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OCT. 2

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55th
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A New Dan Brice Adventure
by **SINCLAIR GLUCK**

Black Swirling Water Swept Her Out of Sight

Girl Leaps for Ferryboat and Misses: C. C. C. Rescuers Plunge Among Ice Floes



Harold Watson of 64 Scholes St. and his pal Joseph Flanagan of 717 Madison St., Brooklyn, N. Y., who were rewarded with C. C. C. Certificates of Valor signed by President Roosevelt.



"A girl came running down the dock as the boat pulled away. She jumped . . . and missed," writes Harold Watson, "falling into the icy swirling water. Standing as I was on the deck of the ferryboat with my buddy Joe Flanagan, I saw her swept under the pier while those on the dock couldn't tell where she was.

"One man had a flashlight but he didn't know where to shine it . . . I had to have it so I jumped back on the dock and dove after the girl with the flashlight in my mouth. I found her easy enough, but it was so cold in there amongst cakes of floating

ice I couldn't do more than just hold her up. It looked like we both would drown . . . I was ready to give up . . . when I realized Joe was shouting at me, saw him swimming toward us towing a life preserver. Thanks to him we got the life preserver under the girl and brought her out from under

the dock where soldiers in a life boat pulled us out.

"But if it hadn't been for that flashlight and those fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries that kept the light burning in that icy salt water, there couldn't have been any rescue at all, for we never could have found the girl under that dock.

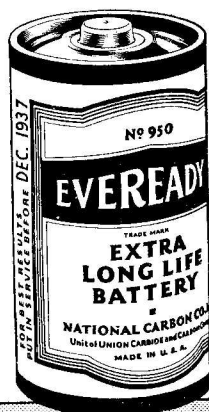
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ARGOSY

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Volume 276

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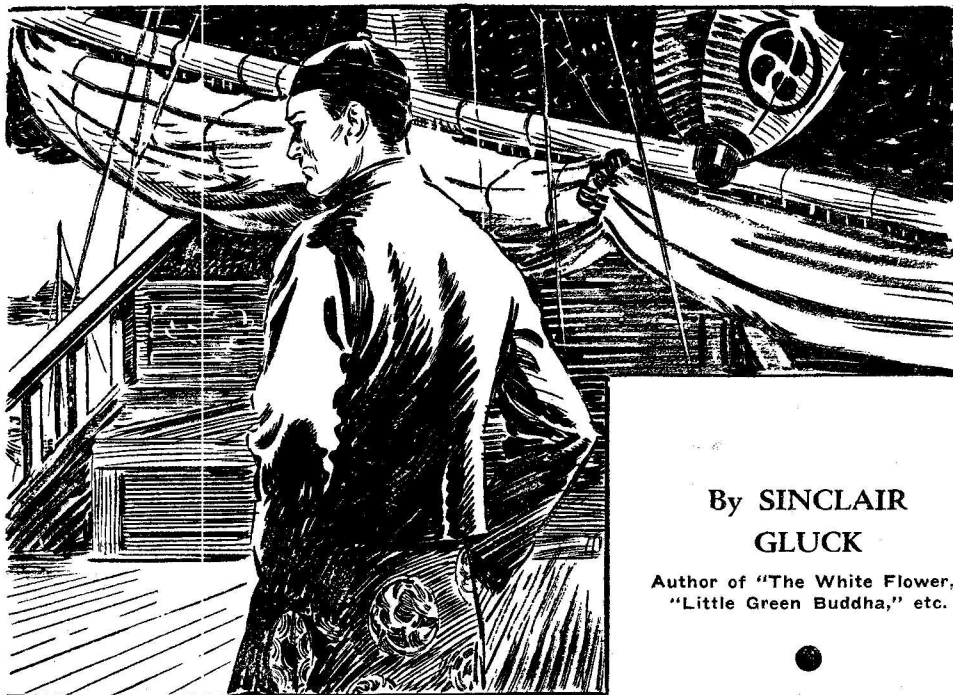
I

IT was quiet tonight in the Chinese City, unusually quiet so soon after nightfall. Dan Brice paused to tap down a cigarette, hard eyes roving, senses alert as a hunting animal. Before the match flared he was satisfied that he was not being followed. Yet he was not entirely satisfied. Knowing the Chinese as few white men did, the ex-marine sergeant understood their

grapevine quickness in spreading news and thereby avoiding danger. He had learned to smell trouble from the way they behaved, and he could smell it now in this ominous quiet.

Whether it threatened himself was another question. He used Shanghai as a base. In a sense he was at home here. In another sense he was still on the firing-line. Years of adventuring up and down China had left him with powerful enemies as well as powerful friends.

Dan Brice in a Complete Novelet of Chinese Waters



By SINCLAIR
GLUCK

Author of "The White Flower,"
"Little Green Buddha," etc.

With no official position, with only wits and cool courage to make him formidable, his enemies could seek him out as readily in Shanghai as elsewhere. That hate has a longer memory than friendship was an axiom not confined to the Chinese.

Abruptly the trend of his thoughts changed and he quickened his stride toward the home of his friend, Ling Ch'i-wu. At noon today the merchant had sent him a chit inviting him to the evening meal. Heretofore, Ling had been punctilious in asking him well in advance. His failure to do so this noon conveyed a hint of urgency that most white men would have missed. High-bred Chinese would have understood, because such devious subtleties are almost a part of their language.

