glassed-in sun-room, and in a moment Helen Falcon appeared in the doorway.

She said, "You—?"

"I'm sorry about last night, Miss Falcon," McCann said. "Sorry about that photographer. I wouldn't have come this morning, but I have to see your father."

A wave of color darkened her cheeks. "Do you still think you have a solution for the strike?"

"I do," he went on hurriedly, "and Mike Finn gave me a message to deliver to—"

"You—you're working with Mike Finn? I thought you were against us. I'm glad, comrade, glad." She turned, her voice low. "The lawyers are here, but I'll get you into the room. Then you can deliver your message anyway."

McCann followed her down the hall. She hadn't given him a chance to explain. A chance to tell her that he was going to help her father smash the union. That Finn's message would remain undelivered until after he—

"In here."

THEN McCann was standing in a large sunny room. Falcon and two other men were bending over a plain, flat-topped desk. Falcon's head came up, and then his lean body stiffened. His deep-set eyes burned dully in his tired face. "How . . .?" He settled back in his chair. "How you got here doesn't make any difference now. What do you want?"

McCann approached the desk. "I came because I think I can help, Mr. Falcon. I think I know how you can end the strike."

The two men beside Falcon exchanged glances. One, tall and gray-haired man, said, "This is impossible."

Falcon waved him into silence, and then

leaned forward. "Just one thing before you start. These gentlemen are the highest-priced legal brains in America. We've been working all night, and most of today, trying to find a way to end the strike. So far we've been unsuccessful. The only solution that has presented itself to date is to deed my plants to the union. Now do you still think you can help?"

"Yes," McCann said steadily.

The gray-haired man laughed.

"There are a few things to explain first. Your men didn't want to join the union, Mr. Falcon, they were forced to join. They went on strike because they were told to strike, and they were afraid to disobey. They want to return to their jobs."

Falcon said, "You're covering a lot of ground. Are you sure you aren't inventing these things?"

McCann said, "I've just come from union headquarters. I am sure of these things, Mr. Falcon, and that's why I'm sure you can end the strike."

"Well?"

"First you will have to meet the strikers demands, and then—"

"Stop!" Falcon was on his feet, head thrust forward, eyes blazing. "I might have known this was a trick!"

McCann gasped, "But—but I—"

Falcon hammered the desk. "Get out! And take this message back to your union boss. I will *not* give the control of my plants to any crooked union. Not if I never build another car!"

"You misunderstand me, sir, I—"

"Get out!"

The gray-haired man left his seat to say, "You'd better go now."

McCann's face paled. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said stiffly, "and good day." He pivoted and strode out of the room.

HELEN FALCON was waiting for him a few feet down the hall. "I heard what you said," she whispered. "Heard you play traitor to the man who sent you here. You're worse than a spy. Spies don't change sides for money. You've lied, and cheated, and doublecrossed everyone."

"You're wrong, Helen, terribly wrong."

"And you're—a liar!"

His hand shot out and caught her wrist. "You're going to listen to me. Your father wouldn't. He's too pig-headed, but you'll listen if I have to—"

Her lips were a crimson wound against the rice-paper pallor of her face. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm the only sane one in this house," McCann rasped. "Listen. Your father can end this strike any time he wants to, and he can break the control of that bunch of killers who run the union. Yes," he repeated looking down into her face, "killers! They've murdered two men that I know of—and they'll kill others."

"You're—you're wrong!" The words squeezed past her lips. "You're lying again!"

"Tell your father that he can end the strike by allowing the men to organize their own union, and an honest union, inside the plant. All the elected office-holders to be Falcon employees. That's the only thing he's got to insist on. The men will go back to work then, and—"

Her eyes were blazing, and there was scorn in her ringing voice. "Let go of my arm, Duncan McCann, or I'll have you thrown out of here."

McCann's eyes jerked narrow. "How," he asked bleakly, "did you know my name?"

She said coldly, "Your father called me this morning from the Capitol. He'd seen the picture, and he wanted to locate you."

McCann dropped her arm. His shoulders sagged, and his voice was lifeless. "That's it, I guess there's nothing else—"

"There's this spy!" She stepped close, and slapped him across the mouth. Twice her palm *splatted* against his face.

McCann didn't move. Blood darkened his face, and the print of her fingers stood out whitely. For a full minute he didn't speak, and then he said:

"You splendid little fool."

Her mouth opened, but no sound came from her. McCann stepped past her and went down the long hall to the door.

The crowd around the gate had thickened. The surly guard unlocked the gate without speaking, and McCann elbowed his way through the crowd. He walked past a row of parked cars to a couple of taxis at the end of the line. The meter flags of both cabs were down. One driver said, "We got fares, fella, but you can catch a bus on the highway."

McCann thanked him, was turning away when the cold voice said, "You can ride back with me." McCann turned to find Montana Fells behind him.

"Thanks," McCann said, "I'd—"

"You ride with me." Montana's eyes flickered redly. "The boss sent me out to bring you in." His right hand was deep in his raincoat pocket. "Coming?"

Bitter humor twisted McCann's lips. "When you're so—well prepared for me how could I refuse?"

No trace of emotion crossed Montana's face. "You couldn't," he said flatly.

CHAPTER XVI

TROUBLE ON SOUTH MILL STREET

THE prim, spectacled secretary came silently into Governor James McCann's office. She placed a pile of newspapers on McCann's desk, and waited quietly until he looked up.

"Yes, Miss Elkman?" Fatigue had grayed the Governor's lips, dulled the crisp brightness of his eyes.

"These are the latest papers, sir. Mr. Stanley is waiting outside, and Mr. Davork called to say he'd be here in fifteen minutes. There have been no answers to your telegrams yet."

"Tell Mr. Stanley to come in." The Governor reached for the stacked newspapers, then said, "And bring in any telegram as soon as it arrives."

"Of course, Governor."

The woman went out, and Stanley appeared in the doorway. He grinned as he pushed a deep chair close to the desk, sat down. "Well," he said, "I was wrong. The union I thought was non-existent seems to be big enough to tie up the whole Falcon Plant." He stripped the foil from a thin cigar. "But I still think it's nothing to worry about."

"I do," the Governor said coldly. "Industrial City's biggest industry is shut down. Two thousand men are on strike. All the dependent industries connected with Falcon are tied up. Storekeepers are taking a tremendous daily loss, and the men themselves are going deeper into debt every day this strike lasts. *I'd* say it was serious."

"Of course, and you're right." Stanley smiled around his cigar. "I didn't mean that it wasn't big, or that it didn't affect a lot of people. I was trying to say that it wouldn't last long. This is the second day. I'll bet you a hat that three days or a week will see the Falcon Plant running overtime to catch up."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Why not?" Stanley leaned forward to touch the desk. "I've been studying the papers pretty carefully, and from what I read the only bone of contention between Falcon and the strikers is union recognition. That doesn't amount to much. The only financial loss to Falcon is that of the shutdown. He won't have to raise wages to re-open his plant. Both sides lose money for every day of the strike. Falcon will sign with the union in order to get his plant running again. Then the strike will be over—just like that."

Davork came in then, his eyes blinking worriedly behind thick glasses. "I can't understand it, sir. I had checked every possible source of information, and not one of them thought there was a possibility of a strike." He mopped his brow. "I can't see how—"

The Governor said, "Sit down, Davork." The Governor turned back to Stanley, "Why does Falcon refuse to talk to any union representatives if there is no immediate financial loss for him involved in the settlement?"

Stanley said, "I don't know."

Davork blinked, put both hands flat on the desk. "I can try and . . ."

The spectacled secretary came into the

room then. "A wire for you, Governor."

"Thanks." Governor McCann slit the envelope, spread the single sheet of yellow paper on the desk. He frowned and then read it aloud.

NO ASSISTANCE NEEDED IN HANDLING OF STRIKERS STOP HAS NOT BEEN NECESSARY TO SWEAR IN ANY SPECIAL POLICE AS YET STOP NATIONAL GUARD WOULD ONLY ROUSE STRIKERS TO FEVER PITCH STOP WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED STOP HOPE FOR QUICK SETTLEMENT. A. ZOSS, CHIEF OF POLICE, INDUSTRIAL CITY.

Stanley leaned back. "That's just about in line with what I suggested. There's no cause for alarm, and any interference on your part would kick a hole in the labor vote at the next election."

"I got about the same thing from the press bureau," Davork said. "So far there has been little violence. There were guards at first who kept the sit-down strikers from getting any food, but those have been pulled off. Falcon is trying to get a court order to evict the strikers from the plant."

Three deep lines channeled the Governor's brow, "And if he does, the strikers will be out on a limb, unless they put up a fight."

Stanley laughed. "The strike will be over before that time."

"I hope," the Governor said, "that you're right."

SOUTH MILL STREET was jammed from curb to curb with a noisy, shouting throng. The main gate of the Falcon Plant was open, and two food trucks rolled slowly past the uniformed police at the gate. One of the drivers leaned out to shout, "See, flatfoot, we get in, an' you can't stop us."

The police sergeant cursed under his breath, but didn't raise his eyes or turn his head. A moment later he spoke to the cop beside him. "Pass the word along, Morry. Things're goin' to get tough. Coleman and his bunch of thugs fixed it right. There's guns in that mob. Tell the boys I said to keep their sticks quiet till I give the word, or I'll make 'em eat 'em."

"Right, O'Hern."

The big-shouldered cop moved away through the crowd. A police coupé slipped into the driveway, and the man under the wheel gave O'Hern a mocking salute, asked, "Any sign of trouble, Sarge?"

The sergeant tilted his cap to one side before he spoke. "They take guys like you —guys that are soft in the head—an' put 'em in the radio detail—then the other end goes soft, too. Sure, there's trouble comin'. Now, find somebody else to bother with your chatter."

The driver grinned, said, "Old Maid O'Hern's worried again," and tooled the car back into the street. If the sergeant heard he gave no sign. His narrowed eyes were watching the street crowd.

There *was* trouble coming! You don't pound a beat for ten years, and then wear a sergeant's stripes for eight more, without knowing the signs. This wasn't his first strike—nor his tenth. . . . It was there, raw, ugly, trouble in the making. You caught it in the subdued murmur of voices, in the comments that rose in the wake of a man in uniform, in any one of a thousand ways. Trouble!

"I told 'em, Sarge." Morry was back. "Some of them think you're wrong, but I told 'em it was orders."

"Wrong, is it?" O'Hern's lined face was set. "I hope so, Morry, and I'll be glad when this day is over."

NO one could have said where the demonstration started. The banners seemed to spring from the ground. Then, suddenly, there were knots of people around those banners. Surging knots that swirled, eddied, and finally formed into rough ranks. A small man popped out in front of the ranks, waved a short stick.

"Ho!" he shouted, "everybody march!" He waved his stick in a jerky imitation of a drum major's baton. The straggling crowd moved—six or eight abreast—down the street.

Others left the walk, and streamed after the marchers. The singing started some time after they had turned the first corner.

It deepened, grew to a thunderous chant.

The sergeant leaned back against the fence. "I hope they march all the deviltry out of them. As long as they're yelling like that, nothing much can happen."

Morry fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, shot a side glance at Sergeant O'Hern's face, and then changed his mind.

O'Hern said, "Smoke if you want to. You'll get little enough rest on this job."

The crowd was coming back then, the little man dancing and twisting in front of them. The chant had changed too, and O'Hern paled when he caught the words.

"We want in the plant! . . . We want in the plant!"

O'Hern jerked the words out of the side of his mouth. "Close them gates quick!"

Morry obeyed. The mob was crossing the intersection, coming straight toward them. Sergeant O'Hern moved out to the center of the drive, and stood there on widespread legs, unsmiling, grim.

"We want in the plant!"

The leader was backing up now, bringing his hands down with every boomed word. Sergeant O'Hern didn't move, didn't speak. The little man backed squarely into him.

He bounced back, twisted his head and shot a quick glance up over his shoulder. The front ranks of the marching men stopped, but the pressure of those behind shoved them forward.

"We want in the plant!"

O'Hern held up his hand. A ragged, ugly muttering swept over the crowd, died away. O'Hern's great voice boomed over the crowd:

"You know you can't go inside the gates. You can march outside the fences till your feet drop off, but you can't go through these gates. I don't have to tell you that, you already know it. We don't want trouble, but it's our job to keep you out. We've got the men and the weapons to do it. We don't want to use them, and we won't—unless you make us!"

"Cossack!"

O'Hern's mouth jerked. "You know better than that. We're cops, and we've got a job to do. Now go on with your marching, and I'll cheer every time you come by."

Someone laughed, and the sound swept back over the ranks. Then the same bass voice bellowed, "Cossack!"

O'Hern held his ground. Morry and the two other cops behind him stirred nervously, fingered the tear-gas grenades at their belts. There was no sound for a full moment save the uneasy rasp of feet on the pavement.

Then the shrill, high-pitched yell ripped the silence. A thin, stooped man shot out of the ranks. Gun glitter flashed in the sun.

O'Hern's open hands were pressed hard against his legs. The stooped man stopped a good ten feet away, his red-rimmed eyes glittering. "Cossack!"

O'Hern said, "Put that gun away!"

The man cursed defiance.

Morry took a step forward, but O'Hern waved him back, said, "We don't want trouble. Just hand over the gun and . . ." He smiled tautly, stepped forward.

The stooped man laughed harshly, whipped the gun up, and shot O'Hern twice in the stomach.

THERE was silence following the flat *spang* of the shots. An awed, sucked-out silence that lasted for just a heart-beat. Then Morry was springing forward as the stooped man whirled, and a thousand voices roared.

O'Hern's hands went to his stomach, and red welled up between his fingers. A white line had appeared suddenly around his mouth as though cut there by a lash. He swayed, leaned far forward.

Morry's fingers slipped from the stooped man's shoulders, and then a heavy body slammed into him from the side, and the stooped gunman melted into the crowd.

The street was a roaring chaos now. Raw curses spilled from Morry's lips as he fought his way back to O'Hern's side. Another cop was bending over O'Hern who lay on his side.

A brick flew past Morry's head to *whang*

against the fence. A hundred throats were yelling, "Smash the gate down!" and the heavy crush of the mob pushed the front ranks closer, closer.

Morry stooped. O'Hern's lips were moving, but the words were too faint for him to catch. Something hit his arm, and pain flowed down his side. He lunged erect.

The two other cops were backed tight against the gate, their eyes on Morry, their hands on the grenades.

Morry shouted, "The mop!"

The other cops were moving as Morry pulled the pin of the grenade, and counted under his breath. They weren't going to throw this back—not any. He tossed the grenade then, and it arched high over the crowd. A dense, spreading cloud of white vapor sprang suddenly into being, settled downward.

Sirens wailed on the fringe of the crowd as Morry clawed at his gas mask. One of the other cops was beside him, a tear-gas gun in his hands spewing its choking vapor. The mob milled frantically, stampeded away from the gate. Other gas-masked cops were plunging into the mob, their clubbed nightsticks swinging. Only seconds later the riot was raging a block up the street, and Morry was alone with O'Hern's crumpled body.

CHAPTER XVII

GENTLEMAN RENEGADE

DUNCAN McCANN slid the big sedan into an open slot a half block from union headquarters, and shut off the engine. Then he turned to face Montana Fells. "What next?"

"Lock this crate up," Montana said, "then we go see the boss." Montana got out of the car, and waited on the walk. His hand was still deep in his raincoat pocket.

McCann had locked the car door, was stepping back when the faint *spang* reached his ears. He stiffened, listening. Montana said, "Come on, come on."

"Wait! That—that sounded like gun shots!"

He heard the roar of the crowd then, low and far away at first, then rising to a deep sound like the thunder of booming surf.

McCann's lips thinned. "That was a shot."

"Yeah, an' what of it. If the army was back there, it wouldn't matter. The boss is still waitin'." Montana used his left hand to unwrap a stick of gum. "Move."

Wonder grew in McCann's mind as he climbed the stairs to Finn's second floor office. Those had been shots. What new brand of hell was breaking loose at the plant?

The shades were still drawn in the big office, and tobacco smoke surged in flat planes under the glaring drop lights. The soft hum of voices, the staccato clatter of two typewriters and the smoky beat of music met McCann as he shouldered through the door.

Finn was talking to a couple of men from the plant, and others waited in the straightback chairs along the wall. Marcia Dubois' dark head was bent over one typewriter, and the full-cheeked Ryan was at another. His hat was on the back of his head, a lighted cigarette dangled from his lips. He looked around, nodded, and then his fingers again tore hammering sound from the keyboard.

Finn saw them, and a smile tugged at his wide mouth. "Hey, I thought you guys were lost. How'd it go?" Montana shrugged, and crossed the room to sit on one corner of Marcia Dubois' desk. "Well?" Finn's eyes held McCann's face.

McCann got the envelope out of his pocket, dropped it in front of Finn. "I got in all right," he said, "but that's as far as I got. Falcon was talking to a couple of lawyers. He let me get started, and then threw me out."

"Yes?" A shadow darkened Finn's eyes. He wasn't smiling now. "What did he say?"

"He said," McCann could feel every eye in the room on him, "that he wouldn't give the control of his plants to any union, if he never built another car."

"Blast him!" Finn's fist crashed down on the desk. "If he thinks—" The flesh between his eyes creased, and his eyes held the cold glitter of blued steel. "Did he say anything else, anything at all?" McCann shook his head. "Okay," Finn said crisply, "you did your part. Sit down, I'll want to talk to you in a minute." He spun the desk chair, said, "Marcia!"

The woman was already looking at him, her dark eyes questioning. Finn said, "This is it." Marcia Dubois left her desk chair, crossed the room, and went through an inner door.

Finn was again talking to the two workmen. McCann drifted over to a chair near the door through which the woman had disappeared.

The automatic phonograph had ceased to play. Ryan's typewriter stopped then, and the only sound in the big room was the buzz of voices.

McCann leaned back in his chair. He could hear, faintly, the whirr of a dial telephone, and Marcia's voice saying, "Long distance—?"