At the time, Brice had not even no-

ticed the slight breach of etiquette. Now, in face of the deserted street, it made him uneasy. He and Ling were good friends. Each had befriended the other in the past. And, though a lone wolf by choice, Brice was really fond of little Lien-tzu, daughter and only child of his host. Her name meant Lily-bud. During his last absence she had blossomed into slim loveliness as healthy as it was delicate. He felt that she returned his affection, although with a quaint young reserve now that amused him.

If her regard for the tall, bronzed soldier of fortune was less impersonal than his for her, Brice never guessed it. And the wakening girl would rather have died than betray it.

He was thinking of her with part of his alert mind as he came in sight of

her home. It was set well back from the street and guarded by a high wall. Over this he could see the graceful, sweeping eaves of the house and, more dimly, the fanciful creatures of stone bestriding the ridge tiles.

A moment later he turned in at the open gate. Two young deodars flanked the path. Through their branches lighted windows gleamed quietly. There was no sound.

The crunch of his feet on the path seemed unusually loud. He had almost reached the house before he could see the vertical line of light at the front door. He checked, probing the dim, formal garden with his eyes. The houseboys of Ling Ch'i-wu were far too well trained to leave that door ajar.

Stone lanterns, clumps of bamboo, tiny bell-fringed pagodas rose like ghosts in the shadows where paths meandered. The little bridge that arched the lily pond seemed frozen in mid-leap. A dozen men could be hiding there, crouched and concealed. Nothing stirred.

BRICE knocked on the door, waited, thrust it open a little. The hall was in perfect order, but deserted. Advancing silently he entered the living room. Under- rather than over-furnished in blue and gold, with a tasteful blend of East and West, the long, airy room was undisturbed, unoccupied.

He wheeled and stood listening. For a moment there was not even the tiniest sound in the house. Then a rustle and a sharp, harsh voice startled him. It spoke in Chinese.

"Revere the dead!"

With a tingle down his spine, Brice remembered and located the speaker. It was a *miyah* bird in a beautiful cage, a pet of Ling Ch'i-wu. It was staring at him with bright, yellow-rimmed eyes,

its sleek, black plumage ruffled, its yellow beak open a little. As he looked at it, the beak opened wider, the eyes rolled up and the bird tumbled from its perch. The upthrust claws twitched for an instant. Then it lay still.

Brice choked off a curse in his throat and made for Ling's sanctum. Here, too, the furniture was undisturbed, the pleasant room unoccupied. Only the desk had been swept clean of papers that Brice remembered seeing there.

On swift, silent feet he explored the kitchens, found them deserted and raced upstairs. Nothing on the second floor seemed disturbed until he came to the dainty, emerald-green bedroom of little Lien-tzu. In the doorway he checked and stared, his lean face set and dark with anger.

On the floor near the window lay a square of unfinished embroidery. He had seen that embroidery. It showed the great gold vase in which the gods had imprisoned the waters of the earth, and the rebel human who had smashed his way out and loosed the ancient deluge upon the world. Now the frame was smashed, the silken threads of gold and deep blue were soiled and trampled.

His hard eyes roved and checked again in mounting fury. Against the wall lay the royal Pekinese dog he had given to Lien-tzu. Its small body was crushed and twisted. Blood not yet congealed had ceased to flow from its mouth.

Brice spent ten minutes of black anger seeking a note or even the tiniest clue to the fate which had overtaken his friends. There was nothing on the second floor, not even a hint. At length he went softly downstairs to call the police.

He had left the front door ajar.

Now it was closed. Framed against it stood two members of the Chinese police, for Ling Ch'i-wu lived outside the zone patrolled by the Sikhs. They were simply watching him with bland, inscrutable eyes. One of them he knew slightly, but the man gave no sign of recognition. His companion spoke in a sing-song voice.

"Foreign person has leave to enter this house?"

Brice studied them. "This person comes to eat by invitation," he replied softly. "The home of Ling Ch'i-wu is ravished, its people gone. It is well that you are come."

A very slight movement betrayed the man's amazement that Brice spoke perfect Chinese. He continued to stare.

"Has the intruding foreigner discovered signs of a struggle?" he asked in the same toneless voice.

"Are the feet of the police so heavy that they cannot see for themselves?" Brice retorted.

"The police ask—and must be answered."

On his guard, Brice told them quietly what he had found.

"A vicious dog slain, a bird unwatered—in the haste of departure," the Chinese droned. "What of these things?"

"The police have been through the house?" asked Brice.

The man gave a gesture of assent. "Because of the open door. It is clear that the honorable Ling Ch'i-wu has gone on a journey. The police remain, to guard against the intrusion."

Brice hesitated. These men were not fools. They were willfully blind, and he was skating on thin ice. He shrugged.

"Being here by invitation," he said, "this person is naturally surprised at the sudden departure of his host—sur-

prised and curious. The departure was voluntary?"

The Chinese merely stared. His companion, whom Brice knew slightly, elected to answer. "How else would Ling Ch'i-wu depart?" he asked blandly. "Perhaps the ways of the Chinese are clear only to the Chinese." He paused. "It is said that too much curiosity may overheat the mind—causing death."

Brice studied the man, his own eyes veiled. The words seemed rather a warning than a threat. He shrugged again.

"If the police are incurious," he said, "who is this person to ask questions? Ling Ch'i-wu is my friend, but is not answerable to me for his comings and goings."

"Wisdom is a rare jewel and deserving of respect," the policeman bowed. "Let us go forth and lock the door until the auspicious return of Ling Ch'i-wu," he stood aside.

Brice went out. They followed, closed the door, and escorted him to the street. There they paused.

WITH a casual good night, Brice strolled away toward the Foreign Concession. Though he did not look back, he could sense their eyes on him until he turned the first corner. Full of dread for his friends, he was equally puzzled. The police knew what had happened. Yet he had the impression that they were not directly responsible for it. They merely acquiesced.

Wits racing in search of a clue, Brice had quickened his pace and covered some distance before he realized that he was being followed. He turned a corner and paused at the zigzag bridge that ran out to the water pavilion, one hand rising absently to loosen the gun in his shoulder holster.

The reflection of lights trembled in the quiet water. He stared at them, listening intently, then wheeled.

There was no one in sight. At the same instant, he heard a stifled cry from around the corner.

Brice ran lightly back the way he had come. The shadow might be a personal enemy, the cry a trap. The shadow might be someone who feared or desired his intervention on behalf of Ling Ch'i-wu and his daughter—

He swung wide in a crouching run and almost fell over the body of a man writhing on the ground. It was a Chinese, his face twisted with desperate agony, both hands to his stomach.

A quick glance showed Brice the rest of the street deserted as before. He looked down, then kneeled swiftly. The man on the ground was Ling's houseboy, Ch'ang. He had been all but disemboweled.

"Ch'ang!" said Brice sharply. "What of your master?"

The rolling eyes met his for an instant. "Lien-tzu!" whispered Ch'ang. "Felicitous nights. Be swift—" With a shuddering groan, the houseboy stiffened and relaxed in death.

Brice rose in cold fury, his hard eyes searching for the murderer. The street remained deserted. And that fact restored his wits and his caution together. If the enemies of Ling Ch'i-wu were powerful enough to clear the whole neighborhood, there was nothing he could do here except throw away his life.

Certain that he was being watched, he shook his head, glanced about nervously and hurried on toward the bund. After a second turn he saw a ricksha, hailed it and was carried at jog-trot to the Astor House. If anything was to be done for Ling Ch'i-wu and his daughter it must be done warily, by

craft rather than by force. The words of Ch'ang had meant little to him, but they had meant something.

At the hotel he strolled through the lobby and went to his room. After twenty minutes of swift, absorbed action he wheeled and studied himself in the mirror. A yellow-brown dye had changed the color of his face, especially his lips, and made his eyelashes almost invisible. The merest touch of black had slanted his eyes and brows. In sandals, blue trousers and long, black coat, and a black sateen skull-cap with a red button, he could easily pass in the street as a tall, gaunt Chinese of the type bred in the north. Such are often employed as guides by foreigners wishing to visit Peiping. Even if he were seen leaving the hotel it should not arouse comment.

Five minutes later a ricksha-coolie trotted into a side street near the Astor House in answer to a harsh call. A tall Chinese drew one hand from his sleeve and climbed into the ricksha. The directions he gave were in the Peiping dialect, but the coolie understood and trotted off resignedly. From one of his own countrymen his tip would be small indeed.

II

IN the ornate house of Li Nan-wang on Bubbling Well Road the first and second houseboys had departed, leaving Hop See, their sulky junior to put away the dishes and tidy up.

He had almost finished when a curious, slow knock at the back door startled him. Though Hop See belonged to no political party, secret or otherwise, he knew that the head houseboy did. Intrigued by that knock and alarmed for his skin, he hastened to answer. No sooner had he unlocked the door than it opened slowly in his face.

A tall Chinese stalked in, closed and locked the door, then wheeled, his hands in his sleeves. Hop See retreated, dull apprehension showing the muddy whites of his eyes. The black eyes that glittered into his were hard and threatening.

The intruder spoke in the dialect of distant Shensi.

"This person seeks your master," he said in a deep voice. "Tell the way, creature of no importance."

Hop See stammered out where his master was to be found.

"Remain here, low one," ordered the intruder and moved with noiseless dignity into the front part of the house.

The fat little merchant, Li Nan-wang, looked up from his private accounts to see a tall fellow-countryman in the doorway. His smirk of satisfaction vanished in amazement. As he stared, uneasiness and then dismay widened his small, coal-black eyes. His mouth opened like that of a stranded fish.

"Who are you?" he faltered, clutching his low desk.

Aware that a good fright loosens the tongue, Brice advanced and spoke in a threatening voice: "You are a friend of the merchant, Ling Ch'i-wu! Would you deny it?"

"The thing is not clear," gasped the little merchant.

"It is clear. Ling Ch'i-wu was offended. If you had a part in his downfall tonight you will no doubt be rewarded."

"His downfall! Tonight? We—we are friends. If he has offended, this person knows nothing of it—"

Brice lost his threatening scowl, satisfied that Li Nan-wang had no part in the disappearance of the Ling family.

"You do not know me?" he asked. "We met at his house."

The merchant stared. "Now, yes! It is the American who captured Ling Chang, the bandit. How clever the disguise!"

"It is also the friend of Ling Ch'i-wu," nodded Brice, unsmiling. "Listen, friend of my friend." Carefully he described what he had found at the home of Ling Ch'i-wu, mentioning the dead pets and the attitude of the police.

"Can you guess what has happened?" he concluded.