McCANN'S lean body appeared to be relaxed, but his fingers gripped the chair arm hard, so hard that his nails were white from pressure. He tilted his head back, every nerve straining to catch the next words.

"Blackmere 33—"

The crash of an opening door blotted out the remaining numbers. McCann's head snapped up. A stooped man stood just inside the door. A thin, stooped man, whose red-rimmed eyes glittered wildly, whose shirt was torn half off.

"Hell to pay," he croaked hoarsely.

Finn lunged to his feet, barked, "What's wrong?"

"Somebody," the stooped man croaked, "shot a copper in the belly. The rest of the bulls used gas, an' clubs. There must be a hundred guys on the way to the hospital now. The riot's still goin'!"

"Shot a cop, eh?" Finn's expression didn't change. "Now there will be trouble. This means special police, lots of them, and possibly the National Guard. You wait," he told the stooped man, and walked to the inner door. Marcia met him there, nodded, and went back to her desk.

McCann leaned back in the chair again. Finn was talking, "Yes, it went over like a ton of brick and—"

"Up, you!"

The chill voice, coming from the side, jerked McCann rigid. He brought his eyes up. Montana Fells stood four feet away. He held a big Luger, so that it was hidden from the rest of the room, and so the muzzle-eye looked squarely into McCann's face.

"I said up!" Montana's voice was cold, raw. "Get out of that chair, now!"

McCann pushed himself upright. Montana's words couldn't have been heard over four feet, but they were clipped, deadly. "Any place in the room but here, punk. These walls ain't soundproof."

McCann obeyed. Montana's Luger slipped out of sight again, and the big man followed McCann across the room. He touched Ryan's shoulder, said, "Keep your eye on the punk. He's gettin' ideas."

Montana left, and Ryan planted his elbows on each side of the typewriter, asked, "So right away you go huntin' trouble, Quixote?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's the right answer anyway." Ryan picked a smoldering cigarette off the table edge, reached for the half-empty quart bottle that stood in the center of the littered table. "You're learning."

McCann dug square-tipped fingers through his hair. There was a higher-up! Finn was reporting to him now. Blackmere 33 . . . There was only one city in the state that listed a Blackmere exchange. The Capitol! The knowledge burned in McCann's brain. And Governor James McCann's private phone was Blackmere 3323. . . .

THE inner doorway snapped open, and Finn appeared. He said, "Ryan, Duncan. In here."

"The master's voice." Ryan lurched to his feet, scooped the quart bottle off of the table, said, "The windmills are lining up on the right, Quixote."

McCann silently followed him into the inner room.

Finn waved them into chairs, said, "I haven't got much time and I've got a lot to say. McCann, I'm offering you a job. You did the best you could this morning, and I can use a guy like you. Here's why, you've been against the union from the start. Okay, you've managed to stir up some similar feeling in some of the other men. I've got to stop that. I've got a sound wagon on the way here. I want you to work with Ryan in the sound wagon. He'll write the speeches you make."

Finn paused, his cold eyes raking McCann's face. "This might not make sense to you, but it's a smart play. These other guys will see you in the union car, and they'll know you've changed your mind. Little things like that make a lot of difference when it comes to keeping two thousand men in line. I can't overlook any bets. The pay'll run a hundred a week."

McCann said, "I don't—"

"Wait a minute," Finn cut in, "I'll tell you this much. I've got to have all the men behind me to force Falcon to sign, and if you think I'm going to let this strike get away from me you're crazy. Once this plant is organized we'll have six grand a month coming in that's almost all gravy. I'm not trying to horse you, Duncan, this's big business. It doesn't cost any one man much, but the total take runs into important money. The union helps the men plenty, but it helps Finn, too. And when this plant is organized, we'll start work on another."

"Did you say a hundred a week?" McCann asked.

"Right. And here—" he pushed two crisp bills into McCann's hand—"is the money you earned this morning. There's more, a lot more, if you're smart. But if you try to cross us"—the icy glitter looked out of his eyes—"well, we've got a way of paying you off for that too."

McCann asked, "When do I start?"

"You're working now. Ryan will tell you all you need to know." Finn pivoted around to face the full-cheeked Ryan. "You know what to do. And stay away from that whisky for a day or two!"

"Drunk or sober," Ryan said, "I write the best publicity *you* ever read, boss."

Finn laughed. "You do, at that. But how good are you when snakes begin to crawl out of the bottle?" He went out, and a moment later they could hear his big voice booming a greeting to someone in the outer room.

Ryan shivered. "You're a sucker, Quixote. You wouldn't run when you could, and now it's too late. If you've got any ideas about any smart plays, forget 'em." He slouched deep in the chair. "Got any questions?"

"What do we do with this sound wagon?"

"I drive it, and you make speeches. Nice little speeches that are all written for you." Ryan splashed whiskey into a glass. His teeth clicked against the rim as he drank.

"Why do you hang onto this rotten job?"

Ryan eyed him gravely. "I wouldn't if you could tell me where I could find a paper that would hire a drunk—for four hundred dollars a week." He got to his feet. "Come on, Quixote, you might as well get started reading the stuff you're going to use."

McCann smiled bleakly as he opened the door. Then he rocked to a stop as his eyes found the slender figure in front of Finn's desk—a golden-haired girl with an impish mouth, and a tip-tilted nose. Helen Falcon.

McCANN'S chest felt as though it were caught in a mighty vise. Helen Falcon here! He knew in the next sickening second that she held his life in her two slim hands. If she told Finn who he was, or if she repeated the things he'd said to her father. . . . Kim Saddler and another had been killed swiftly, ruthlessly, for far less.

"Hey," Finn tilted his chair back, "come over here, Duncan."

McCann's eyes flickered desperately to the door, to Montana in the chair beside it. No chance. He forced a smile on stiff lips, moved toward the desk.

Finn smiled. "Helen Falcon came down to see if there was anything she could do to help the union. Got any ideas?"

McCann shook his head.

"I'm sure Mr. Duncan couldn't think of a thing for me to do that would help the union."

McCann didn't speak, and the silence stretched taut between them. Then Marcia left her desk to place a sheaf of papers on Finn's desk.

Finn said, "Wait a minute, Marcia."

The dark-haired woman came back to the desk. Finn introduced them. Marcia's voice held the tinkle of ice. "I'm very glad to meet the daughter of J. N. Falcon."

"She wants to help, Marcia. How about using her to take part of the load off of your shoulders?"

"Thanks, but there wouldn't be anything for her to do." Marcia turned to Helen Falcon, scorn flashing in her eyes. "I'm sure you would be able to—"

Finn's abrupt "I'll handle this!" was a chill purr.

Color mounted to Marcia's cheeks as she whirled away. Finn tossed a key container on the desk. "Duncan, you take Miss Falcon out to lunch. Use my car. I'll have something worked out by the time you get back. I'll see you around two-thirty."

Helen Falcon did not speak until they were on the walk outside of headquarters. Her vivid lips were pressed into a flat line as McCann steered her through the crowd around the door, and down the block to Finn's sedan. Then she snatched her arm out of his grasp, said, "I won't eat with you. Not if I never have another bite."

"That's all right with me, but when Finn gives an order he wants it carried out. You don't have to eat, but you can go through the motions anyway."

"I wouldn't—"

McCann said, "Get in that car!" The burning intensity of his voice shocked her into a numb obedience. McCann whipped the sedan away from the curb. Her wide eyes never left his face. McCann waited until the sedan was slamming down Lovejoy toward the ramp before he asked:

"How much did you tell Finn?"

She said, "Nothing," in a faint, small voice. "I didn't have time. I didn't think you'd still be there, and then before I could say anything he—"

McCann relaxed under the wheel, said, "Thanks."

"But I will tell him, just as soon as we get back! I'll tell him who you are, and how you tried to doublecross him with father!"

Ridges of muscle stood out along the clean line of McCann's jaw. Bleakness came into his eyes, into his voice.

"Did you," he asked, "ever kill a man?"

She gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Tell Finn who I am," he ground out savagely, "and you can add murder to your list of experiences. You've got a lot of dizzy ideas, and it's time somebody set you straight. You think these guys are playing with the idea of class justice and a worker's Utopia. They aren't. They're playing for keeps, in a big money game. They're allowing no one to stand in their way. They've killed two men already. Murdered them! I was standing three feet away from one of them when a crane man dropped a sedan body on top of him. He was killed instantly, and his only crime was asking questions. Another man was killed because he refused to join the union. Even the workmen know that this union is run by thieves—but they want to go on living, so they do what they're told!"

"You're lying again!"

"Am I?" McCann bent the sedan east on Rosemore Boulevard. "You can always check back and find out, or you can tell Finn who I am."

"Now I'm sure you're lying. If you were afraid Finn would kill you, then you wouldn't stay here. You'd run. . . ."

"Maybe I should have, long ago. Maybe I should now. I just know this, I'm not

running. I'm in a position now where I might be able to do a little good, and I'm staying. It isn't bravery, it's sheer idiocy. But"— he frowned then, brushed his hand wearily across his eyes—"you might call this making your point the tough way."

McCann turned the sedan into a wide gravel parking strip in front of a roadside restaurant. Helen Falcon's hands were clasped tightly around the purse in her lap, her eyes looked straight ahead. "You can't make me believe it. Mr. Finn's too good, too kind, too fine. He couldn't do a thing like that. And if you think he would, then you don't belong in union headquarters. I will do this much. I won't say anything for thirty-six hours. That will give you time to get away."

"Look," McCann told her bitterly. "Look in the rear-view mirror."

She looked up, asked, "What?"

"That small coupé behind us with the big guy under the wheel. You saw him at headquarters, remember? He's Montana Fells, Finn's number-one gun."

"What—what will he do?"

"Nothing, unless he thinks we're fixing a fast one."

McCANN'S strap watch said two-twenty when they climbed the stairs to union headquarters. The big room was still smoke-layered, crowded, noisy. Mike Finn came to meet them.

"Miss Falcon, I've got a typing table set up over against the wall for you. Mr. Ryan will show you what to do." His brows pulled down. "Same thing goes for you, Duncan."

Ryan elbowed up to them, thrust a sheaf of papers into Helen Falcon's hand. "Here's a stack of copy. I want three carbons—and watch the spelling." He clutched McCann's arm, towed him away. "Come on away, an' let her work."

Late that afternoon McCann drifted casually to Marcia Dubois' desk. She looked up, as his shadow fell across the keyboard, and a faint flush darkened her cheeks.

"Did you want something?" she asked.

He said, "I've been sitting around here for hours with nothing to do. I thought maybe you—"

She nibbled her lower lip. "You're getting paid, aren't you? Wasn't that all you wanted?"

McCann said, "No." He was aware, suddenly, of her quiet beauty, of the contempt that edged her words. He swallowed, looked down into eyes that were even darker than he'd remembered. "No, I'd like to earn that money. I'd like to help, and—"

"You might," she said, "tell that to the girl you kiss for the photographers. The girl who sells her people out for a cheap idea. The—" She looked away, struck quickly at the keyboard.

"Hey, Quixote!"

McCann pivoted to find Ryan standing behind him. The small man's mashed-in hat was pushed well away from his glazed eyes. "I thought your specialty was windmills, guy, but it looks like it's women. Come on, the sound wagon's here. We got work to do."

Marcia spoke then, her voice tight, low, and almost inaudible. "Don't come back here! Don't!"

McCann bent close to ask huskily, "Why did you say that, Marcia?" Their eyes held for just a heart-beat, and then her head dropped. She shook her head silently.

McCann waited until Ryan had almost reached the door before he swung after him. The small man blundered through the crowd, went down a narrow alley to a garage.

THE sound wagon was a small, panel-body truck with four large horns mounted upon its top. Ryan slipped into the driver's seat.

"You better carry that mike in your hands," he said. "This crate rides like a coal wagon anyway, and the bumps don't do it any good." He got a couple of sheets of paper out of an inside pocket. "Here's your script. The switches are at your elbow. We won't use the horns till we get down to the plant."

McCann read the typewritten sheets while Ryan drove south through the early evening traffic.

"How do you write this rot?" McCann asked savagely.

Ryan grinned. "That's good stuff. A little cockeyed, but it's got everything we need. There is truth in that, but the facts are hypoed. I don't get paid for writing sermons. The boys will get hot under the collar when they hear that stuff, and that's the idea."

"Is this all you do, write speeches?"

"No. The newspapers have to get information from the union—I see that they get the stuff we want them to have."

Ryan spoke again as the sedan curved into Mill Street, a block above the plant. "You can go through it once here. Then we'll move down the street and you can try it again."

McCann thumbed the switches open, spread the typed sheets on his knee, spoke bitterly into the microphone. There was no bitterness in the giant's voice that boomed out over his head:

"Why does Falcon refuse to recognize the union?"

A thickening crowd gathered around the sound wagon. McCann glanced up as he finished the first sheet. He started, his breath exploding from between stiff lips. The horns sent the gasp bellowing into the early dusk. Mack Saddler was standing on the fringe of the throng. His gaunt, lined face was set and angry hatred glowed in his eyes.

Ryan grinned, said, "Give, Quixote, give!"

Thunderous, roaring words spilled over the crowd: "Why does Falcon pay expensive lawyers to keep the strike going?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT IS THE LAW

A FULL dozen reporters filed into the big windowed office to form a half circle around Governor James McCann's desk. The desk phone rang then, and the Governor pushed a stack of unopened telegrams aside, scooped the phone out of its cradle. "Governor McCann speaking."

The reporters waited. The prim Miss Elkman tiptoed in with another handful of telegrams, and copies of the afternoon papers.

Governor McCann said, "Yes, right away. Report to me here." He put the phone together, and then stood up. His white hair was rumpled, his face worn and tired. But his blue eyes still glowed fiercely under bristling brows, his back was still well braced and straight. "You had some questions, gentlemen?"

One reporter asked, "Are you going to try to settle the Falcon strike, sir? Have you communicated with Falcon and the union leaders?"

Another voice cut in sharply, "How about the sit-down legality? How about—"

Governor McCann said, "I'll answer your questions one at a time, gentlemen. I have been in contact with the union leaders, but I have not, as yet, been able to reach Mr. Falcon. Since a good deal depends on the outcome of my talk with Mr. Falcon I cannot now say anything about the strike settlement."

"How about the sit-down strikers? Aren't they trespassing on Falcon's property?"

"The courts decided that question just an hour ago. The strikers will be read an eviction notice sometime today."

"How about the riots, sir?" It was the first reporter again. "Are you going to try and stop those?"

Stanley came through the open door then, and dropped into a chair. Davork stopped working on a report to listen. His eyes were harassed, worried.

"Gentlemen," Governor McCann's voice was crisp, "regardless of any strike question, law and order must be maintained. Should the strike end tomorrow I would be the happiest man in this state. But in the meantime I cannot permit any recurrence of today's riots. One policeman was killed, and twenty or thirty people were injured. That condition must be corrected."

There was a moment's silence broken

only by a shuffling of feet, and then one reporter asked, "Does this mean that the state police will—"

"No." Governor McCann swung to face the door, and the uniformed man who stood there. "Gentlemen, this is the commanding officer of the National Guard, Major-General Williams. He has come here to receive orders for the mobilization of two companies of National Guardsmen, who will be enroute to Industrial City before evening."

The moon-faced reporter said, "Oh-oh!" and bolted for the door. The others followed.

A half hour later only Governor McCann, Stanley and Davork remained in the Governor's office.

Davork mopped his forehead. "Isn't this a bit hasty, sir? After all, the labor vote isn't to be dealt with as casually as—"

"I think he's right, absolutely." Stanley got to his feet. "It's the only thing he could do. I would have suggested it myself after hearing that the strikers are to be evicted from the plant. That's apt to stir up a lot of bad feeling."

"I guess you're right," Davork said weakly. "But I think that maybe the state police could have done something."

"I am leaving for Industrial City this evening." Governor McCann turned to face the windows. "Davork, you will accompany me. You'd better bring a couple of bags. We might be there for some time."

"Yes, sir."

Stanley grounded his cigar out in a hammered copper tray. "I'm going down there, too. I think possibly I can get some information that will help like the devil."

TWENTY-FIVE hundred restless men were jammed along the assembly line. Twenty-five hundred tense, listening faces were turned toward the make-shift platform, and the stocky, gray-haired man who held a legal-size, typed sheet, and read from it loudly.

". . . I, as sheriff of said Washington County, do hereby order you to leave and evacuate the aforementioned premises, which are the property of the aforementioned Falcon Automobile Company. Disregard of said order to be punishable by a fine of not less than five hundred dollars, and not more than a thousand dollars; and by a prison sentence of not less than one hundred and eighty days, and not more than one year." The sheriff finished, and tucked the form in his pocket. "That's all. Copies of that order have been handed to all the union officials."

The men shifted, muttered, and then someone shouted, "Okay, Sheriff, now tell us what it means!" Laughter swept over the massed workmen.

The sheriff held up his hands, waited until quiet had returned. "That order means that you men must leave the plant —or be ejected. It's legal, and it's my job. You'll have two hours to decide, but before you make any decision a man from Falcon's office wants to read a statement to you."

Boos and jeers rang through the length of the huge room. A second man had stepped to the center of the platform—a small man, whose bony face was shiny with sweat. His voice was thin, piping.

"To the workmen of the Falcon Plant: You may, or you may not, have grounds for the present strike. That remains to be decided. You are, however, unlawfully occupying property which does not, in any sense, belong to you. I cannot discuss any settlement until that property has been vacated. After evacuation has been made, I will make the following settlement with the workmen of my plant."

The silence was a living thing, a pressure that held every man taut.

"First: There will be no discrimination against any employee for former union activity. Second: The employees will be allowed to form their own union, with these restrictions: no one who is not employed in the Falcon Plant can become a member, or hold any office in this union. And no one not employed in the Falcon plant can have any voice in the union meetings. Third: All differences between employees and employer will be settled by a committee of

employees and three officials of the Falcon Automobile Company. The employee's committee to be chosen by the workmen of the plant."