Li Nan-wang looked badly scared. He replied huskily, his eyes avoiding Brice: "Some evil fate has overtaken my friend and his daughter. Possibly he has—offended the gods."

"It is possible," said Brice dryly. "It is also possible that he has enemies on earth. Can you tell who those enemies are, friend of Ling Ch'i-wu?"

The merchant hesitated. "Who should know better his master's enemies than Ch'ang, the head house-boy?" he evaded.

Brice scowled. "Unfortunately, the introduction of a knife has caused Ch'ang to cease breathing."

"A knife!" Li Nan-wang was shaking. "Perhaps Ch'ang breathed words that were—indiscreet."

"That is why this person comes to the friend of Ling Ch'i-wu in disguise, seeking discreet knowledge." Brice spoke with an edge of contempt in his voice.

LI NAN-WANG stiffened. Then he beckoned Brice nearer. "It is said," he whispered, "that an arrow loosed in the air blindly may return and wound the foolish marksman." He glanced nervously at the door which Brice had closed. "While this person wishes to help you to help his friend, he cannot be sure who the enemies may be."

"A guess would be sufficient, and remain a secret." Brice nodded. "You will not be drawn into this affair."

"This, then, shall be told you," whispered Li Nan-wang reluctantly. "There is a certain highly placed government official whose son wished to marry the daughter of Ling Ch'i-wu. The official himself made the request, which should have been taken as a great honor to our friend. It is rumored that, while so regarding it, Ling Ch'i-wu did not accept."

"Why?" muttered Brice.

"In defiance of all tradition, unlike a Chinese father, Ling Ch'i-wu consulted the wishes of his daughter, the Lily-bud. And Lien-tzu pleaded against it with tears."

"Why?" repeated Brice softly.

Li Nan-wang's uneasiness increased. "Because," he whispered, "she has other than liking for the son of that official. It is rumored that he sleeps through the hours of day and spends the hours of night with sing-song girls. He is not a person blessed with gentleness." The merchant looked up slyly. "Is the white friend of China a very warm friend of Lien-tzu?"

Brice ignored this. "Some words were spoken before Ch'ang died. Do the words: 'Felicitous nights' convey a meaning to the loyal friend of Ling Ch'i-wu and his daughter?"

"The white friend of Lien-tzu knows China," said Li Nan-wang suavely. "Does he not also guess the possible meaning of those words?"

Brice frowned, watching him. "In some such manner are named the sing-song boats?" he suggested.

Li Nan-wang had regained his composure. He bowed. "It comes to me from my youth," he murmured, "that a vessel so named brightens the lake at Soochow with light and tinkling

laughter. Yet that boat especially might not welcome even so distinguished a foreigner as my guest tonight."

"Your guest tonight is Chinese, as you see. And now what are the names of this official and his son?"

"Of what use to lay aside life for a friend," murmured Li Nan-wang piously, "when it cannot help that friend?"

"Tell *me* their names," said Brice harshly. "There is no danger to your life, Li Nan-wang. The danger is to me, and to our friends."

"It is said that one who names names invites death. This person has small sons who will need their father."

Brice shrugged. "It might also be said that half a friend is better than none, Li Nan-wang. Have no fear that what you *have* said will reach the large ear of gossip."

He wheeled and stalked out of the room.

AFTER one of his perilous inland trips Brice usually stayed at the Astor House. Respected and liked by the really big men of the foreign colony, he had been first ignored by the snobbish element, then admired by the women and finally pursued by them. Snubs and pursuit left him equally detached, though sometimes their eager maneuvers amused him. The best hotel was just good advertising for a trustworthy adventurer. From the guests, as such, he remained quietly aloof.

The previous year, he had hired and armed a tug for the capture by guile of a certain war-lord bandit called Ling Chang. With the reward for that feat he had bought the tug and christened her the *Mary Jane*. The name suited her because she was sturdy and competent, but nothing much to look at.

Now his first care was to make certain that nobody saw him leave the house of Li Nan-wang. That accomplished, he hired a ricksha and was carried through small, dark ways toward Soochow Creek. He dismissed the ricksha near the creek and watched it out of sight. Then he walked to the cheap dock where the *Mary Jane* was moored. The neighborhood was a quiet one, but instinct made him use the long, ground-eating stride of northeast China, where men were tall and lean like himself.

The *Mary Jane* lay rubbing and whining softly against the dock as though anxious to be off. Brice stole aboard, unlocked her and made for the engine room. She was an oil-burner, but would eat inflammable at a pinch. He checked the gauges and, lighting the burners, set them to get steam up moderately fast. Then he locked her and slipped ashore unseen.

Wherever waterways permitted, he used the armed tug for his inland voyages. He had a two-man crew of ex-marines who had left the army when he did, and had been his faithful buddies ever since. Huge, slow-witted "Tiny" Huckle acted as engineer. Sam Placer was second in command.

Shanghai was "home" to them, also. During their usually brief periods of idleness, Sam and Tiny relaxed in ways that were frankly simple and primitive. Yet each had learned to stop with the drink that left them exhilarated, and drink again when that wore off. Since their lives might depend on their wits, they never got fuddled. All three shared the same enemies, carried their lives in their hands, and never lost touch with each other.

It did not take Brice long to discover them. They were quietly enjoying themselves in surroundings that

would have turned a reformer purple with shame—or envy. Huckle was rumbling a most indecent song, off key. Sam was in a teasing mood. Tall and blond, with cool gray eyes, Sam was forty and looked about twenty-eight.

Still in his Chinese costume, Brice entered the dive with an air of sullen calm. He found a seat and ordered cheap rice wine. His pals spotted him at once, but paid no attention to him. After a moment, however, they tumbled their squealing, pouting girls from their laps, tossed them some money and strolled out.

When Brice emerged a minute later, they followed him, overtaking him as soon as they were out of sight of the dive. Slightly drunk or sober, all three could steal along darkened byways as silently as cats—when they chose.

"What's up?" Tiny asked at last in a hoarse whisper.

"Steam's getting up. We're off as soon as possible."

"Good enough! What about our duffle?"

"You won't need it," said Brice. "Not going far."

THEY walked on in silence. Just before they reached the tug, Sam eased into a doorway to make sure they were not being followed. He rejoined them aboard a few minutes later.

While Tiny set the jets on full and watched the pressure gauge, Brice told them what had happened to his friends. Neither of them had met Lien-tzu, but they swore softly at the news of her abduction because it made a difference to Brice. He told them Ch'ang's dying words and Li Nan-wang's interpretation of them.

"So," he concluded, "my guess is they've taken her to that sing-song boat

on Lake Taihu near Soochow. And the sooner I get her out of it the better. I'll need you guys to get me there. After that you're out of this."

"Know any more funny cracks?" rumbled Tiny, peering at the gauge. "How you gonna get her back here? Swim?"

Brice hesitated. "Well, you can tie up the *Mary Jane* out of sight, on the chance I can get away with the girl and get her aboard. We'll steam part way back here to Shanghai. But after that I don't want you guys mixed up in this."

"Why not?" asked Sam, "if it ain't a rude question?"

"Because we're not making a dash into trouble and back to safety this time. We're up against the Nanking Government, at least I am. That means cutting the ground from under me, and cutting the water from under the *Mary Jane*, if she's mixed up in it."

"So what's that got to do with us?" asked Sam.

Brice eyed him thoughtfully. "Nothing. You're out."

"Yeah?" Sam looked at Tiny and they burst out laughing.

Tiny wiped the sweat from his grinning face. "Yeah, we're kinda delicate, huh? Gimme enough shells for the 'Barkin' Dog' and we'll lick the whole Chinese navy."

"Which reminds me," nodded Sam, "to get the hatch open." He thumbed his nose at Brice and stalked out.

"Swell discipline aboard this ship," Brice grumbled to hide his feelings. "How's the gauge, Tiny?"

"She'll turn over now, Dan."

"Okay. Go on out and tell Sam to cast off. I'll take the wheel. Don't want to show on deck in this outfit."

"She won't much more'n turn over," warned Tiny.

"Half-speed'll do. When we hit the canal she'd pile up a bow wave and be climbing a hill at more'n half-speed."

Tiny nodded and went out.

Brice climbed to the pilot-house. In a few minutes the tug was nosing quietly upstream. After coiling down, Sam made for the special forward hatch. Brice called him into the pilot-house and told him to lay off.

"I don't want the *Mary Jane* to show in this if I can help it," he explained. "Leave the guns where they are."

"What's the idea getting caught flat-footed?" asked Sam reasonably. "We don't have to use the guns."

"Here's why," said Brice. "I was caught at the house right after the abduction. A high official pulled it and the police are in on it—or condoning it. If we get the girl back they'll put two and two together and look up the *Mary Jane*. By that time I want her moored at her dock as before, not armed and cleared for action. And that's why I want to pull it alone, as an unknown Chinese. *Malum?*"

"You could be right," nodded Sam evasively.

III

WHEN cleared for action, the *Mary Jane* had a shining, one-pound quick-firer on a swivel base, bolted to her foredeck, and a first-class, modern machine gun bolted aft. On perilous missions both guns were protected by makeshift breastworks—cases of canned corned beef that would stop a steel bullet. When at Shanghai, guns and cases were stored in the hold under a forehatch, with the ammunition. The fuel-oil tanks were aft.

Tiny called the one-pounder the Barkin' Dog and the machine-gun the Spittin' Cat. He was almost a magician

with the quick-firer. Sam claimed that Tiny could drop a shell on a dime at a thousand feet, after straddling it with two shots. And he did not greatly exaggerate.

Also, since his capture of Ling Chang and the battle preceding it, Brice and his crew had spent days of hard labor armor-plating the deckhouse to a height of three feet. It was done by permission of the friendly Nanking Government.

Chugging warily up Soochow Creek in the dark, Brice summed up the situation aloud.

"This looks tricky, Sam," he commented. "Ling Ch'i-wu's made a powerful enemy. Whoever the official is, he swings a lot of weight. That probably means he's a government official. We've got friends at Nanking, but they can't help us much if somebody big goes out for our blood. At the best, we couldn't operate in China any more. At the worst, they could sink the *Mary Jane* and shoot us for pirates before the U. S. Consul heard about it. Of course, it wouldn't be official, but we'd be just as dead. That's why I want to keep the tug out of it if possible, and why I don't want you and Tiny mixed up in it at any price. Ling isn't your friend."

"We gotta die sometime," Sam chuckled, unconvinced. "Anyhow, nobody saw us leave the dock."

Brice turned his head, black eyes glimmering in the binnacle lights, his lean mouth smiling. "You'll do as you're told, the way you always have," he said evenly.

Sam stiffened, then relaxed. "Yeah?" He looked out ahead. "I'm wondering how they got her up here, Dan."