The small man remained on the platform for a moment after he had finished, and then he was replaced by the sheriff.

"Remember," the sheriff bellowed, "you have two hours to decide what you want to do. I'll be waiting for you in the office building."

The sheriff climbed down from the platform. Three of four uniformed men fell in beside the sheriff and the small man, and the group moved down the ramp, and out into the yard.

THE office building was a small, brick structure, set in one corner of the grounds. There were already ten or fifteen men waiting there when the sheriff came in.

A big plainclothes man asked, "How'd it go?"

"Just the way we figured," the sheriff said. "I told them, and they didn't like it much. Five gets you fifteen that they tell us to go to blazes, Brock."

"Yeah," Brock grinned, "and the same five'll get you twenty that they change their minds—plenty!" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's a poker game in there."

The little man who had read Falcon's message said, "I think the men will be glad to endorse Mr. Falcon's plan. But—if they don't, how will you—?"

The sheriff said, "There's ways and ways, Mr. Clark, but this set-up is made to order. You might pray for rain if you want to help."

"Rain?"

"Yeah, so they'll close the windows."

"He won't have to," Brock said, "it's raining already. Come on, Chief, we got two hours to kill, an' I like to take your money. You always liked two pair."

Tobacco smoke was thick in the office long before the thunderous knock sounded on the door. Brock went out into the hall. He came back a moment later with a long roll of paper under his arm.

The sheriff said, "What—?"

"They wrote it out." Brock unrolled the paper on the desk.

The words had been printed on a sheet of brown paper four feet square with a heavy crayon.

BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT FALCON WOULD CONTROL ANY PLANT UNION THROUGH SPIES AND STOOL PIGEONS WE REJECT HIS PROPOSAL. BECAUSE WE LIKE IT HERE IN THE PLANT WE ARE STAYING TILL HE SIGNS WITH OUR UNION.

"Call Falcon, Mr. Clark," the sheriff said gruffly. "Tell him what the men said, and ask him if he still wants them out of his plant."

"I know that—"

"Call him anyway."

The small man walked out of the room. He was back a moment later to say, "He hasn't changed his mind."

The sheriff nodded, "Okay. Brock, you an' Tony an' Slade take care of the gas. We'll handle the outside."

Brock said, "So I have to get stuck, huh?" and led two other men out of the room, and into the office building.

THERE was already one uniformed man in the basement. He was sitting on the stairs with a sub-machine gun across his knees. Brock asked, "Hear anything?"

The man with the machine gun shook his head. "Not a sound. Maybe those guys don't know about that passageway."

Brock said, "They will. We'll need masks, a couple of dozen grenades, one gas gun. Tony can lug the stutter-gun." He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, crossed the basement and unlocked a metal door set flush against the wall.

He came back then, and slipped out of his overcoat. "Thanks for the blueprints. This'd have been a rotten job if we didn't know about this alleyway for the steam pipes." He hung a gas-mask pouch around his neck, picked up a bag of grenades. "Come on, let's get her done."

They went down the narrow passageway hunched over with their heads pulled low to miss the steel strap supports. It was hot

in the passageway, an intense, dry heat that had all three men gasping.

There were only three men in the boiler room of the Falcon plant when Brock and the others came through the small door. And they didn't know anything was amiss until Brock dug his gun barrel into one man's back, and said:

"Don't move, guy!" The other two whirled to see the sub-machine gun in Tony's hands, and froze.

"So you're goin' to hang around, eh?" Brock asked. "You might not know it, but I think you're just about to go now." His voice thinned. "Where's the air conditioning unit?"

"Over there."

Brock surveyed the big unit, asked, "How do you start it, and how do you get at the fans?"

"The switch's right behind you. You raise that door there and—"

"Baby," Brock said, "she's froze solid."

He stepped over to the switch, yanked it into the starting position. A huge motor growled, and then the sound built up to a high hum. Brock dipped into the grenade bag, said, "Start runnin', boys, that's vomit gas." He grinned as they fled, and then slipped the mask over his face. He pulled the pin on one grenade, tossed it into the fan. A moment later he threw another, and another.

Dimly, he could hear the faraway pound of running feet, a muffled shout, and the crash of breaking glass.

The grenade bags were empty when Brock led the others up the stairs. The Falcon Plant was empty too. They found only a single man on the ground floor. He was face down near the door. His hands were knotted across his stomach. Brock dragged him outside.

There were other gas-masked men outside, uniformed men who held big-barreled gas guns—but they weren't needed.

Mill Street was a roaring chaos. The traffic was hopelessly jammed. The walks and the street were packed with men who had but one idea—to get away, far away, from the gas that sickened them.

CHAPTER XIX

A LONG TIME DEAD

THE sound wagon was parked just a block from the Falcon Plant—Duncan McCann was smoking, and Ryan was dozing under the wheel—when the first of the strikers ran from the plant gate.

Instantly it seemed that there were a hundred, five hundred, a thousand men fighting to get through that gate. Men who pawed blindly at their eyes, who gasped and reeled, and some who fell beneath the trampling feet. One, he was scarcely more than a boy, clawed at his eyes with one hand, and fumbled his way along the fence with the other. A gray-haired man fell, tried twice to get up, and then lay still.

McCann shook Ryan awake. "Look! The lid's popped!"

Some of the men were abreast of the sound wagon now. A thin, stoop-shouldered man clung to the front fender. His face was almost yellow, a racking spasm shook his body and he was violently sick.

Ryan was fully awake. He breathed: "Is this the works! The cops are usin' gas."

McCann asked, "How do you know?"

"It's the only stuff that gets you this way. Tear gas is bad, if you can't get away from it, but this stuff really takes the fight out of anybody." His eyes flicked to McCann's face. "This puts the strike in the bag!"

"How?"

"These guys are goin' to hate Falcon's soul for this. They won't go back to work at any price—unless he signs. Finn won't have any trouble holdin' the men in line now." Ryan prodded the motor into life.

"Where're you goin'?" McCann said.

"To tell Finn!"

"You can phone faster than you can drive. There's a phone in that lunchroom across the street!"

"Swell!" Ryan twisted out of the car, lunged through the crowd. McCann waited only long enough to see Ryan vanish through the swinging door before he too was on the street, running toward the spot where he'd last seen Mack Saddler.

Saddler's gaunt figure was nowhere in sight when he rounded the corner. McCann ran a hundred yards down the street before he caught sight of him. Saddler was standing in a doorway watching the swirling mob.

McCann raced up the stairs. *"Mack!* Mack, this's the first chance I've had to talk to you!"

Saddler looked down, his eyes bleak, hard. "Beat it!"

McCann's fingers sunk into Saddler's arm. "Mack, you fool! You don't think I'm working for Finn because I like it? There's a chance to get him, to get the whole rotten outfit—and I'm taking it!"

"You'd say that anyway."

"You're wrong. Can't you see this's the chance we've been waiting for? I *had* to take it. I'm getting something. It's slow, but I *am* getting it. There is somebody higher up than Finn. Somebody Finn takes orders from."

"If you're telling the truth, lad, then you're in a dangerous spot."

McCann laughed shortly. "The way things look now I've got just thirty-six, no —thirty-one hours to live. Then Helen Falcon is telling Finn that I am a spy!"

"What do you mean?"

For just a second McCann didn't reply. Then he said, "Finn sent me out to Falcon's, and she heard me doublecross Finn —or try to. It didn't work, but she's got enough to convince Finn that I'm a spy. And that means—"

"It means death, lad!"

"I need help," McCann said. "Can you scare up two or three other men, good men, who want to wreck the union?"

"A dozen, if—"

"Do it! Where can I meet you this time tomorrow night?"

Mack's eyes were shiny with thought. "At Kim's house, lad. Elsie and the small ones are still at my place. If you are lying to me you wouldn't dare bring Finn's men out there!"

"Fine!" McCann turned, "I've got to go. I'll be there tomorrow night. I might be late, but for the love of heaven, wait!" Saddler nodded. McCann pushed his way into the crowd, jammed his way back to the corner. Ryan was just climbing into the sound wagon.

"Chasin' windmills again, Quixote?" Ryan's eyes were feverishly bright. "Keep this up, an' the cops'll be picking you out of a gutter—dead."

McCann asked, "What'd Finn say?"

"He wants us in headquarters right away." He twisted the sound wagon away from the curb.

MARCIA DUBOIS was alone in the big office when McCann and Ryan arrived. She looked up, said, "He's in there," and jerked her head at the inner door.

Ryan went past her. McCann lagged to a stop beside her desk. Marcia's closed hands rose slowly to press hard against her temples. Hot color beat in her cheeks.

"You—you came back!" she whispered.

McCann started to speak, and then Ryan called from the inner doorway, "Hey, Duncan, come on!"

Finn smiled frostily at them. "This puts it right in the bag. Ryan, you get on that typewriter, and get out some copy the papers can use. An eye-witness story. Play up the gas, the men injured, the lack of warning. Put it on thick. I've got a legman on the *Blade* waiting for the stuff. Then knock out something we can use for handbills. I'll have this whole town plastered with them tomorrow. Falcon dumped this right in our lap! I'm talking over the radio tonight."

Montana Fells came in then, stood with his back to the door. His muddy eyes clung to McCann's face. His jaws moved rhythmically, slowly on a wad of gum.

McCann itched to see just how big, and how tough Montana really was. Itched to smash that thin smile into a bloody smear.

"You can take the rest of the night off, Duncan," Finn went on. "Get down here at eight in the morning."

Montana moved to one side to allow McCann to pass. Thick lids drooped over his eyes. He didn't speak.

There was a phone call waiting for McCann when he reached his hotel. The clerk said, "The gentleman called four or five times. It must be important."

McCann took the card into a phone booth. A moment later Stanley's unmistakable voice came over the wire. "I've been trying to reach you, Duncan. I'd expected to hear from you before now. Got anything yet?"

"A little."

"When can you get over here?"

"Right away."

"I'll be in the back booth of the Trenton Coffee Shop."

McCann took a taxi to the Trenton, went through the lobby, and into the coffee shop. Stanley looked up expectantly as McCann came into the booth. A thin cigar smouldered in the big man's hand.

McCann said, "You've got to get the State Police here in a hurry."

"Seen this?" Stanley slid a newspaper across the table.

Banner headlines screamed:

GOVERNOR CALLS OUT MILITIA! NATIONAL GUARD TO ARRIVE IN MORNING!

"That might help." McCann's eyes were thoughtful. "We've got to stop Finn. He'll wreck the Falcon Plant, or own it before he's through. This is just the first step. If he's let alone he'll be a labor dictator. He's going after the other plants as soon as he's through here."

"As bad as that?"

"Worse," McCann said bitterly, "there is a higher-up! Someone is giving Finn orders, someone who—"

"Do you know who it is?"

"No, not yet."

"Give me what facts you have. The Governor is waiting for a report. He doesn't know where I'm getting the information, but he'll act on it."

McCann told him what he knew. Told him in terse, clipped sentences, and when he had finished Stanley said:

"You're putting yourself in a pretty bad spot."

"You let me worry about that. I'll call you sometime tomorrow night." McCann got to his feet. "And if you tell my father you've seen me, I'll take a swing at you just for luck."

"I won't."

McCann was halfway to the door when he saw the big man at the counter. His breath caught in his throat, and his teeth vised as Montana Fells came toward him.

"Out late, ain't you?"

The growled words came from low in McCann's throat. "Listen, you big ape, if you don't stay out of my way I'll mess up that face of yours with the first thing I can get my hands on."

"Yeah?" Montana stepped close. His raincoat brushed McCann's side, and gun metal dug into his ribs. "We're goin' back, punk, an' see who you were talkin' to. If this is what I think it is, morning will find you a long time dead."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Homecoming

By WILLIAM CORCORAN
Author of "The Faith Unfaithful," etc.

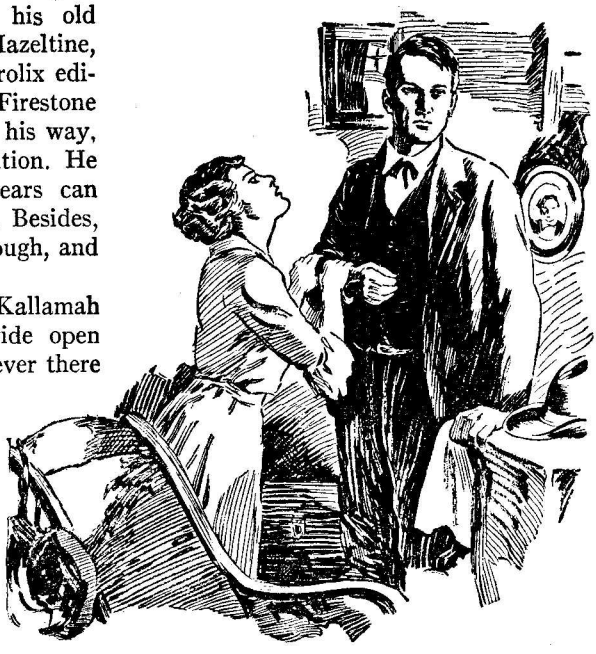
JIM FIRESTONE swung from the coach steps to the cinders of the depot at Kallamah, gave the beaming porter a slight smile and a silver dollar, picked up his bag, and started walking. He gazed at Kallamah, and he realized how much ten years can do to a town. Growth and change. Stock corrals and loading pens —new, whitewashed, efficient looking. Recent buildings, a couple built of brick and soaring three stories high. Even a grain elevator, as foreign a thing as Firestone could think of in this half wild and still frontier country.

A few familiar faces stood out of the little crowd about the depot. Firestone felt all his nerves tighten as he searched swiftly among them, but the face he looked for was not there. He didn't mind; time enough for that yet, he thought grimly. Old Tanglefoot was there; express agent in stagecoach days, he tended his old duties in a new way. And Lem Hazeltine, fat and asthmatic, amiable and prolix editor of the Kallamah *Courier*. Firestone picked out others. A few glanced his way, in curiosity, but without recognition. He didn't mind that either; ten years can change a man as well as a town. Besides, he'd be meeting them all soon enough, and with little love lost.

Firestone had heard much of Kallamah through the years. A grand, wide open town, some said. A bad town, if ever there was one, others declared. The signs were clear on Front Street and Railroad Avenue—saloons, resorts, dubious hotels and bars.

Firestone went to the Harkness House, one of the newer brick buildings on Front Street. He opened his bag in his room, and then debated a moment, weighing in his hands a well worn and polished shoulder holster and Frontier model .45. Deciding against it, he went down the stairs again, bought a *Courier* in the lobby, and stepped into the bar.

The room was fairly crowded, booming with the talk and laughter of men. The talk was of cattle mostly, grazing country gossip, although there was talk, too, of Jim Corbett and Teddy Roosevelt and the gay lights of Chicago and cards and women and violence and death. It was that certain hour when men gather out of ancient instinct about the smell of mounting woodsmoke or the sound of tinkling glasses or the mere reassuring roll of voices that celebrate the winning and survival of another day. They were all of them strangers to Firestone, yet he was unmistakably one of them, from the rolling brim of the big



soft hat that looked all of the twenty dollars it had cost him to the hand-stitched riding boots that cost him twice as much.

He was one of them by every sign, and yet he was set apart from them across a gulf he could never bridge. Between them lay an ancient enmity and a grim unsettled score, and not all their joviality and friendliness could beguile him from the memory of that. And he sipped his beer, and listened to the rolling voices, and he thought how sweet and how intensely bitter a man could find it to be home.

THEN a vigorous hand clasped his shoulder. It was Lem Hazeltine. "Jim Firestone! I didn't know you! Why didn't you come up and say howdy at the depot?"

Firestone's guard was up instantly. "Well, Lem, you were right busy. I didn't know you spied me. I figured to get to talking to people by stages, sort of."

"You never need do that with me, Jim. You know that."

"Thanks, Lem. But it's been a long time—"

"You bet it's been a long time. Hell's bells, if I'd known, I'd 'a had a brass band out!" Hazeltine laughed, and Firestone laughed, but with more politeness than sincerity.

He understood. It was Hazeltine's business to be genial and winning, especially when a story for his paper loomed in sight.

Hazeltine went on, "Jim, you've got some mighty good friends hereabouts. You just let me tell them you're back, and they'll come a-rallying like old times."

Firestone said dryly, "Old times, Lem?"

And Hazeltine was embarrassed. "Well, land's sakes, Jim——!"

"No, Lem. A man's friends will find him, if they want to. I'll take it kindly if you'll leave me out of the paper."

"Of course, if you say so." The editor paused, uncomfortable. "But it ain't fair, Jim. To yourself, I mean."

Firestone shrugged and changed the subject. Hazeltine told him about the country, the town.

"There's been a lot of change. It ain't done yet by a damsite. We still need a mite of taming down. I've been campaigning in the paper. The wild days are gone, Jim. There was need of them in their time, and they were little enough repayment for the loneliness and hardship. But today we have what's to be guarded from the wild old ways. There are women, and children now, and homes."

"And business and investments, I take note."

"There are. Take the Kallamah Bank. I'm on the board myself. We needed a bank, and we made one, a good one, and it's helped build this country. But banks and wild towns don't travel very comfortably together."

Firestone gave him a secret kind of glance. "No, I reckon not."

There was a pause, that kind of minute space of silence in which smoldering thought is kindled into burning words. But something quenched the somber spark in the editor's eye, and he slapped Firestone's shoulder, offered his hand again, and wished him luck. "Just let me know, Jim. There might be something I can do. You've got a lot of friends."

The word echoed in Firestone's mind. Friends! He laughed bitterly, and suddenly turned and left the bar, and the bartender, watching him go, thought acutely that there walked an unhappy and very determined man.

IT was on the street in front of the Harkness House that Firestone ran into Marshal Flood. Flood, stocky and powerful, had been for years all the law in Kallamah; and the years had given him a flinty eye and an iron mouth and a bluntness of manner that best went with them.