Brice nodded. "I'm wondering that myself. Maybe I can't help dragging you in. Maybe—you'd better get a case

of corned willy on deck. They're heavy. Let Tiny know what to do with it, if necessary. Get the idea?"

"I catch," muttered Sam. "But no guns?"

"No. Anyhow, not yet. But I'm going to snatch that youngster out of trouble if the job can be done."

"Fair enough," purred Sam, and slid out on the fore deck. Though watching the channel, Brice could see his deft second-in-command strip the hatch, raise two boards and swing below. A heavy case thumped on deck. Sam muscled out, replaced the boards and battened down the tarpaulin. He loped aft to come to an understanding with Tiny. Brice knew it, but did not know how complete that understanding was to be.

After a while Sam returned with two rifles. He stood them in a handy corner and rejoined Brice. "Free the girl it is," he said. "What's your plan?"

Brice told him. Sam grumbled a little, but let it go, as he said, for the time being.

WITH increasing pressure, Brice signaled for all the speed he dared in the narrow channel. Presently, astern, the full moon lifted a pale orange rim on the eastern horizon. They cursed it absently, in unison. The job ahead would be tricky enough in the dark. By moonlight it would be ten times riskier and more difficult.

The moon rose higher, brightening as it paled, glinting on patches of marsh as the creek twisted and wound. Above the steady, muffled beat of their engine came a sound of a million frogs and, occasionally, the wild cry of a bird.

Suddenly Brice jerked erect. At the same instant, Sam darted out of the pilot house and tumbled below. Moon-

light had caught the white bow-wave of a launch speeding down on them.

Brice signaled for quarter speed. A moment later the bow-wave of the launch subsided to thin ribbons of foam as it slowed and veered toward the tug's port bow. Brice shifted his helm to starboard a little, switched on his searchlight and trained it.

The faces and bodies of the three men in the launch flashed brilliantly distinct. They were Chinese. Two looked like deckhands. A third, half rising from the helm to shield his eyes, was older, wore a dark uniform and a yachting cap.

Brice switched off the light. The launch might be an innocent pleasure-craft belonging to some wealthy merchant.

It was close now, almost alongside. As it slid past, the man at the helm shouted at Brice in Chinese. He caught the word "Stop!" but the rest was indistinct.

He regained the center of the channel and looked aft. The shallow-draft launch had veered shoreward and was backing, maneuvering for a turn. Brice smiled. Their interest in the presence of the tug argued their own guilt.

The lumbering bulk of Tiny Huckle clumped out on the fore-deck. He picked up the case of corned-beef tins as though it were empty, and carried it aft. Brice heard the case thump on the roof of the deckhouse behind him.

Sam darted into the pilot-house, caught up a rifle and oozed out on deck. The *Mary Jane* chugged on at quarter speed.

Again Brice looked astern. The launch had turned and was overhauling them fast, coming up to port. Sam's guarded voice reached Brice: "I got 'em covered. Tell 'em so, Dan."

The launch drew level, slowed and

scraped their trailing, wooden buffers.

The two deckhands grabbed their rail.

"Who are you? What do you do here?" called the man at the helm in Chinese. His voice was high-pitched, but held a note of authority. "Stop your engine!"

Brice answered in Chinese, without showing himself.

"By whose order?" he yelled. "Are you pirates?"

The Chinese hesitated. "It may be! Where are you bound? Stop your engine, low-born, water-rat!"

"We are bound on pleasure only, great noble!" Brice whined. "To the vessel of *Felicitous Nights*."

"Ha!" The man drew a revolver. "Stop, son of filth!"

"Alas!" howled Brice. "Can the noble lord and his men swim? It is vital to their safety!"

The man peered upward. "Certainly, we can swim!" He raised the revolver. "For the last time, stop your engine!"

"Look aft and drop your gun!" called Brice in a hard voice. "You are staring at death, foolish pirate!"

The man looked, saw the muzzle of Sam's rifle and let his weapon fall, his mouth a dark cavity of amazement.

"Now swim!" called Brice with a note of grim laughter, and jerked the whistle-cord.

WITH the short blast he glanced aft. On the deckhouse towered the giant Huckle, the case above his head. The deckhands yelled with terror and tried to scramble out of the way. Their leader clawed for his gun, but missed it. The case rose in the air lazily and fell in the cockpit of the launch with a rending crash, just missing the deckhands. Two corners of it ripped through the light bottom like tissue paper.

Instantly a fountain of water gushed up in the cockpit. The launch began to settle in the water with appalling quickness. Brice heard a chuckle in his ear but did not turn.

The two deckhands stared for an instant as though frozen, then whirled and plunged overboard with howls of fear.

Their leader tried to cover the hole with the case of corned beef, but could not even lift it. The launch was sinking under him when he, too, dove overboard and struck out for the marshy fringe of the creek. The launch went down with an amused gurgle, leaving a tiny whirlpool on the surface. An oar and two seat cushions popped up and floated forlornly.

"And that's that," laughed Sam. "Tiny's gone below."

Brice watched the dark, bobbing heads of the swimmers for a minute or two, then signaled for half-speed ahead.

"Take 'em all night to get anywhere in that marsh," he observed. "Tiny's the cat's pants."

"You've said it," agreed Sam placidly. He stacked his rifle in the corner and strolled out. The tug surged forward.

Half a mile farther on, Brice slowed again and turned a little to port. Warily the tug entered a branch of the Grand Canal which ran due west to Soochow. Sam reappeared.

"Tiny thinks he should've bopped the bird with the gun," he confided lazily. "Bloodthirsty guy, ain't he! Wha'd you find out from them Chinks, Dan?"

"Plenty," said Brice with a hard laugh. "He drew on us when I mentioned that sing-song boat—*Felicitous Nights*."

"Then we're on the right track."

"You've said it," echoed Brice, watching the channel.

"Wish I could talk the lingo," mourned Sam. He waited, got no reply and eased out again, realizing that Brice wanted to think.

An hour later the *Mary Jane* had circled Soochow and nosed cautiously into a small inlet to the south. Sam dropped a light anchor, then rowed Brice ashore in the dinghy. Hands in his sleeves, Brice bowed a mock farewell and started north toward Soochow. His comrades watched him almost out of sight.

IN the smaller, darker streets of Soochow, the tall, striding, Chinese figure aroused some interest but no suspicion. Brice waited until he saw a well-dressed merchant whose expression looked intelligent. He checked the man courteously.

"Is it known where lies the boat of *Felicitous Nights*?"

"It is known," the merchant stared uneasily, "but the vessel in question is not for—such as we."

"For the noble and wealthy, perhaps?" Brice inquired.

"That is so, courteous stranger."

"It is said that not all the noble and wealthy can be known by their attire," Brice suggested in a silken murmur.

"That also is true, respected sir," replied the merchant nervously. "The vessel known as *Felicitous Nights* lies anchored in Hsi Kou Bay to the south of Kwang Foong."

"And may be reached in what manner, unimportant one?"

The merchant grew still more nervous and respectful. "By launch from close at hand. Is it permitted to guide, noble sir? This person would make amends for his lack of respect."

"It is permitted," said Brice.

The merchant led him to the foot of the next street. There he hailed a launch which lay alongside a small dock, bidding the man hurry for a distinguished passenger. The boatman started his engine at once. Plainly visible in the moonlight, the launch looked swift and sturdy. It was roomy, too.

Brice thumped off the safety catch on the automatic in his sleeve. He and the merchant had been followed from the last street, followed with a silent skill rare even for the Chinese. Looking down at the launch, he thanked the merchant pointedly.

His guide murmured something respectful and hurried away. Brice stepped into the launch, wheeled swiftly and drew his gun. Two figures raced out on the dock, bringing a cry of alarm from the boatman. With a snort, Brice put his gun away.

Wreathed in placid smiles, Sam and Tiny stepped down into the cockpit and made themselves comfortable.

"Thought you'd go it alone, huh?" asked Sam.

"Home, James," said Tiny in a comfortable growl.

For a second Brice was angry. Then his mouth twitched. The boatman was staring in scared amazement. Brice nodded.

"To Hsi Kou Bay on Lake Taihu, and the sing-song boat known as *Felicitous Nights*," he ordered in imperious Chinese.

The boatman's eyes widened nervously, but he cast off, put his engine in gear and jumped to the helm.

"And don't spare the hosses," chuckled Tiny.

It was a long trip—about fifteen miles—south on the Grand Canal to an arm of Lake Taihu, then southwest until they saw the lights of Tai Ku Ting, then northwest between the is-

lands into Hsi Kou Bay. Luckily the launch was swift and covered the distance in half an hour.

They saw the vessel almost as soon as they rounded the point. It lay on the water like a gorgeous dragon-fly lighted fore and aft by softly swaying colored lanterns. But it lay silent, with no tinkle of music or laughter.

Sam and Tiny had a good look at it, then lay down in the cockpit and spread its canvas cover over themselves.

Brice showed the boatman his automatic once more.

"A quiet tongue," he said, "leads to venerable age."

"High-born, this one sees nothing—knows nothing!"

Five minutes later the launch brushed alongside the pleasure barge. Brice whispered to the boatman to draw off a little but remain within hearing. Then he stepped up on the Sing-song boat's deck of polished, richly inlaid boards, and into the scent of perfumed candles.

IV

THE afterdeck was entirely deserted. His sandals made the slightest whisper on the smooth boards, yet almost at once the carved, teakwood door into the deckhouse swung open. Two little sing-song girls appeared in the doorway. They were very young, their piquant, rice-powdered faces exquisitely pretty. Their trousers and tunics were of thin silk, revealing their slim contours. Young lips pouted while almond eyes smiled at him. In twittering chorus, they bowed him into the dim and scented main cabin of the sing-song boat.

Brice entered with grave dignity, aware of their birdlike glances at his cheap attire. When he halted, one of

them lifted a smiling, flowerlike face.

"Great Lord," she trilled mockingly, "that pretty one is called Su Su. This humble slave is Ying Ying."

As though at a signal, they pirouetted before him in unison. Brice stared gravely over their heads.

"Men know," he intoned on a deep note, "that some few great ones do not wear their honors upon their sleeves. Women are as peacocks, knowing nothing except to be admired."

The girls bowed low. When they looked up, all mockery was gone. Their smooth, almond eyes were bright with fear. "The Great One would have us go?" asked Su Su timidly.

It cost Brice an effort to keep his eyes coldly remote. To frighten young girls was a new role for him.

"This one who comes as a low-born," he said pointedly, "desires speech with the girl who came tonight, and none other."

They looked startled and even more frightened.