"I was just going to drop in and see you, Firestone," he said. "I heard word that you'd hit town."

"Yes?" said Firestone, and waited, expressionless, motionless.

"I wanted a talk with you."

"What about?"

"I reckon you know, don't you?"

"If I do, then why bring it up? We've

nothing at all to talk about, you and me."

Faintly the eyes flashed fire. "Easy does it, now, Firestone. Bygones may be bygones, and all that. But I'm responsible for the peace in Kallamah, and I've got the right to make peaceable inquiries."

"Not of me, Flood. Come and arrest me if you've got proper grounds; otherwise stay away. I'll be at the hotel."

And he turned on one heel and strode off down the street. The marshal stared after him with hot anger in his gaze, but then the anger died, and he shrugged sardonically, lit a cigarette, and went his way up the street in the opposite direction. Patient and imperturbable is the law, even in Kallamah. And understanding.

A fury boiled in Firestone, the fury of years of resentment and bitterness, and it took him a while to walk it off. But the self-control of years asserted itself, and the fury passed away, and there was left only the cold determination that was the essence of the man. He walked in the twilight, and it was cool and still; the heat had gone with the sun, and the tiny dust devils no longer tormented the floury wheel ruts in the road. Lights glowed in the resorts, and the little restaurants were hazy with the smoke of many sizzling pans. Firestone was almost alone abroad in this brief last hour of quiet and of peace.

THEN, from out of a narrow alley between two small buildings, with startling suddenness, an infant bad-man charged. The desperado was about four, in tiny overalls and a battered hat, discarded by some cowboy, that enveloped him like a tent. He brandished a pair of toy pistols and utterly destroyed Firestone at one fusillade. He said, "Bang, bang, bang!" and then paused to observe results.

Firestone looked at him. The little fellow had sturdy legs and brown hair and big, bright brown eyes. Firestone said earnestly, "You sure got me that time, stranger."

At first suspicious, but then reassured, the bad man said, "You're dead. I killed you."

"You sure did."

"Then you should lie down if you're dead."

The logic was unassailable. Firestone said, "Well— Do you reckon it will be all right if I just sit down this time, stranger?"

"You should really lie down." Then magnanimously, "But you can sit down."

"Fine!" Firestone sat on the edge of the plank sidewalk. "Now suppose you tell me how come?"

"How come what?"

"How come I got myself dry-gulched that way, and by an expert?"

"Oh," said the bad man deprecatingly, "I was just robbing the bank."

Being dead, Firestone was no longer a menace, so the infant sat down beside him and told him the details. The two had an enthralled conversation about the affair.

Firestone said, "What's your name, son?"

"My name is Denny—and I'm not 'son'. I'm Black Denny."

"Black Denny?" Firestone gave him a sudden, peculiar look. "What's your daddy's name?"

"My daddy's name is Denton Parrish, and my mummy's name is Mary Lou Parrish. But I'm Black Denny."

"Black Denny!" Firestone took off his hat and looked into it, and he rubbed his tousled hair an instant, and then he put his hat back on again.

The child watched him, and in an altered tone asked. "What's the matter, mister?"

"Not a thing, son." Then he laughed a little. "I reckon I just ain't accustomed to being dry-gulched that way."

Then a woman's voice called from within one of the small buildings, "Denny!" The boy instantly assumed a crafty look and put a finger to his lips.

"Sh-h! That's my mummy and she wants me to go to bed and I don't want to go to bed."

But no craft availed. A screen door opened on the sidewalk and Black Denny's doom appeared disguised as a pretty young woman who paused at sight of the pair on

the sidewalk edge, and then came forward, at once firm and apologetic.

Firestone had risen before she spoke, and before she did she herself came stock still, and her eyes were wide and the color was suddenly gone from her face. Firestone, impassive, said nothing, and they stared for a long moment at each other. Then she said, "Jim Firestone. You've come back."

"I reckon that's right, Mary Lou."

She said, "Oh . . ." and her voice trailed off, and she seemed to know not what to do. But then all at once she swooped down and picked up young Denny in her arms, and said, "Come inside, Jim. I must talk to you."

Firestone did not move "I'd like to talk to you, Mary Lou. But I don't quite reckon it's possible."

"Why not?"

"It's not possible for me to set foot inside Denton Parrish's door, and I reckon you know that."

She laughed, shortly and bitterly. "You come right inside. This is no door of Denton Parrish's."

"It's not?"

"No, and it never has been. You do as I say."

So Jim Firestone did as she said.

BLACK DENNY, the Bad Man, was many hours asleep before that talk came to an end. They talked in the single room at the rear of the little building which was the entire living quarters of Mary Lou and little Denny. The front part of the place was Mary Lou's workshop and store, and there she plied the meager trade of frontier milliner.

"I've been here over three years now," she told him. "It's not the life I had dreamed of in the days you knew me, Jim, but it does. I have Denny, and that's about everything."

He listened to her, lounging in brooding fashion in an old rocking chair, legs outstretched. There was a devil of restlessness in him, but he quelled it, watching her from under lowered and deeply thoughtful brows. Something was coming; she had a deeper purpose than mere idle talk, and he waited and wondered. Thought and memory ran on of themselves, independent of his attention to her talk. She sat with the oil lamp close beside her on the table, a work basket on her knees, and she mended the boy's clothes. He could see a pride and a valor about her, and an aloofness in poverty, although these things were dropped from her this night like a garment, now that she talked to him.

"I stood it for two years, Jim," she said. "Two months taught me plain enough all that my life would be forever after with Denton, and I planned desperately to end it somehow. But before I could get away—there was suddenly young Denny to consider, and I didn't go. I thought maybe the baby would be an influence. It was, but the wrong kind. It meant responsibility, and thought for another, and work and care. Denton Parrish's life had no room for those things."

"Just what was wrong with him? Was he drinking?"

"Drinking? Maybe I could have put up with it, if it were that alone. It was many things. Gambling, women—oh, you can guess."

"Hm," said Firestone, and he stirred, and placed one leg over the other and ran a hand through his hair, and said, "Did he ever strike you?"

She shook her head slightly, and there was a small troubled smile on her face, as if it mattered so little what Denton had done to her—and mattered so terribly that Jim Firestone should clearly understand.

She said, "Yes, he struck me. But that's of so little consequence. What counted was little Denny, and that a home was going to ruin. Denton hated marriage and work and family, and he ceased caring what happened to anything. The herd his father left him was draining dry. Good hands wouldn't stay and work for him, and the couple he kept only helped drink up what money we had."

"How is the ranch now?"

"There isn't any ranch. He sold it later

for a song—and that's all it was worth by that time."

It was an incredible story, touched with horror, so impersonally told. Mary Lou was no longer a pretty woman in that lamplight—she was beautiful. Little Denny's eyes were hers, large and eloquent and moving, of a luminous light brown hue. Her face was even, full of character, and her complexion was youthful and fair. He watched her mouth, an ample, kind mouth made for soft laughter and tenderness and love, and he remembered her as she was ten years gone.

She had been fourteen or fifteen. Not yet a woman, no longer a child, she was a lovely young thing, lithe and straight and full of thrilling promise. She spoke little, but she watched, and the big shining eyes told more than she would have wished. She had a hero—handsome, reckless young Jim Firestone. He might never have known, but that folks teased her. He was amused and even flattered and then puzzled and finally discomfited. It is difficult, at twenty-one, to face the worship of fifteen, unasked, unwanted. He simply stayed away from its vicinity.

"We never thought, back in the old days," she said now, as if she read his thoughts, "that there could ever be such terrible things in life as have happened to us, Jim. No more than, now that we're a little wiser, we can guess what lies ahead, can we?"

"We can know one thing for certain, Mary Lou. We were pretty happy and carefree then, and that didn't last. Whatever the present may be, it won't last either—not if we want the change bad enough."

She threw him a quick, unreadable look. Her hands were idle a moment. Then she got up, went to have a look at young Denny in the bed beyond the drape that hung across the room, dividing it. When she came back she said, "You've let me talk on, Jim, but you've told me practically nothing about yourself. I'd like to know."

"Well . . . there's little to know."

"Please don't be stand-offish with me, Jim," she pleaded. "We're old friends."

He smiled a slow smile. "What would you like to know?"

"Why—— Well, I'll come out with it. Tell me about prison. Was it very bad?"

He colored, and his eyes grew hard. "No, it wasn't bad. The grub was all right, the warden was fair, and the governor let me out under three years. That's about all I've got to say about my prison term."

"And after?"

"I worked around. I filed on a quarter section, and proved up. I've got a few head of stock."

"You look prosperous, Jim. You look like a man who's got plenty more than a few. Are you married?"

"No. I never quite found the time. I've worked pretty hard."

"I see. And now suppose you tell me—"

But at that he got up, abruptly enough to check her. He simply stood there, unreadable, absorbed in the cigarette he was making. She waited for him to speak, waiting with woman's patience, biding her time.

He said, "Mary Lou, I know what you most want to be told. But I'm afraid I don't feel inclined to talk much about it."

"No?"

"I reckon I needn't explain. You naturally want to know what could have brought me back to the bitterness of Kallamah. I'll take it kindly if we leave that question unanswered."

Now she rose and came to him, to stand and study him, his eyes, his mouth, his hardened face. "I know you, Jim Firestone, even after all these years. I don't need to ask any more questions. I know why you came back to Kallamah."

He said nothing, and she went on, "You've kept a hard and bitter thought in your heart all this time. But I reckon you must realize by now how vain a thing it is."

"Vain?"

ABRUPTLY he wheeled and walked away from her, unable to stand there longer, but as quickly he returned, and he said harshly, "Tell me what's vain about that!"

"Then I'm right," she said. She looked at him, puzzled, and added, "But don't you know? Didn't they tell you? Denton's not here."

"Not here? Where is he?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. He's a fugitive."

"Go on."

"He broke into Considine's grain and feed office and robbed the old safe. A year ago. Nobody'd ever have suspected, but that he was seen coming out. He had to keep on going. There have been rumors of him now and then, from bad to worse, but no one knows where he is."

And something wilted in Jim Firestone. His mind tried to reject this news, and it could not. He sat down slowly in the chair.

She watched him a moment, then sat on the floor alongside and leaned one arm on his knee. There was pity and understanding in her eyes, an anxiety to bring this man to see, as she saw, the emptiness of passion and vengeance, the sad, drear sterility of pain cherished beyond its brief time. It was a feeling in her stronger than words.

"Jim," she said softly.

"Yes."

"I've got something to tell you. I've been waiting to tell you. But I wish you'd give me a promise."

"A promise of what?"

"To go away from here."

"Mary Lou, are you pleading for Denton Parrish?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"Little Denny is enough reason, isn't he? I don't want the killer of his father to be—Jim Firestone."

"Why not?" he rasped. "I reckon you don't know my reasons."

"I reckon I do," she said. "Listen to me, Jim. I was once in love with you. Head over heels. It was a schoolgirl kind of thing, but it lasted a long time, and it tore me to pieces often. I near died when they took you away. Denton Parrish knew that. And he made use of it. He taunted me. He told me at last, for the plain satisfaction he found in it, that you were clean innocent of the charge that sent you to prison. He told me that he had run off that bunch of stock himself and planted the evidence that convicted you of rustling cattle. I suppose you knew that?"

"I knew it."

"And you never spoke up?"

"I didn't. We'd been friends, Dent and I. We rode together as boys. I figured to let it ride; I thought sure he'd clear me if it came to conviction. I couldn't believe he'd let a man down."

"He was weak, Jim. Easy to like and hard to trust. And what was weakness in the boy became viciousness in the man. He has punished himself more than you ever can. That's the thing I want you to see. God takes care of those things in His own time and His own way, Jim."

He said nothing, and she went on, "Jim—you'll quit this and go away now, won't you?"

And Firestone balked. "No, by Heaven! I have an account to settle. If not with Denton Parrish, then with this town that let me be framed and railroaded for nothing more than that I was a coltish, half-broken kid. They called that justice. Justice? They were all set on breaking me regardless, and they broke me, and they owe me a settlement for that. No—I'm not done with them!"

"Jim! What do you mean? What are you going to do?"

But he got up, raising her firmly to her feet without a word. Grimly, granting nothing, he picked up his hat, and with that she threw herself at him, holding him in desperation and panic.

"Jim. . . Jim! Whatever can I do with you? You think it's justice you want, when it's not justice at all but a private satisfaction. It's no squaring of a debt, but a personal pleasure, and a cruel and selfish one."

"Cruel? Selfish?"

"What else? If I can dare speak the truth, you can stand to hear it. Don't do it, Jim, whatever you have in mind. I know it's something terrible. Don't do it.

Leave it to the Almighty, Jim. And let me help you, let me."

"You can forget you ever saw me tonight, and that will be the best help you can offer."

He disengaged her hold, and she did not resist, but covered her face with her hands and began to cry. For a moment he held her, his own hands hard on her shoulders, and then he let her go and made for the door and was abruptly gone in the night.

SOME while later, after Firestone had walked off the first fury of the storm raging within him, he stopped at an empty corral at the edge of town, and he climbed to a seat on the top rail and rolled a cigarette. A three-quarter moon rode high, and the level prairie was a mist of shadows below the far darkness of the mountains. Firestone stared into the night, and his thoughts were no comfort but a confusion of doubt and distraction. Memory plagued him, and the riddle of life—and on top of all, the mystery that is woman was a torment exquisite and wholly unexpected.

It was a rendezvous with all the future that he kept there, a casting of accounts and the striking of a balance. He had understood Mary Lou's argument far better than he allowed. She had called the turn. He had come back here to Kallamah, in his stubbornness and strength, to exact a long due payment—and in the end, he knew, it was only a bitter and sterile thing. He thought of the faith and the strength and the beauty of her, and he was humbled. He thought of the valor and quiet courage that had carried her, unfailing and unflinching, through all despair, and the quick of his being was pierced by the thought.

A cruel and selfish personal pleasure, she had said. And he could not gainsay her. He sat there with his thoughts while the moon and the constellations wheeled and the lights of Front Street died and the very stillness of Creation came over the world.

It was still an hour till dawn when Firestone knocked softly at Mary Lou Parrish's door. It was the rear door, and the knock awakened her, and she answered as quickly as she could find slippers and a large, all enveloping shawl in the darkness.

"Mary Lou, I won't ask to come in," he told her. "I know well it's a rash thing, to come here at this hour, but I've got to talk to you."

"Certainly, Jim," she said, and she came out and closed the door and sat on the little step and drew him down beside her. The night air was cool, and she wrapped herself closely in the shawl. Her matter-of-factness was belied by a trembling all through her.

"What is it, Jim?"

He said, "I think I've fought it out in my mind, Mary Lou. I've tried. I'm willing to go away."

"I'm right glad, Jim."

"I wonder."

"Why do you say that?"

"You asked to help me. I'm asking for help. There's something mighty big you can do, Mary Lou."

"Yes?"

"I want you to come away with me and let me take care of you and the boy."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she rocked a little, and a tiny moan escaped her. "Jim! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I realize. I've thought it out tonight, sitting out by the prairie and trying to figure out why you should pinch along here without help or comfort. Trying maybe to figure out what good use was left for my own busted life. I reckon I need you. And I could take good care of you both, Mary Lou."

"I don't doubt it, Jim. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"But it can't be done."

"Why not? I'm fixed to take the best of care of you both. On any terms you say, Mary Lou. You know what I mean, I reckon."

"I know. You're decent and good, Jim, and you're kind. But it's just utterly out of the question."

"I still can't see why," he said. "If it's

Denny you're thinking of, won't he be better off away from here where his father is branded? And what if his father takes it in his head to carry off the boy?"

She clutched at his arm, the fingers digging in his flesh. "Jim—don't say such things!"

"I've thought of them, and a lot others."

"Please, please, Jim! Don't say any more. Trust me that I know what's best. You've got to."

There was no argument to meet that. He tried to think of one, and couldn't. He looked at her in silence; her face was a faint luminous presence in the deep dark. They were close, and yet they were divided by more than a space of worlds, and there was a bleakness in Jim Firestone and the night was empty and he was alone. He sat wordless for so long that she finally whispered, "Jim—you're not mad at me?"

"No," he said. "I'm not mad at anybody. I feel like something that was burning and alive that the fire has gone out of. Life was pretty simple up till the time I came home today. to come home here and do what I planned to do was all I needed to complete it."

"What did you plan?"

"To get Dent if it was the last thing I ever did. And if I disposed of that, to hold up that new bank and clean it of everything I could lay a hand on."

"Jim!"

He laughed softly. "Don't be shocked. I wasn't turning bandit professionally. I was aiming only to square my account with this town. And now suddenly I don't care enough."

"I'm very glad." She added, "And in a way, I'm sorry. Not caring can be worse than hating, Jim."

He thought that over a moment, and said, "Maybe. But I'll be careful hereafter not to find myself caring for any least thing again."

JIM FIRESTONE slept till late next day. He was loath to awaken even then, for there was a kind of exhaustion in him, and no welcome for another day. He got up and went downstairs and ate without appetite. He went into the bar and there looked through the *Courier,* and was barely aware of what he read. For a time he simply stood at the street window and stared unseeing out at the cloudless sky above the rooftops. Finally he went to his room and began slowly to put his things back into his bag, but before he finished the job he sat down in a chair and rested his head in his hands and remained so a long time without moving.

There was a sickness in the soul of Jim Firestone, and a serious malady it was. Jim Firestone was alone among his own people, and there is no greater loneliness than that.

He was there in his room when the day began to die and the prairie wind was stilled and the rolling murmur of voices from the bar crept through the quiet that lay upon the town. He did not at first move when he heard the yelling of a man in the street, but he came alert when a desperate voice retorted, cursing, and three pistol shots sounded rapidly, followed by the deep report of a shotgun. Automatically, swiftly, he got his .45 from the bag, and a small box of cartridges as well. A confusion of fearful shouting and a fusillade of shots came from the street, and he did not go near the exposed window, but ran from the room and downstairs to the lobby.

A couple of men crouched at window corners there in attitudes of fear and fascination. The pale and shaking clerk behind the desk held a revolver in his hand but looked utterly incapable of doing anything with it. From him Firestone got an explanation. The Kallamah Bank was being held up. A gang, springing apparently out of nowhere, had taken possession of Front Street, driving to shelter the few citizens abroad in this quiet hour. Marshal Flood had been shot down out of hand, the report had it, and dragged wounded into shelter. That was all the clerk knew.

Firestone stood motionless at the desk for an instant, and thought went off like wheels of fire in his brain. And then suddenly he laughed. Here assuredly was

sheerest irony, cosmic irony, a jest of the very gods. The Kallamah Bank!

Then he snatched up a pen and a piece of paper from the desk, wrote rapidly, and thrust pen and paper at the clerk. "Witness my signature, there," he commanded. "Get one of those fellows to sign for a second witness. Then put that paper in an envelope and hold it for me."

"What are you going to do?" asked the clerk.

"I'm going to settle an old account."

Firestone, pistol in hand, walked to the swing doors of the entrance and looked over their top, ignoring the hoarse commands of a man flattened against the nearby wall that he keep back and not draw the bandits' fire. Down the street Firestone saw two mounted men, heavily armed. A third man stood on the sidewalk before the bank. He had a shotgun. There were two saddled horses waiting in the roadway. That meant a fourth man inside the bank. None of the men were masked. One look was sufficient to place them as men of the country, skilled and reckless riders and deadly shots. For one paralyzed moment the town was in their power, and that moment was all they asked or needed.

Laughter still rose in Firestone like something bubbling up from unfathomed depths. Every nerve in him was quickened to a quivering tension, and there was a devil in his brain, perverse and mad. He pushed open the doors and stepped out into the street.

FIRESTONE walked in the roadway so as not to draw fire toward the buildings on the street. One of the riders turned in the saddle and snapped three quick shots, but they missed and whipped the air past Firestone without doing harm. He held his own fire. The second rider spurred his mount and advanced to close the distance for surer aim. Firestone let him come, but as the other slowed, he fired in one sure quick movement before the bandit pulled trigger. The man crumpled in the saddle and toppled forward from his seat into the road. He retained a rigid grip on one rein, and the horse snorted and circled about him in panic.

It was the horse, doubtless, that saved Firestone. The animal paced and maneuvered in a spot precisely between Firestone and the two remaining bandits, depriving them of any advantage. The gunman on the sidewalk shouted urgently into the bank. Firestone walked steadily on.

And then a number of things happened in such rapid succession as to seem to come all at once. The fourth bandit backed out of the bank, a canvas sack slung over his shoulder. He fired two aimless shots through the door to intimidate those inside. From up the street behind Firestone came a woman's scream, and then her voice calling frantically. It was Mary Lou, and without looking back, Firestone knew she was running—running to stop him, likely enough. And next a man ventured out of a small building almost opposite the bank. He was white of face and he trembled, but there was a shotgun in his hands and an awesome look in his reckless eyes. Fear was visibly molten in him, and he was a brave man indeed. It was Lem Hazeltine.

And finally, the fourth bandit turned to face the rising danger in the street—and Firestone saw that he was Denton Parrish, and knew that Parrish recognized him instantly in turn.

The street exploded with gunfire. The three bandits, nerves set on a hairtrigger, fired in a frenzy. Firestone halted and replied without haste, grimly deliberate. There was no laughter in him now. His third shot dropped the man with the shotgun, wounding him severely, by every sign. Parrish first tried to aid, then abandoned him. Parrish was a man going to pieces before the eyes of those who watched. The bandit still in the saddle emptied his two guns, and then turned his mount and raced down the street in headlong flight.

Denton Parrish alone remained, and a madness of rage overtook him. He began to run, cursing, charging, firing as he

came. Firestone stopped and waited, gun ready.

But he was not to use it. Sitting on the sidewalk edge, where a bullet had crumpled one leg beneath him, Lem Hazeltine let go the second shell in his shotgun, and Denton Parrish collapsed full into the dust, the life blasted out of him. And so the shooting and the bank raid both were suddenly brought to an end.

Firestone was still standing motionless, expressionless, looking at the hideous remnant of a man lying in the road, when Mary Lou caught up with him. She was sobbing, and she grabbed him and felt of him, his shoulders and his arms, as if it were incredible that he should be still unharmed.

"Jim! Oh Jim . . .!"

"I'm all right, Mary Lou. It's all done and over."

"Jim—I'd die if anything happened to you!"

And then he had to reach quickly and hold her, for the trembling knees beneath her had suddenly done too much to sustain her longer.

IT was an exultant crowd that presently gathered at the Harkness bar. More than a little of the noise and loud talk arose from the sheepish chagrin that many now felt at their late behavior. They slapped Firestone on the back and shook his hand and tried to buy him drinks enough to founder him. They addressed him as "Jim!" and recalled the old days and were proud of him with the pride that is reserved for one's own.

Lem Hazeltine explained it somewhat when Firestone called him. The editor was temporarily crippled, but not seriously hurt.

"I won't say anything at all here and now about what you did out there in the street today, Jim. I'll save that for the paper. But I reckon I ought to tell you, for every man in the country as well as myself, that we feel beholden to you in a way I don't think we can ever repay. It's a long time now since that jury sent you to Stillwell, but I doubt there's a man within a day's riding today who has any doubts of your innocence in that old charge. We didn't know Denton Parrish then, you see, as well as we later came to know him. When I shook your hand, boy, I meant it in true friendship from the bottom of my heart, even though I could feel your suspicion and distrust and didn't know for the life of me what to do about it. You have my word for it that the same holds for every man who has taken your hand. We're your friends, Jim. And we're mighty humble, and mighty proud of you today."

And a thousand values shifted and rearranged themselves in Firestone's mind, and he began to sense for the first time clearly how sweet a thing a man can find it to be home. Friends! He smiled a slow smile, and looked into his hat and ran a hand through his hair, and then got out his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette with a considerable spilling of the golden flakes.

It was late evening before the chance came to Firestone to see Mary Lou alone. They sat on a little step outside her door and watched the lop-sided moon wheeling through the night. There was a quietness on Mary Lou tonight, a quietness of spirit that was something quite other than mere peace. It was an acceptance of life and the mystery of living, an acceptance without demur. It was serenity, but there was a sadness in it.

He watched her and wondered, and he was disturbed and there was a dull, listless pain somewhere in his being that he knew would never be appeased.

She said, "Jim, I thought I knew you. But I reckon nobody ever knows another person completely. There's one thing I don't and can't understand."

"What's that, Mary Lou?"

"What ever led you to walk into the street in the face of those guns this afternoon?"

That was hard to answer. "I don't know exactly. It happened, that's all."

"But you had told me you wanted that

bank to be robbed--and yet you walked out when no other man in town dared."

He grinned a little. "Well, maybe it was plain dog-in-the-manger. I just couldn't stand for anybody else doing what they were doing." But he sobered, and talked on, and he tried to tell her something of what happened in his mind all in that one tense moment. That life had shaken down to an emptiness such as he had never known nor dreamed of, that he found it suddenly containing no single thing he could cherish or preserve. She herself had told him that "not caring" could be worse than hating, and he had come to the pass of seeing how right she was.

AND then all in an instant he found that he really did care, after all, and cared badly. He cared that the bank was in danger and that the town was threatened. It was his town and his home, and its faults were the faults of his own people. If he still cared little for himself or for his life, that was one thing. Kallamah and its people were another.

"I spent no time debating it," he told her. "I knew what it was I most wanted. I had my gun and I went out there into the street. If I'd stopped to think longer, maybe I'd have stayed hidden. I stopped only to write out a certain document, and to have it witnessed and placed in the hotel clerk's hand for safekeeping. I was willing for it to be the last thing I ever did."

"What was it?"

"It was my will, Mary Lou. I own a considerable spread and a sizable herd. If anything should happen, that was all to go to you and young Denny."

"Jim . . .!" she said, and she put a hand on his hand

His hand folded itself over her smaller one. "Mary Lou, let me say what I want to say just this once more. You're free now. I can take care of you in every way a man is able. I'd like for you—I'd like you to marry me, Mary Lou."

She made a little sound of pain, and she did not answer.

He went on, "I'd do my best to make up to you for everything, honey—to make you as happy as I can. I ask for nothing more than the chance of that, Mary Lou."

"Yes?"

"About caring for things. There was more than the bank and the town on my mind, honey. There was you, most of all."

She looked at him. "What do you mean, Jim?"

"I mean I love you. I reckon I always did."

"*Me*, Jim?"

"Yes. It seems like I must always have thought of you as a little girl, until now that I find you a grown woman, and prettier and finer than I could have dreamed. I can't help telling you this. I hope you don't mind that I seem so set and stubborn about it."

"Jim!" She took his face in her hands, looking in wonder, searching for the answer to a very great mystery indeed. "Do you really mean that? Really?"

"I'd never have spoken otherwise."

"Oh, my dear . . . Oh, my dear!" Her throat choked, and she rocked a little where she sat, and then her arms, quick with an intense hunger, were around his neck, and her head was on his shoulder and her hair was soft and fragrant against his face. "My darling! And you never, never guessed? Jim—I'm all yours, yours, every bit of me. You can do whatever you want with me."

He was like one stunned. "Mary Lou—you'll marry me?"

"Tomorrow, if you want. Or tonight, or any time. I love you—I've never stopped loving you."

The feeling of miracles in him was too great for speech. She went on, "You were gone out of my life, I thought, and then without a word of warning you walked into it again. And you wanted to take me away, and you never said you cared. You never cared before. You never hinted you cared now. Maybe I might have gone with you anyway, but for little Denny. When you come near me I'm weak, Jim. If you'd once said you loved me, I don't know what

I might have done. Oh, Jim—"

"I'm a fool lunkhead, and I'm sorry," he said humbly. "I didn't know. There's a lot I don't know, Mary Lou. But I reckon I can learn."

"You've only begun to learn how much I care, Jim. Oh, I'll see that you never stop learning, never. And never stop loving me. All of a lifetime, forever and a day."

"Forever and a day," he promised, and could think of nothing more to add. There were no words left unsaid. He held her close, and his arms contained a tremendous happiness, and all the wide dark night around them was warm and aglow with a great, untouched enchantment.

Hairless in Gaza

THE further we progress in the civilized scale from the ape, the less we care to look like him. Up until the last twenty-five years the male face was looked upon as a garden for raising all manner of hirsute shrubbery. The real beau of the plush-sofa decade looked like a cross between a French poodle and a moss-covered manse. His whiskers were as artfully managed as the sculptured boxwood of the Este gardens. These hairy perennials were often the breeding ground for pests and bugs; they trailed in the soup, they were bathed in beer suds; and, on the face of a lover, they were—well, a nuisance.

In the United States, about the only beards that remain are on the Supreme Court bench, but in South America beards and mustaches still flourish. And that is why Mr. Louis Zinberg, accompanied by a secretary and an interpreter, has sailed for South America. Mr. Zinberg is president of a firm which thinks that electrolysis is the nicest way to remove hair from the limbs, chests and faces of mankind. He has pretty well denuded the American skin and now is carrying his message to our brothers of the South.

The South Americans, being the romantics they are, will be easy to convince, Mr. Zinberg thinks. Mr. Zinberg will stress the romantic angle. He will try to convince the males that the females do not like foliage on the face, and he will try to convince the females that, at the beach, they will be more popular with smooth, electrolysized limbs. The ultimate of this line of reasoning seems to be that Mr. Zinberg will soon have us all bald.

—*J. Wentworth Tilden*

King Colt

By LUKE SHORT

CHAPTER XXII

CAMPFIRE CONCLAVE

HANK built a big fire in the gravel while the rest of them untied Westfall and then unsaddled. By the time they were finished, there was a roaring fire going and it pushed night far back behind the malpais walls. Neither Turk, Hugo, nor Hank talked, for this was Johnny's affair. They watched silently as Johnny led Westfall over to the fire and untied his bonds. They looked at the man, at his massive body, his openly puzzled face, and privately they wondered—all except Hugo. His ores had never betrayed him; this was the man who first started digging at Pick's ore, and it followed that he was Pick's killer.

Westfall looked at the four of them, his face—if not amiable—composed. But he was bewildered, too.

When the ropes were off, he chafed his wrists, and looked over at Johnny.

"You wouldn't know what this is all about, I suppose," Johnny said softly, scornfully.

Westfall shook his head. "No, I don't."

"You don't know me?"

"Never seen you before."

"Ever hear of Johnny Hendry?" Johnny asked, as he unbuckled his shell belt and let it slide to the ground.

Westfall nodded. "Sure. I've heard of you. You're outlawed now, ain't you?"

"Ever hear of Pick Hendry?" Johnny asked quietly, watching Westfall with unblinking, savage eyes.

Westfall shook his big head and glanced inquisitively at Hank. "Are you him?"

"You liar," Johnny said tightly, "you murderin' sneakin' liar!"

Westfall's grave eyes settled on Johnny again, and, seeing the agitation in his face, he wisely kept silent.

Johnny walked over to face him, and as he walked, he whipped off his hat. Facing Westfall, he said in a voice thick with

The first instalment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for July 3

anger, "You never heard of him! You killed him!"

"How do you figure that?" Westfall said calmly.

Johnny's lips were white. "Pick Hendry was murdered, his head half blown off with a shotgun. He'd been workin' there in Bonanza canyon and he'd struck gold. He was on his way to register his claim when you come up on him. You killed him and took his location papers and filed them, and now you're workin' the claim!"

"And how can you prove that?" Westfall asked, still curiously.

"Your ore matches the ore Pick had assayed!" Johnny said thickly, and then he did not wait for more. He lashed out with his fist, catching Westfall flush in the face so that he staggered back and fell. Johnny walked over to him.

"First, I'm goin' to give you the beatin' of your life, fella'. Then, when I'm done, I'm goin' to give you a gun. If you've nerve enough to try and use it, I'll belly-shoot you! I'll stand by five days and nights and watch you die, you back-shootin' ranahan! Get up here and take it!"

Westfall was mad now. It didn't matter that he had been accused unfairly. This slim, furious cowpuncher before him had named him everything that he hated, and had knocked him down to boot.

With a growl of rage, Westfall got to his feet and faced Johnny.

JOHNNY struck out again with the swiftness of a snake's tongue, and again Westfall went down. Johnny leaped on top of him and they were a tangle of flailing arms and legs. It was a bitter fight, with no cursing, no sound except the grunting and the smack of fists on flesh. Johnny fought like a maniac. Astraddle Westfall, he slugged blow after blow into Westfall's face, until that giant of man, goaded to desperation, heaved himself to his feet, shaking Johnny off. Erect, his face was already bloody, but there was a light of murder in his eyes.

He tried to clinch with Johnny, and in lofty and angry contempt, Johnny let him. They wrestled around locked in iron embrace, but Johnny pumped a dozen blows into Westfall's midriff before the bigger man was glad to break. But Johnny would not let him break; he followed him with implacable anger, his lean shoulder muscles corded with the overhand blows he was looping into Westfall's face. And with the blind anger of a bull, Westfall was fighting back. When one of his ponderous blows landed, it would lift Johnny off his feet and set him back a yard, but each time Johnny would charge in anew, fighting with the deadly silence of a man gone mad.

Round and round the fire they circled, and it was Westfall, in spite of superior weight, who was giving ground. With the dogged bewilderment of a cornered bear before hounds, he tried to protect himself, but he could not. His slowness left him prey to Johnny's lightning blows, and when each one landed on his raw face, he staggered a little.

In one last rally, he lowered his head, braced his feet in the gravel, and slugged wildly at the swarming figure before him. Johnny, blind with rage, drove blow after blow at those thick, protecting arms, and then in fury of frustration, he dived in and clinched with Westfall. The big man wrapped his arms around Johnny, trying to smother him, but Johnny, legs braced broadly, hunched his shoulders and heaved mightily. Westfall left the ground, and, still heaving, Johnny toppled him over backwards. Almost before Westfall sprawled on his back, Johnny was at him again, straddling him. And time after time, his fists raised as if he were pounding with a hammer, Johnny slugged down at that face. Abruptly, Westfall's arms ceased to move and sank down by his side, but still Johnny kept hitting him, his blows hard and savage, merciless, countless.

At last, struggling and cursing and crying, he had to be dragged off by Hugo and Turk, who had a hard time holding him until he came to his senses and calmed down.

"I'm all right," he panted finally. "Get him on his feet."

Johnny stood there, weaving on his feet, his shirt torn to ribbons, his face bloody, his body cut.

But Westfall was completely out. Hank slapped him, punched him, rolled his head, but the man remained as limp as a rag.

"Get him up!" Johnny commanded, his eyes blazing. "He's going to get the rest of it!"

Turk looked over at Hank. Neither of them liked this. It was as bloody and savage as two wolves fighting for the supremacy of the pack; and it sickened Hugo. But none of them objected, for they could understand Johnny's part of it.

Hank went over to the spring and filled his hat with water and brought it back and doused water in Westfall's face. Still he did not move.

AFTER Hank had made ten trips with water, during which time Turk slapped Westfall's face until his hands were sore, Westfall moaned. Turk stood up and backed off, and slowly, Westfall rose to a sitting position. For a long minute, while the rest of them watched him, he stared at the fire with the glassy eyes of a man who is only partially conscious. When he shook his head, as if trying to clear his brain, Johnny strode over to him and hoisted him to his unsteady feet. What clothes were remaining on Westfall were covered with blood. His face was distorted with welts and bruises and his lips were shapeless ribbons of flesh.

Sharply, Johnny slapped him in the face until he flinched away and raised an arm, then Johnny let him go and backed off.

Westfall looked up now, and his eyes were clear.

"That's enough," he murmured wearily.

Johnny said nothing. He walked over to his shell belt, took out both guns, came over to Westfall and thrust one of them at Westfall.

"Enough!" he said savagely. "You haven't even begun to get it."

Westfall looked stupidly at the gun. "What's this for?"

Turk cut in gently, "Ease up, kid. He can't even count his toes now." But Turk had his six-gun out, trained on Westfall.

Johnny turned to Turk and said savagely, "Stay out of this!"

Wheeling back to Westfall, he said, "Get across that fire. I'll give any man a chance to defend himself, but when you turn around to face me, start shootin', fella, because I am!"

A gleam of intelligence returned to Westfall's face. He studied the gun a long moment, as if assembling his thoughts. Then he dropped the gun and looked up at Johnny. "Go ahead and shoot," he said wearily.

"Pick up that gun!"

"Huh-unh. Go ahead and cut down on me. I dunno what this is all about, but I reckon you got blood in your eye, mister."

"I'll shoot," Johnny said evenly. "But not before you pick up that gun! And if I have to tie it in your hand, I'll do that! Pick it up!"

Westfall heaved a deep sigh and looked steadily at Johnny with his one good eye. "That claim ain't mine, son. I might as well tell you. I never found it. I was paid to mine it."

"Crawlin'!" Johnny sneered.

Westfall shook his head. "You don't need to believe that, but it's so."

"Pick up that gun!" Johnny commanded.

"Wait a minute," Hugo cut in gently. "That could be, Johnny. It might have been sold to him by the man that really killed Pick."

"Who owns it then?" Johnny cut in, his voice still scornful.

"Major Fitz."

At any other name in the world, Johnny would have laughed and sneered. But now, he suddenly lowered his gun. "Major Fitz?" he murmured. "He sold you the claim?"

"No, I'm just minin' it for him. He didn't want his name known, threatened to cut me to doll rags if I ever mentioned it to anybody."

Johnny shot one brief glance at Turk

and Hank, and then walked over to Westfall.

"Go on."

"That's all there is to it," Westfall said wearily. "Hoke Carmody come over and made me the proposition. I couldn't see anything wrong with it. Carmody put money in the Warms bank for me and I drew on it. I hired the men, bought the supplies and started the work. Last night, I brought the first report to Fitz and Carmody from the mill. Fitz accused me of holdin' out the gold on him. Said to go back and if the next report didn't show better, he'd turn them gunnies of his loose on me." He looked at Johnny and said simply, "That's all there is to it."

"You got the location papers, the original ones?"

"The ones Fitz gave me? Sure."

WESTFALL'S hands were so cut and bloody that it took him some time to pull out the papers in his hip pocket. He stepped over to the fire so as to see better, and after he had fumbled through the mass of papers in his hand, he brought two out and handed them to Johnny. The others crowded around Johnny to read them. One was the original location paper, written in Pick's own handwriting. The others were the plats of the other six claims, just as Fitz had copied them down from Barney's description. These, of course, were in Fitz's handwriting.

When Johnny was finished, he folded them up and sank down by the fire, staring at it. He had forgotten all about Westfall. All he could think of was that Major Fitz, already proven a rustler and killer, the warm friend of Nora's, his own one-time friend and benefactor, was the man who had killed Pick Hendry.

"Tell me all of this again, from start to finish," he told Westfall. The story was almost the same. Westfall repeated conversations, and Johnny prodded him with questions. Westfall told of the happenings of last night, of his meeting with Fitz, of his conviction that he was being watched by hands of the Bar 33.

"Has Tip Rogers got his report yet?" Johnny asked.

"He got it tonight."

Johnny gazed pensively at his bloody fists, the germ of an idea formulating in his mind. He was wondering about Tip Rogers. Tip had every reason to hate him, if he believed that Johnny robbed the bank; but on the other hand, if all this evidence against Fitz was presented, wouldn't Tip be willing to help? Johnny remembered that grave, honest face. The thought that Tip had Nora now and would marry her was something that he put in the back of his mind. He was trying to be just. Would Tip help him, if all the facts were before him? Johnny thought so.

"Roll me a cigarette, Turk, will you?" Johnny asked. "Roll Westfall one too."

Turk did, and they lighted up. All of them were waiting to hear what Johnny would propose, and when he was finished with his smoke, he told them. It was a bold plan, and risky.

"Hugo," he said, when they were finished discussing it. "Do you think you could get Tip Rogers and bring him here by morning?"

"I ought to be able to. He was at the hotel when I left. Likely, he'll stay there the night."

"Then try and get him," Johnny murmured. "If he falls in with this, we'll not only kill Fitz, but we'll break him before we do, and that will hurt him worse than a slug in the back." He turned to Westfall. "Are you with us, Westfall? It strikes me that's the only way out for you."

"It is," Westfall said grimly. "I am. My life ain't worth nothin' as long as that coyote is loose."

BY the time Hugo was ready to leave, Johnny and Westfall were sleeping in their blankets, side by side. Hank sided Hugo as far as the town, which was so dark and deserted at this hour that Hank decided to risk going in. At the tie rail of the Cosmos, he waited while Hugo went inside and inquired of the clerk, whom he had to waken, the number of Tip's room.

In ten minutes, Hugo returned with Tip. The Cosmos was utterly dark, and the store lamps across the street were long since dimmed, so that Tip could not see Hank very well. Hugo introduced him as Bill Petty and Tip nodded.

"Why all the mystery, Hugo?" Tip asked, laughing a little. "Where are we going?"

"How did your report from the mill turn out?" Hugo countered.

Tip laughed ruefully. "Between you and me, it didn't turn out. There was nothing there—not a thing."

"Think you'd like your old job back at the Esmerella?"

"I would," Tip said shortly, "but there's not much chance."

"Maybe if you come along with me tonight, we'll fix that."

"Open the Esmerella?"

"I think so, and before very long."

Tip's curiosity was whetted down. As they rode out of town, he asked more questions, but Hugo was uncommunicative.

It was well after sun-up when Hank guided them into the malpais field. Tip had spent the last hour since daylight trying to place Hank's face, and for the life of him, he could not. But he had the uneasy feeling that he had met the man before, and in a place where he could not see his face very well. Hugo, however, was whistling, and Tip trusted him, so that his faint suspicions did not make him balky.

Just at the mouth of the small conyon, Hank pulled his horse aside and motioned Hugo ahead. Hugo, in turn, motioned Tip ahead, and Tip went on.

Rounding the turn, he came square into the camp—and saw Johnny Hendry grinning at him from his place by the campfire.

Instinctively, Tip's hand traveled to his gun, very suddenly, but he remembered that Hank was behind him. He wheeled his horse to confront Hugo.

"Since when did you turn crook, too, Hugo?"

"Take it easy," Hugo said, smiling faintly. "Don't talk until you've heard what there is to say. You're no prisoner, Tip, so cough the sand out of your craw."

Grimly, Tip dismounted and walked over to Johnny. "This your plan, Johnny?"

Johnny cheerfully admitted it was. He introduced Turk and Westfall, and Tip looked long at Westfall, trying to explain his presence here. Tip concluded in one short moment that there had been a fight here between Johnny and Westfall, but beyond that, he could not hazard a guess.

"How'd your report turn out, Rogers?" Westfall asked him.

"Sorry. How did yours?"

"The same, and for a good reason. There's no gold there," Westfall said, and laughed. Tip couldn't understand that either. He took the breakfast offered him, and listened to the small talk between the others. Covertly, he eyed Johnny, and against his own wishes he had to concede that Johnny didn't look like a bank robber and never would.

When they were all smoking after the meal, Tip said to Hugo, "Well, Hugo, it's up to you. Do you think this crowd will get the Esmerella going again? Is that what you meant?"

"It is," Johnny cut in. "If we could nail the man who's been behind all this rustling and robbery, who's hired most of the hardcases in this town, don't you think we'd have a fair chance of cleaning it up?"

"With a good sheriff, maybe."

Johnny only grinned at that. His next question was asked in a calm voice, but it made Tip sit up in astonishment.

"What would you say, Tip, if I told you that Major Fitz is the brains behind all this trouble? What would you say if I told you that he killed Pick Hendry, that he started this gold rush where there's no gold, that he's behind Leach Wigran and all the rest of it?"

BEFORE Tip could answer, Johnny started out on his story, and to begin it, he went back to the time Pick was killed. He told of the poll of the ranchers, which really first put him on the trail of

Fitz. All the other things he and Hank and Turk and Hugo discovered came out, sometimes from Hank's lips, other times from Johnny's. Westfall told his part of it too, and three good hours passed in the telling. At first, Tip was skeptical, almost hostile, but he was answered reasonably. No one made any false claims and everything they said Tip checked and found true. And slowly, as the talk passed around among these men, he saw what Johnny Hendry had done, and he felt a sympathy for him. Moreover, he saw that these men were telling the truth. And out of it, there came a picture of Major Fitz which was blacker than Tip had ever dreamed of. Part of the story—especially the burning of the Running W and the Bar 33—Tip could not verify, because he had been in Bonanza canyon, but Hugo vouched for the truth of it all. He had heard it. Almost everybody in town had, but its importance was lost in the excitement of the rush.

When that was out of the way and Tip was silent with all this knowledge, Johnny broached the subject of the scheme to trap Fitz.

When he was finished, Tip said, "But why all the scheming? Go up and get him."

"I'm an outlaw," Johnny said drily. "A wanted man."

"Have Hugo tell the Sheriff, Baily Blue."

"Hasn't it struck you as pretty queer, Tip, how Blue won that election? Think back. Who'd be the worst hit if an honest lawman got in office?"

"Fitz."

"Who did get in? Blue. Who was interested in puttin' Blue in—a man who wouldn't stir a finger to clean up the country? Fitz. Then, knowin' what we know now about Fitz, it could be that Fitz crooked the election. He had the men and the money to do it, didn't he?"

"Then you think Blue is in with Fitz?" Tip asked.

Johnny spread out his hands in a gesture of negation. "I'm not accusin' any man till I have the facts, Tip. Maybe Fitz robbed the bank to get me, an honest lawman away, but I don't know. But I don't think Blue would arrest Fitz. I don't think he'd get the evidence on him. And once he did, and Fitz was in jail, how long do you think Blue would keep him locked up? If it ever come to a peaceful trial, do you think there'd be a witness left to testify against Fitz? Do you, with all those gunnies he's got and the money he's got to buy more of them?"

"Maybe not," Tip said. "But how is your scheme any better? It'd just break Fitz, strap him."

"There you've said it!" Johnny said swiftly. "Take his money away from him so he can't buy gunmen, can't bribe people, can't pay them killers' wages, and then who's goin' to stick by him? Nobody. Rats leave a sinking ship, Tip, and Fitz will be sunk."

Johnny rested his case on this, and Tip smoked in silence a long time.

"That's all you want me to do, then? Just get a quarter of a bar of gold and give it to Westfall?"

"That's all we need. Fitz will do the rest." Johnny regarded Tip with serious, sober eyes. "We came to you, Tip, because you're the only man who can get us that gold. You can get it from Sammons. We can't go to Kinder, because this has got to be secret. Sammons will believe you. It'll be a risk, of course, but as long as I can stand on two feet and give my promise, I promise that you'll get that gold back. Can you do it?"

Tip nodded his head slightly. "I can. I'll do it, too. It's a plain business gamble. If it works, the Esmerella will open. If it doesn't—"

"It will," Johnny said grimly. "It will if I have to ride the owlhoot the rest of my life for the murder of Major Fitz."

Tip rose and the meeting broke up. Johnny followed Tip over to his horse. Tip was just ready to mount when Johnny said, "I heard about you and Nora, Tip. I wish you both luck."

Tip turned, to see Johnny holding out

his hand. He gripped it and said, "Thanks, Johnny, I'll tell her."

"If anyone can make her happy, I reckon you can," Johnny said gently. "But if you can't, Tip, promise me one thing."

"What?"

"That you'll clear out when you see it doesn't work."

"It will work."

"I think so too."

"I'll clear out if it doesn't," Tip said. "She's too fine to have her life cluttered up by a man she doesn't love, Johnny—either you or me. Do you understand?"

Johnny nodded. Tip mounted. Hugo and Westfall were waiting. They rode out of the camp, and with them rode the success of the scheme. And somehow, remembering Tip, Johnny felt it was in good hands. The waiting on the results would be the hardest thing to bear.

CHAPTER XXIII

RAT TRAP

WITH the forged report in his pocket and the two pound bar of gold in a sack resting on his saddle horn, Westfall rode up on the ridge above town and turned to the left again. There was a cool wind tonight riding off the bench, and it felt healing to the scars and bruises on his face. He whistled softly between his teeth, relishing what was about to happen.

The moon was brighter tonight, and from quite a ways off he could pick out the horses of Major Fitz and Carmody. As he approached, two figures moved out of the shadow to meet him.

Westfall reined up and dismounted stiffly, and again, Major Fitz, like a brash little terrier, stood in front of him.

"Well, Westfall, you decided to reconsider, did you?"

"Not reconsider, Fitz," Westfall said, chuckling a little. "I just made a bad guess. I was lookin' on the gloomy side of it."

"What's the report this time?"

For answer, Westfall handed him the gold bar and then the paper.

"How much?" Fitz asked quickly.

"A little over eleven hundred dollars from a short ton of ore," Westfall said calmly.

Fitz's hand tightened on the bar, and Westfall could hear his breath coming quickly.

"Eleven hundred dollars!" Fitz exclaimed softly, and he opened the paper with trembling fingers. The moon was so strong that he did not need a match to read the figures and the signature at the bottom.

"Well, how'd you do it?" Fitz demanded brusquely.

"Like you told me to, I got another ton down," Westfall said quietly. "It assayed only forty dollars a ton. But I knew I was on the track of somethin'. I didn't want to come back and tell you. I figured you was just about red-headed enough to gun me if I gave you that report. So I worked the men both shifts through the night. I changed the course of the shaft, workin' in more toward the dike and even into it. Come mornin', I knew I had it. I could tell by the look of the ore. I hurried it down to the mill and Kinder put a rush job through for me and there it is."

Fitz laughed with pleasure. He could afford to be magnanimous now. "You mustn't take me too literally, Westfall. I was upset. I'd lost my place the night before and I didn't know what I was doing."

"No offense," Westfall said easily. "I knew it was up to me to either produce or get out. The gold was there and you knew it."

"I did."

Carmody took the bar now and hefted it and whistled in exclamation.

"You reckon you're in a pretty good humor now?" Westfall asked.

"Best ever," Fitz laughed. "Come over and sit down and let's smoke. You want to ask me something, don't you?"

"That's it." They walked over to the base of the pinnacle rock and rolled smokes. Westfall took his time in starting, for this was the part that would need skill.

HE began thus: 'You're a kind of hard man, Fitz, but I like to work for a driver. And you've done well by me in the way of wages. With the men too."

"I've tried to," Fitz said with some satisfaction.

"I just had an idea when I got that report from Kinder." Westfall continued, after a moment's pause. "It come to me so quick I acted on the spur of the moment."

Fitz said nothing.

"It come to me," Westfall said slowly, "that if I didn't do somethin' to keep his mouth shut, Kinder would spread this news about our strike to the four winds."

"Yes?"

"So I give him three hundred dollars —all I had in my pockets—to keep this a secret for three days." He paused, and glanced obliquely at Fitz, who was listening carefully.

"What for?" Carmody put in.

"Well, I figured it this way," Westfall drawled. "Tip Rogers got his report last night. It was nothin'—worse than mine. That news is out in camp. Also, the news of our first report is out in camp. The whole camp is discouraged. This mornin' when I left, there wasn't but five or six men workin' their claims. Already some of the saddle tramps have started to pick up and leave. See what I mean? They're licked up there already!"

"Yes, yes," Fitz said impatiently.

"Here's my scheme, then. What if I was to go up there with a report signed by Kinder—that report that says the ore only showed forty dollars a ton. I'd show it around. Well, that would discourage the rest of 'em. No man, unless he's got a company behind him and a whole ore field to work on, is goin' to make money out of forty-dollar-a-ton ore, is he?"

"Hardly."

"Then what if I was to go up there and call the camp together and say, 'Look here. This ore is worth forty dollars a ton. It's no good to you jaspers unless you can sell out to a big outfit. All right, I'm the big outfit. I represent a million dollars lookin' for a place to mine low grade ore. Sell me your claims. I'll pay you a reasonable figure for them.' And once I've got them, all of them, enough to assure me that I'll have lots of ore to work, why I'll put in a big mine and mill here and start operations." He looked at Fitz. "How do you think they'd take that? Don't you reckon they'd jump at the chance to sell? And once I had all the claims, I could scrape away that top rubble and we'd open a vein of gold that would be worth millions, yes, millions!"

For a moment, Fitz did not answer, and Westfall could almost see the greed in him at work.

"Good Lord!" Fitz said softly, almost to himself. "What a fortune!"

"You see, Kinder will keep his mouth shut about my strike just as long as I pay him a hundred dollars a day. We'd have to act fast, before Rogers or any of the others strike the vein too. But inside of three days, I judge, I can buy out every claim in that canyon, and for a song." He paused, and regarded Fitz openly. "Only I ain't got the money to buy the claims. Have you?"

In his excitement, Fitz jumped to his feet and walked out to the horses. He wheeled and came back toward Westfall, and he was talking so loud he was almost shouting.

"Money! Of course I've got the money! How much will it take?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand, anyway," Westfall said. "Have you got that much?"

"Nearly. But the rest won't matter!" He paused, and said more slowly, "How long have I got to get it?"

"Three days, I'd judge. By that time, Rogers or some of the others will be about down to the vein. The time we wait after that would be risky."

"My money is over in Warms," Fitz said swiftly. "I could make it back with the cash in two nights and a day."

"Well, I reckon you've got a gold mine then," Westfall said calmly. "I don't see how it will fail."

"What's your cut on this, Westfall?" Fitz demanded, his excitement making his voice quaver. "Ask for anything reasonable and it's yours."

"Five per cent," Westfall drawled. "That and a job as superintendent at the wages you're givin' me. It ain't much, but then I ain't puttin' up any of the money. All I want is a nice stake out of it."

"Done!" Fitz said. They spent another ten minutes talking over the details and arranging a meeting place, and then Fitz fairly ran for his horse, Carmody behind him.

As he was ready to ride off, Westfall called, "Fitz, you're leavin' this brick!"

"Keep it," Fitz yelled. "I'll pick it up when I get back!" and he and Carmody thundered off into the night.

Westfall watched them, chuckling through his cracked lips. And then he spat loudly to take the taste of it from his mouth.

WHEN Tip came down to breakfast the next morning, he laid a burlap-wrapped object on the windowsill, and when Nora came to take his order, she saw it.

"What's that, Tip?"

"Bait," Tip said wisely.

"For what?"

Tip grinned up at her and touched the brick which Westfall had returned to him early that morning. "You'll know in a couple of days, honey."

Nora made a face at him and took his order. When she returned with it, she sat down opposite him and watched him eat.

"You've been awful quiet lately, Tip. Aren't things going well at the camp?"

For a moment, Tip did not answer, and Nora saw him scowling at his plate. He had not told her about the report he had got from Kinder, thinking to spare her a share in his own disillusionment. But now he looked up at her and watched her closely as he said, "That mine is a fake, honey. There isn't a hundred dollars in the whole acre of it."

"When did you find that out?"

"Day before yesterday."

"And you haven't told me?" Nora exclaimed. "Why, Tip? Don't you think I can accept disappointment too?"

"I had my heart set on it," Tip murmured. "I was a fool, Nora. In my own mind, I had a home built for us. You were traveling—China, South America, Europe, anywhere. I was with you. We took the finest boats, bought the most expensive things." He grinned shyly. "I'm pretty much of a fool."

"Then it's no good? No good at all?"

"Not worth a hoot. Does it matter to you?"

"You know it doesn't, Tip." She smiled warmly at him and patted his hand. With a sigh, he picked up his fork and started eating again.

Nora hesitated a long time before she asked the question that was uppermost in her mind, but she determined to get it over with.

"Are you sorry you didn't go to Mexico, Tip?" she asked gently.

Honest bewilderment showed on Tip's face. "Nora! What made you ask that?"

Nora shrugged. "It's kind of tough to have big wide dreams and then come down to earth. It's bad enough when you're single. It's worse, I imagine, when you think you haven't done right by someone you love. And you do feel that way, Tip?"

Tip nodded. "Sort of."

"Don't do it. I don't mind no money, Tip. Our luck will change."

"What would you think if I told you it had changed already?" Tip murmured.

Nora only stared at him, her blue eyes wide and inquisitive.

"Keep this under that lovely blonde hair of yours," Tip said, "but I think the Esmerella will open soon."

"Tip! You don't mean it!"

"I do."

"How soon?"

"I don't know. Nobody else does. But things are going to break here in this county. They won't break, they'll explode. And when they do, we'll see things the way we want them."

"That's strange," Nora murmured, her steady gaze on Tip. "That sounded like Johnny Hendry for a minute. You aren't having his delusions, are you, Tip?"

Tip laughed uneasily, and Nora could see the color creep up into his face from his neck.

"You've seen him, Tip!" Nora accused.

Tip avoided her gaze, and Nora knew instantly that what she had said was true. For a moment, she hated to believe it. "Tip, you've talked to him and he's got those wild schemes in your head! Oh, Tip, and I thought you were so steady and sensible!"

"Maybe I am," Tip murmured.

"Not if you can let Johnny Hendry sway you!" She leaned over nearer to him. "What is it, Tip? What has he done to you?"

"It's not *to* me, Nora, it's *for* me."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't tell you now. You'll just have to wait and see." Tip raised pleading eyes to her. "Believe me, Nora, I was wrong about Johnny. If you only understood. You were wrong, too."

"Not about the important part," Nora said firmly. "He's generous, Johnny is, but he's undependable. He's prejudiced, as suspicious as an old woman." Her eyes darkened. "I'd hate to take anything from him, Tip—I'd hate for us to!"

"Wait until you see what happens."

"I don't want to!" She spoke vehemently now, passionately. "Tip, if you love me, don't be with him! He's everything that's wrong in my world! He's everything that breaks a woman's heart, and makes her hate him!"

Tip said soothingly, "All right, honey. All right. But wait and see. Don't judge him until you know." He looked down at the tablecloth. "I did once, and I was pretty much of a fool." He rose now and went over to her and kissed her, and then went out.

Nora watched him go, and for a while she sat there, ashamed of herself. What had made her speak so violently against Johnny, as if he had done something to hurt her? Really, he had never been anything but kind to her. And the thought crossed Nora's mind that perhaps she did not understand her own feelings, that she spoke out of resentment—much as Johnny had been known to do himself. But she would not think this thought. She rose and hurried about her business, but if anyone had looked at her, they would have noticed that she was blushing deeply and beautifully.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MAJOR KILLING

OVER the apathetic boom camp of Bonanza canyon, the clashing of a dishpan hammered with a wooden spoon went out in loud waves. Lanterns hung from the ridgepoles of tents and in the doorways of open shacks. There was very little sound of merriment in the place tonight for this was a gloom camp now. The two streets were hourly losing their crowds.

Men who clustered in silent groups of two and three pricked up their ears at the sound of the homely gong. This was the call to a meeting, where all the news, good and bad, was announced to the camp—and lately, it had been mostly bad.

Big Westfall stood on the high front porch of Tim Prince's saloon, two old-fashioned kerosene flares on either side of the saloon door behind him. He clanged the dishpan with a hearty gusto and shouted out into the night for the crowd to assemble. They did, slowly, and among them were the figures of Major Fitz and Bledsoe. Baily Blue was with them. These three had ridden up today ostensibly to see how their claims were being worked. And in that crowd also, which moiled and flowed around the foot of Prince's porch was Tip Rogers. Behind the saloon, up on the cliff side, hidden in a sparse thicket of scrub oak, Johnny Hendry and Hank and Turk were waiting.

When most of the camp was around him, in front of and behind him, Big Westfall raised his hands for silence.

"I dunno whether you'll think this was worth callin' you for or not," Westfall began in his slow and homely drawl. "I just rode back from the mill and got my report on the second and third shipment of ore I freighted down. It was a bare forty dollars a ton."

A murmur of disgust ran through the crowd.

Somebody up in the front ranks said quietly, "Lemme see it, Westfall," and Westfall handed the report to the man without a word. It was passed around, talked about, until, from the very discouragement it bred, was handed back to Westfall, who pocketed it.

Westfall saw now that the crowd was turning to gossip again, and he kicked the pan with his foot to draw attention to himself.

Leaning against a porch post, he began again in a conversational tone which sounded as if he, too, was disheartened.

"This really ain't what I called you together for," Westfall said. "That was to kind of prepare you for the proposition I'm makin'. First of all, let me ask. Has anyone in the camp got a better report than forty dollars to a ton of their ore?"

In various ways, the crowd of rough miners and punchers and townsmen told him no. They even ridiculed such a high figure.

"Well, then, I might's well make my proposition," Westfall continued. "It don't look to me like any of us is goin' to make any money in this camp except us that can afford to put in a big outfit here and a stamp mill and mine forty-dollar-a-ton ore. Does it to you?"

Again they said no.

"Well, I was talkin' to my bosses from Warms this afternoon. They come half way over the Calicoes to see me. They read my report. They got the capital to put up the buildings and machinery and take out low-grade ore and reduce it and still make a profit on it. But they can't do it on the six claims I staked out for 'em. They told me to make you folks a proposition."

Here, the general attention picked up, and when Westfall had waited long enough for their curiosity to be aroused, he went on.

"Me, I don't think much of it from their standpoint, but orders is orders. They said if you folks would sell out for a reasonable low figure, they'd buy out your claims. They aim to pay two thousand dollars a claim for all them that butts the dike, a thousand for them within five hundred yards of it either way, and seven hundred and fifty for all them rimrock claims within a half mile east of the canyon end. That's the proposition." He paused and spat and said negligently, "If you ain't a bunch of suckers, you'll take it. Not that I care whether you do or don't, though. I'm followin' orders."

A WAVE of talk swept through the crowd. Westfall sat down on the steps and cuffed his hat on the back of his head and idly gazed about him, as if mildly bored by the whole thing. He was the picture of a man wholly indifferent to his business.

Inevitably, men began to crowd around him and ply him with questions. He answered them curtly, indifferently, but beyond them, he could tell that the idea had taken hold of the crowd. Men were crowding forward to listen to what he said.

Presently, a voice rose over the crowd. "Westfall! Westfall!"

Big Westfall lumbered to his feet and looked over the crowd. Back deep in it, a hand was raised, and people craned to see who it was. It was, invitably, Tip Rogers. He was elbowing his way to the front. When he was almost to Westfall, he said, "I'll take you up on that. I got a dike claim, and I'll sell it to you, clean and clear."

Westfall, again leaning against the porch pillar, appeared unimpressed. "All right," he drawled. "But one claim ain't goin' to do me no good. You get five other rannies with dike claims and we'll talk business."

"Young man," a harsh voice called out. "I'll make it number two—and gladly." This was the voice of Major Fitz and it

came from back in the crowd. It got a general laugh, for it was tinged with irony.

"I'll make it three," Bledsoe called.

And suddenly, given this impetus by the best financiers and the best mining heads in the camp, others joined in, until there was a veritable avalanche of offers.

Big Westfall's face never changed. When the crowd had quieted a little to hear him speak, he announced, "All right. Tim Prince said I could use his place. Get your papers. I got the claim recorder here. Form a line and come into Tim's place. I pay in cash. You get your money, have a drink on me—and if you're smart, you'll git home and leave this gold minin' to a bigger outfit."

His announcement was met with a roar of laughter. Many of these men had sunk their last money in claim fees and tools and supplies, and this chance to unload at a profit, however small, was a golden opportunity. For none of them, not even the most sanguine, believed that there was any amount of gold here. Furthermore, they did not relish the prospect of having to prove up on their claims.

Tip Rogers was the first in the long line. He turned over his papers, had them checked by the recorder, received his money, took his drink and, with a grin of pleasure, waved his money high over his head and disappeared into the night.

The whole crowd was gathered around Tim Prince's. Those who held claims were being chaffed good-naturedly and a little enviously by those who did not. But losers or gainers, everyone in camp was gathered at Tim Prince's saloon.

Tip Rogers headed back to his tent, but when he was out of sight of the saloon, he cut across toward Westfall's mine. At the shed to one side of the office, he opened the door and stepped inside.

"Tip?" Johnny Hendry asked, from the depths of that darkness, and Tip answered: Hank and Hugo and Turk were here, too.

BAILY BLUE and Bledsoe and Major Fitz hung around the saloon for a while, watching the claims changing hands. From a big metal box on a poker table, Westfall was taking out silver and paper money. His supply seemed inexhaustible.

The sight fascinated Major Fitz. This metal box by Westfall's right hand represented every dollar, honest and dishonest, that he had managed to accumulate since he left the army thirty years ago. But if that sight was a little unnerving, he had only to think that what he was getting in return was worth a hundred times the amount held by the box.

Baily Blue, puzzled as to what was behind all this and surprised at Major Fitz's interest, was watching the Major covertly, a glass of whisky cuddled in his hand.

Presently, Bledsoe turned to Fitz. "I think I'll go look up some of the boys while they still have money. Most of them in this camp owe me for supplies. Coming along?"

Fitz shook his head, as did Blue. "I'll watch this," Fitz said.

He observed it a while longer, then turned to go out. Blue followed him. Outside, the crowd had dispersed, and the camp was almost normal once more. The last of the line was already inside the doors of the saloon.

Fitz turned down the road, Blue beside him.

"I'd like to know what's behind this," Blue murmured. "Seems to me there's a lot of places here in the Calicos that hold more ore than this canyon, and it'll produce more than forty dollars a ton, too."

Fitz only chuckled, and Blue glanced obliquely at him. "You know somethin' about this, don't you, Fitz?"

Fitz stopped and regarded him. "What makes you think so?"

"Several things," Baily said amiably. "You were almighty interested in what was goin' on here tonight."

Fitz did not speak for a moment, and then he said quietly, pleased with himself, "I ought to be, I'm behind it."

"Behind what?"

"I'm the company Westfall spoke about. He's buying the claims for me."

Blue cleared his throat and started to

speak and then seemed to change his mind, for the words did not come.

"Say it," Fitz invited.

"All right, I will. Why are you payin' a thousand dollars a claim for ore that is common as dirt?"

"Who said it was?"

"Why, everybody."

"Ask Westfall to show you the last report he got from Kinder. The report he didn't mention. It showed eleven hundred dollars for a scant ton."

Blue was silent a moment, and then he started to chuckle, and then to laugh quietly. "I might have known that," he said at last. "Yes, sir, I might have known that. When they can out-think you, Fitz, then I'll take to herdin' sheep."

Fitz smiled with pleasure at this. "Come over to Westfall's shack," he invited. "You'd probably like to see just how much of an investment this is."

They turned down another rough street, which was dark, and made their way down the canyon to the Glory Hole. The office was unlocked, as Westfall had promised it would be, and they went inside. After first making sure that the burlap curtains were drawn tightly over the windows, Fitz lighted the lamp and looked around him. There was a deal desk in one corner, some rough benches and a straw-stuffed bunk at the far end.

They had only to wait a few minutes when the tramp of Westfall's heavy step came to them. The door was opened, and Big Westfall, stooping to clear the frame, stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He nodded to Fitz, smiling, and then looked at Blue and nodded courteously. His glance at Fitz was questioning.

"It's all right, Westfall," Fitz said. "He knows about it."

Westfall took off his hat and laid the box on the desk. "There you are, Fitz. I ran out of money toward the last. There were six claims up on the rock rim that I couldn't buy, but I reckon they won't be rich enough to bother with."

Fitz rose and came over to the desk and opened the box. Blue stood behind him, looking over his shoulder.

Suddenly, a voice drawled from the doorway, "Evenin', gents."

BLUE whirled—to confront the six-gun in Johnny Hendry's hand. Johnny stepped forward, and Hank, Turk, Hugo and Bledsoe, a bewildered expression on his face, filed into the room. Tip Rogers brought up the rear and closed the door.

Major Fitz was the first to find his wits. "Well, Johnny, my boy!" he exclaimed, elbowing Blue aside and walking up to Johnny, hand outstretched. "We thought you'd—"

Turk was the first to see it. He leaped at Johnny, grabbing his left arm. Johnny's hand was fisted, his arm tense and ready to strike, his lips drawn tight over his teeth.

Over his shoulder, Turk snarled at Fitz, "Keep out the way, you, or he'll kill you."

Sobered, Fitz backed off and Turk freed Johnny, who glared at Fitz for a long moment, then shifted his attention to Westfall.

"Big, bring that lamp over here on the table away from that coyote." Westfall did. "Now sit down, Fitz. You too, Blue."

Blue wisely did as he was told, keeping silent, but Fitz, always pugnacious, did not sit down. He looked at Johnny and Turk and Hank and said scornfully to Johnny, "Have these outlaws' ways got the best of you, Johnny? I always believed—"

Cursing, Turk took the two steps to Fitz, grabbed him by the coat-front and slapped him again and again in the face.

"Sit down and stay down and shut up!"

He rammed Fitz down in his chair and stood glaring over him. Fitz was subdued now, his thin fox face flushed with an anger which he was afraid to vent. Turk walked back and leaned on the table.

Johnny took over now and he spoke with a slow easiness that was studied self-control. His gun was holstered.

"How much money did you spend for these claims tonight, Fitz?" Johnny drawled.

Fitz shot a wicked glance at Westfall, who was grinning broadly, but he didn't answer. Westfall answered for him.

"A little over a hundred and twenty-three thousand, Johnny."

"They're mine, anyway!" Fitz snapped. "They're registered legally under a company of which I'm the sole stockholder!"

"Did it take all your capital?" Johnny asked drily, and again Fitz would not answer. He was puzzled by all this.

Again, Westfall said, "It cleaned him out, Johnny."

"Good," Johnny murmured. "Maybe you'd be interested in knowin', Fitz, that we framed up this deal on you—Westfall, Tip Rogers and the rest of us. This whole canyon here don't hold a thousand dollars worth of gold. That good report you got from Westfall was forged. That gold bar he showed you was borrowed from the Esmerelda. Kinder was never bribed, because the only thing he could tell was that your ore was worthless."

Johnny paused, watching the color drain out of Fitz's face. "So you gave your money away, Fitz. You've spread it all around the camp, like the generous man you are. But you're broke, you savvy that?"

Fitz half rose out of his chair, but sat down again when Turk took a menacing step toward him.

"About this fight with Leach Wigran," Johnny drawled. "I started that. I stole your beef, Major, and planted that Running W gelding. I burned your place. I rustled that other herd, too, and you killed Mickey Hogan for it. Remember? I even helped Leach Wigran when you tried to wipe him out. Remember those two rifles up on the hill?"

JOHNNY was talking softly now, his eyes narrowed, a fixed, unpleasant smile on his face. Fitz's face was turning a dirty gray, but his fighter's jaw was still outthrust, belligerent.

"I did something else, too, Major. I did this on my own hook, because I don't like to be framed. I went back to the Running W early that morning after Leach had hit for the mountains, and I pulled Leach Wigran's red hot safe out of that fire and I hauled it away. Do you know what I found in it, Major? I found a melted bar of that Esmerelda gold. Part of it still held the mill stamp. You hired Wigran, Fitz. He couldn't move without word from you. He's the one that robbed the bank—and on your orders."

Tip Rogers said excitedly, "You didn't tell me that, Johnny!"

"Why tell it?" Johnny said softly, not taking his attention from Fitz. "I was waiting until I could get it all for you, Tip—and with the proof."

Baily Blue's face remained immobile, but he was barely breathing. This was getting uncomfortably close to him.

"Remember the poll of the ranchers I aimed to take, Fitz?" Johnny went on. "Remember, the votes come to the post-office and you sent a hardcase to steal them and I killed him? Well, that vote was for you, Fitz—you were the biggest rustler in the crowd. It took me a long time to tumble to what everybody, other ranchers, suspected, but I proved it, Fitz. Wigran was the chief rustler and you backed him. The stolen stuff was driven to Warms and sold and the money deposited to your account over there."

Fitz's face seemed a little shrunken now, but he sat utterly still.

Johnny's voice got a little harder now and he shifted his feet faintly.

"But all this is just by the way, Fitz," he drawled pleasantly. "What I'm goin' to kill you for is this: You had Pick Hendry bushwhacked."

"That's a lie!" Fitz said swiftly.

"Is it?" Johnny drawled. "Can you claim you didn't hire Westfall to mine a claim? Didn't you give him papers describing that claim?"

Fitz was silent for a moment. "Carmody did, yes. He told me about some location papers one day. He said he'd bought them over in Warms. I told him to take a look at the claim and if it looked good to go ahead with it. It was his affair.

I loaned him the money. When they began to look good, I took them over."

"Wasn't that location paper in Pick's handwriting?" Johnny asked gently.

"I never saw it, I tell you. Carmody pointed it out to me on a map. I was indulging the whim of my most loyal hand."

"You lie, Fitz," Johnny said idly. "You lie in your teeth. You saw that location paper. I can prove that because you wrote out the other five claims in your own handwriting."

He turned to Westfall and said, "Big, give me those papers."

There was a swift movement at Fitz's chair, and Johnny swiveled his head, his hand streaking to his gun. But he was too late. Fitz had yanked out a .45 from a shoulder holster, and now he covered the room with it. He had taken advantage of that one second, during which everybody automatically looked at Westfall, to make his play. And it had succeeded. There was a full minute of dead silence.

"Don't want to try it, eh?" Fitz taunted them. "All right, Baily, cover them."

BLUE rose and drew both his guns, and there was that old amiable smile on his face. He had been loyal, and his loyalty was repaid now, for no man on earth could get the best of Fitz, he knew.

With three guns trained on him, Johnny did not take his eyes from Fitz.

"You're a smart young whelp, Johnny," Fitz said. "Too smart to live: I can't make up my mind how many people you've told about us. I—"

"Us?" Johnny said swiftly. "Is Baily in on it, too?"

Fitz didn't say anything. Baily chuckled. "Go ahead, Fitz. Tell him. Yes, I'm in on it, Johnny. I was in on it while you were my deputy."

Johnny's face did not change. It was flushed and tense and his eyes were blazing.

"How many have you told, Johnny?" Fitz asked pleasantly.

"Just these here."

"Now I know you lie," Fitz said. He shook his head reprovingly. "Well, I reckon we'll have to ride out of Cosmos, Baily, don't you?"

"Not without tellin' him what he wants to know," Baily taunted. "That'd be a shame. Did you kill Pick, Fitz?"

Fitz was watching Johnny; an evil smile on his face, as he said, "I had him killed, to be correct," and it gave him pleasure to see how this tortured Johnny. "I was convinced he'd struck it rich."

"All right, Baily," he said, then, when Johnny didn't answer. "You start off. You've got two guns to my one, but save me—"

There was a crash of glass from the window behind Major Fitz, and in that stillness, it exploded almost like a shot. Johnny saw the burlap billow out, saw Baily Blue jump with surprise, and then he streaked for his guns. Westfall was almost as quick. He swept the lamp off the table, and ducked.

But Johnny didn't. Before the lamp went out, he whipped both guns hip-high and the thunder of his shot was first, cutting in ahead of Baily Blue's. Feet planted a little wide, one gun pointed dead ahead, the other at an angle toward Fitz, Johnny fanned the hammers frantically, cursing savagely.

And then the light winked out and the thunder of Turk's guns joined the chorus and then the whole room exploded with the concert of gunfire.

When, finally, in that dark, Johnny saw no answering flashes, he pulled up his guns and waited. The fire from beside him slacked off. All that could be heard was a small gurgling groan from the floor. Behind him, someone moaned and then cursed.

"Strike a light!" Johnny ordered.

WESTFALL'S match flared and he picked up the lamp. The chimney was broken, but the lamp was whole. By its guttering flame, they looked over toward the desk. Fitz was sitting against the desk leg, his head on his chest, as if he was trying to see the four neat holes that

were spreading red across his shirtfront.

Blue lay on his back, guns still in his hand, his face a bloody mess.

And then Johnny was aware that there was someone standing in the open doorway and he yanked up his gaze.

For a moment he was speechless, and then yelled: "Pick!"

In another second, he was beating Pick on the back, hugging him, trying to stifle the sobs of joy in his throat. Pick couldn't talk. For twenty-five years of his life, ever since the day he had found that tiny orphan in the shack, he had been wanting to know this. And now he did—knew that John Hendry loved him as a son loves a father.

Pick's first spoken words were characteristic, and they made Johnny laugh with joy. "I was squattin' outside that window and heard every word, but I didn't have a shell for my gun. So I heaved a rock."

Things happened all at once now. A crowd gathered, attracted by the gunfire, and it was Bledsoe who, on the steps of the shack, told them the brief story of Major Fitz's crimes and of his and Blue's death. Inside, Pick told his story, of his faking his own death and planting of the false papers, of salting the test pits and starting the rush. And while he talked, he watched Johnny, his tired old eyes summing him up anew. And he saw that Johnny had been through the fire and had come out steel—a man

It was only later, after all the stories had been compared, that Hugo Miller asked for a bandage on his leg. His wound was the only casualty of their group.

CHAPTER XXV

A CASE FOR THE CLERGY

IT WAS mid-morning by the time Tip had finished telling Nora. At the end of it, she rose from the chair in the lobby and walked over to the window. Tip watched her, his eyes reserved, watchful. He had been the first to leave Bonanza Canyon last night. He had wanted to tell Nora about everything. And halfway through his story, they heard the clamor out on the streets that told them Johnny and Pick Hendry had returned to Cosmos. That had been an hour ago.

Nora watched the street absently. Then she turned and came back to Tip. "It's grand, Tip," she said simply. "Everything bad I've said about Johnny Hendry, I gladly take back."

"I knew you would."

"I wish him all the success in the world," Nora said quietly. "Will—will he come to see me before he leaves?" she asked slowly.

"Certainly. Besides, his outfit is here."

They talked on a few moments more, and then the lobby door opened and Pick and Johnny came in. Nora ran to greet Pick and gave his leathery old cheek a smacking kiss. They talked a long time, and then she turned to Johnny.

"I was wrong, Johnny, about Major Fitz."

Johnny's tense, clean-shaven face broke into a slow smile, but his eyes were veiled, black as night pools. "So were a lot of people, Nora—me among 'em."

There was an awkward silence. Pick sidled over to Tip and started to talk, leaving Johnny to face Nora alone.

"Tip told me you were leaving, Johnny," Nora said.

"That's right."

"For where?"

"I dunno. To see the world, maybe."

"But you're the rightful sheriff, Tip says. He said the commissioners are sure to recall you."

Johnny grinned. "Turk and Hank can take care of that job better than I can. Bledsoe has promised to make one sheriff, the other marshal as a favor to me. And they'll post a five thousand dollar reward to keep Wigran over the mountains. So it'll be easy."

"I wish you luck, wherever you go," Nora said. Johnny looked at her face, which was paler than he had ever seen it. And more beautiful—so that it hurt him to see it. His glance traveled down her slim figure, approving of the deep blue dress. But it rested on the ring—Tip's ring, which she was wearing.

"And I wish you luck," Johnny said gravely. "I haven't had much of a chance to till now. But I do, Nora. You and Tip —you're both fine people."

And with that, Johnny ducked upstairs.

NORA was not in the lobby when he came down. Out on the street with his warbag over his shoulder, Pick beside him, they strolled toward the feed stable.

"I think you're bein' stubborn, son," Pick said with unaccustomed gentleness. "You don't seem to realize I'm a rich man."

Johnny teased him. "I think you're kiddin' me, Pick. I won't believe it until we ride up and see it tonight."

"But where you goin' from there?" Pick growled.

"Travel."

"And leave a good job and a clean town to be a saddle-bum?"

"That's it," Johnny said crisply. He added more gently, "Pick, a man never likes to stay around a place where he's got a kick in the teeth, does he?"

"I reckon not." Pick looked at him. "You mean Nora."

Johnny only nodded. They swung in under the arch of the feed stable and Tip Rogers, who had been leaning against one of the stalls, walked over to Johnny.

"Johnny, I'm leavin' today," he said simply. "I've got a job in Mexico."

"Good," Johnny said. "I hope Nora will like it."

"She doesn't even know about it."

Johnny looked Tip steadily in the eye. He said quietly, "You runnin' out on her?"

Tip nodded a little. "You could call it that, Johnny. You see, I don't like the idea of playing second fiddle all my life. No man does."

"Second fiddle to who?"

"You," Tip said quietly. He stuck out his hand and smiled fondly at Johnny. "Go up there and tell her you love her, Johnny. You do. She loves you. And treat her well, Johnny. I know you will."

Johnny took Tip's hand, but a frown creased his forehead. "You're a jump ahead of me, Tip. How do you know all this?"

"About her loving you?"

"Yes."

"You can tell that when you watch her," Tip said evenly. "She was mad at you, Johnny. I came just at the right time. But now you're back, it's the way it always was. She's too loyal to send me away. She'd die before she'd admit to me that she loves you better. But I think she'll admit it to you after I'm gone."

Johnny wrung Tip's hand in one violent wrench and then raced out of the livery stable and up to the Cosmos House. She wasn't in the lobby. He slammed open the door of the dining room, and there she was in the act of putting the silver out on the table for the noon meal.

Johnny walked over to her, took the silver out of her hand and dropped it on the floor with a crash, then folded her to him and kissed her time and again. She struggled violently to free herself, and when she finally did, her eyes were bright with anger.

"Johnny Hendry!" she cried, stamping her foot. "I'm an engaged woman!"

"You bet you are," Johnny growled fondly. "Engaged to me." He reached down for her hand and pulled the ring off her finger and threw it across the room, then, taking both hands, he said to her, "To think what a hammerhead I am! Of course you love me. Of course I love you. And we'll be married."

"But Tip—"

"Tip's a right nice jasper. And smart. He had sense enough to see that both of us would die without each other, so he just rode off for Mexico."

"But—"

"No buts. When do we get married?"

Nora gave a little moan of delight and threw her arms around his neck. "The sooner the better," she said, and she was squeezing him so hard he didn't have the breath to answer.

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

DON'T expect modesty from this corner today. We are in braggart mood. Our chest (a mightyish thing, but our own) is puffed; our stride (we hope you didn't imagine we were doing this sitting still) is springy; and there is a glitter of pure triumph in our eye. Even the typewriter (drat the thing) is leaping about, skipping lines and making these poor phrases look as if the moths had been at them. And Hamilcar is just emerging from a fine swim around the red inkwell, puffing, panting and grinning, and acting in general as if he had just negotiated the English Channel.

The reason for this unseemly jubilation? We've just been taking a furtive look into our immediate future, and finding the August stories fully as exciting as so many heaps of gold doubloons.

Late in the month we begin Martin McCall's serial, *Kingdom Come.* This really is something pretty special, an artful and exciting projection of newspaper headlines into a fine, imaginative tale. It wasn't, for instance, many weeks back that Ambassador William E. Dodd, American envoy to Berlin, created a dandy furore by affirming that he knew the identity of an unnamed billionaire bent on establishing a United States dictatorship. The alarm Mr. Dodd's dispatch caused, the credence it received in many quarters, at least indicates the existence in this country of a widespread uneasiness that a totalitarian, fascist state may not be so far removed as we like to think.

At any rate ARGOSY saw an excellent tale in all this, and with its customary promptness ordered one forthwith. With all due respect to Mr. Sinclair Lewis, who recently affirmed that *It Can't Happen Here,* ARGOSY and Martin McCall paint a fascinating picture of what it might be like if it did. *Kingdom Come* is something you really shouldn't miss.

Other choice items looming for the month of dog days include Bennett Foster's great new Western, *Trails West,* which starts next week; and the new Donald Barr Chidsey series about a Siamese prince from Princeton, returning home with a bright new diploma in his hands and a young fortune in Siamese diamonds and rubies draped about his person. The efforts of a couple of harassed American detectives to keep Prince Mike and his jewelry together form the basis for a group of novelets in Chidsey's highest, widest, and fanciest style. The first one, *Call Me Mike,* appears in the ARGOSY for the twenty-first, and the others will follow promptly.

And now to the mailbag.

JIM TOULOUSE

Today I picked up the June 26 ARGOSY and noticed only three serials. I immediately turned to the back and after careful reading, I found that there was no explanation for this condition.

I was one of the readers who advocated the return to four serials. We received the wanted number; but now, ARGOSY has gone back to three. I protest, even if the change is only temporary.

I usually write when I have certain conditions to object to. The variety of stories published in ARGOSY had fallen off during the last three or four years; lately there has been some return to a better class of story; but there has not been one fantastic.

Yes, there are a number of readers who object to this type of story. But the ARGOSY of the past made its name on the fantasy stories it published. Whenever I talk to someone who

has the same interest in ARGOSY that I have, he will admit that he remembers the pseudo-scientific story when he has forgotten other headline stories that appeared in ARGOSY at the same time.

This type of story leads to many objections from many people; but the greater number of old timers will, if polled, desire the return of this type of fiction. Some people are naturally narrow-minded, I may be one of them; for I don't care for the Henry stories. Yet, in the great number of ARGOSY readers there are many who get enjoyment from them.

This is my last appeal for the type of fantasy stories that a great majority of the readers desire.

In closing may I state that the ARGOSY has picked up with its new staff and has showed much improvement in arrangement. The new type of cover has added life to the magazine.

Albuquerque, N. Mex.

FOR fantasies, Mr. Toulouse, please see *Drink We Deep,* currently running. And Ottocar, our No. 2 pixie, wicked little brain-driver that he is, has a chain gang of talented writers working down in the old south pasture, each developing a fantastic idea that sounded really pretty special when its author sketched it for us in the rough. Under Ottocar's goading, something should come of this.

LOOKING AHEAD!

TRAILS WEST

The author of "Riding Gun" spins another fine tale of America's frontiers, astir with the spirit and the imagination that fashioned the empire-builder's dream. When Miles Trask returns to Tramparas, it is not as conquering hero, but as a cattle association agent pledged to track down the rustlers of the Gonzalitas range. He has a fight on his hands—and another within himself—when he learns that old friends have become new enemies. Beginning a new novel by

BENNETT FOSTER

RESURRECTION IN PARIS

It's April in Paris—and there's a magic on the old quais beside the Seine that makes even a dead man want to live. So it was Dan Harden's job to prove that his client wasn't really a corpse. A complete novelet by

FREDERICK C. PAINTON

ALSO: Another J. Edwin Bell story of Hollywood by DALE CLARK, and fiction by ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN, JOHN HAWKINS, ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT, and others

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—AUGUST 14th

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE?

Writing short stories, articles on business, hobbies, travels, sports, etc., will enable you to earn extra money. In your own home, on your own time, the New York Copy-Desk Method teaches you how to write—the way newspaper men learn, by writing. We have prepared a unique "Writing Aptitude Test" which tells whether you possess the fundamental qualities essential to successful writing. You'll enjoy this test. Write for it, without cost or obligation.

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MANY NEVER SUSPECT CAUSE OF BACKACHES

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. Most people pass about 3 pints a day or about 3 pounds of waste.

Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning shows there may be something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

An excess of acids or poisons in your blood, when due to functional kidney disorders, may be the cause of nagging backache, rheumatic pains, lumbago, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

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It is all explained in a new treatise called

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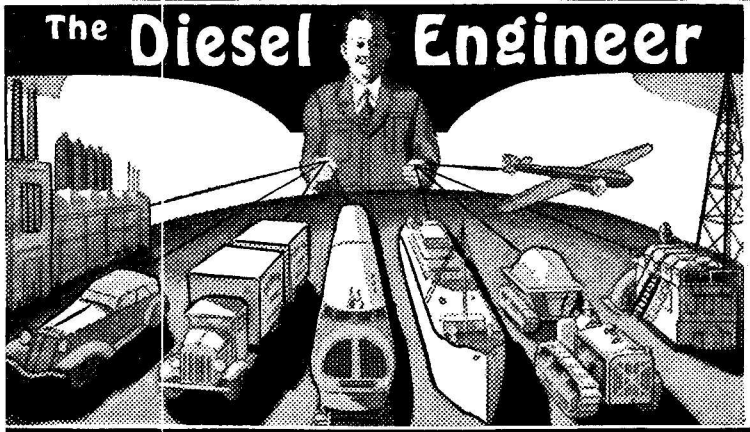
The Diesel Engineer



Is Your Job Safe?

Just as the gasoline engine changed or wiped out the jobs of thousands who depended on horse-drawn vehicles for their living—just as electricity changed the entire set-up in the fields of light and power—so now the Diesel engine is fast invading both the power and transportation fields, and threatening the present jobs of thousands of workers.

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fun?

SURE IT IS

—and mighty strenuous too!

"SPORT, even for the fun of it, can be tense and tiring," says Miss Gloria Wheeden, who is shown aquaplaning above and at left. "Like most of the folks who go in for water sports, I pride myself on my physical condition. Yes, I smoke. When I feel a bit let-down, I light up a Camel and get a 'lift' in energy." When an active day drains physical and nervous energy, Camels help you renew your flow of vim. And being mild, they never get on your nerves.

"MANY A TIME I've smoked a Camel to get a 'lift,'" says Harry Burmester printer, *{left}*. "With Camels handy, I feel I can take the tough spots right in stride. Camels never tire my taste or irritate my throat—even smoking as much as I do."

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