"This—this worthless thing will inquire," faltered Ying Ying. At his nod of permission, she ran gracefully toward the front of the cabin and slipped out through a narrow door.

Su Su stood before him with bowed head, clasping and unclasping her soft little hands. Moments passed, but Ying Ying did not return. Then, like something that creeps in the night, the consciousness stole over Brice that he was being watched. An instant later, Su Su clapped a hand over her mouth and ran out of the cabin with a stifled wail of terror.

Brice stood motionless while his black eyes roved over the huge dim cabin and his hand tightened on the automatic. A faint sound made him wheel swiftly. Two enormous, soft-footed Chinese stood in the main door-

way, watching him in silence. He turned his head sharply. Two other doors, one on each side of the cabin, had opened to admit two more men each.

Trying to watch them all with narrowed eyes, Brice drew his automatic and thumbed off the safety catch. At sight of it all six of them closed in on him in swift silence.

Brice shot two of them with cool accuracy, one through the lungs, another between the eyes. While the sharp explosions still echoed, the other four were upon him with their bare hands.

One of them staggered back with a broken jaw, out on his feet. Another took a fist in the stomach that sat him down with a breathless snarl. But under the rush of the other two, Brice measured his length on the cabin floor.

Used to the art of rough and tumble, he was up like a cat. He had lost the automatic, but was swinging a hard fist when the seated man tackled his legs. Down he went again, and this time the other two swarmed all over him. Prone on his face, Brice was still making a fight of it when a silken noose was slipped about his neck from behind and tightened savagely. At the same instant his left arm was twisted and locked on his back.

Gasping for breath, the blood roaring in his ears, Brice was losing consciousness. Under his iron will, his body gathered itself in a final effort. He twisted half over, felt the silk loosen and gulped a lungful of air. Again the noose tightened and his arm was twisted savagely. He sensed a blow descending but could not see it—

FROM the doorway came a good American curse. Dimly Brice heard the clump of quick, shod feet and the

clean smack of blows. The noose fell away. His arm was free. Gasping a little, he rolled over weakly and sat up in time to see Huckle land an uppercut on the last Chinese. It whipped the man's head back and snapped his neck. He was dying when he hit the floor.

Brice got up unsteadily. "Good lads," he muttered.

Sam had moved to help. "You okay?" he growled.

Brice stooped for his automatic and straightened dizzily, panting a little. "Okay by a small margin. What about our launch? If that boatman decides to beat it—"

"Don't worry. He's tied up and we got his keys. We made her fast alongside."

"Watch her, Sam! Somebody aboard could shove her off. Let Tiny keep an eye on these birds."

Sam chuckled. Tiny was moving from Chink to prone Chink, methodically rapping their heads with the muzzle of his long .45. Three were dead. The other three were out cold now.

"Tiny's watching 'em now," Sam pointed out. "Kind of a cute joint this, ain't it?"

"You get out there and watch that launch!" Brice made for the door where Ying Ying had vanished. It was unlocked. He opened it wide and stepped through, his automatic poised to chop down.

Beyond the door, a passage led forward and then down a narrow companionway. There was no one in sight. Brice crept along the passage and stole downward, his narrow eyes alert and savage, his throat still aching from the noose.

At the foot of the companionway, open doors to left and right revealed

gorgeously furnished but unoccupied cabins.

A third door, facing Brice, was closed. He listened intently, but could not hear a sound.

At length he tried the handle. The door yielded, opening a few inches silently. After a quick glance behind him, he looked into the cabin.

It was luxurious and well lighted. He saw Lien-tzu at once. The girl had backed into a corner. Her heavy silk tunic was ripped in a dozen places. One sleeve had been torn away, baring a pale shoulder and arm. She was holding the point of a knife against her young bosom, her petal-face grave and composed.

Facing the girl, with his back to the door, stood a slim Chinese. He wore emerald silk trousers and a green tunic with a great, golden dragon emblazoned on the back.

As Brice sized up the cabin before entering, a panel opened silently just behind Lien-tzu's shoulder. A long, yellow arm shot through and clamped her wrist, twisting it as she cried out. The knife fell. The arm hurled her stumbling forward toward the slim Chinese.

BRICE fired. There was a cough behind the panel and the sound of fingernails clawing wood. The richly clad Chinese wheeled sharply, revealing a young face, dark and narrow, cruel, ravaged by dissipation. As he turned, Lien-tzu swerved lithely past him and ran to Brice with a little murmur of relief.

After one snarling, incredulous glance, the young Chinese clapped his hands sharply together. Then, with lightning quickness, he drew a knife from his sleeve and sprang at Brice.

The girl tried to thrust her body between them to shield Brice. He swept

her aside and fired at the upraised arm. The knife fell. The young Chinese howled with fury, clutching his wounded arm. Then he stooped for the knife and sprang up with it in his left hand. Brice shifted his gun to his own left hand, dodged the knife and struck, the weight of his shoulder behind the lifting blow. It caught the slim Chinese under the jaw and hurled him back head first against the wall. His head was on one side a little. The impact broke his neck with a dull snap. He sprawled limply on the floor like a gorgeous China doll.

A cry from Lien-tzu made Brice wheel swiftly. A hidden door in the paneling had opened, admitting two huge, cat-footed Chinese armed with knives. They sprang at him as he turned.

Through the open door Tiny charged like a great wind. Brice fired, dropping one of the Chinese in a plunging dive. Tiny closed with the other, caught his knife-arm, wheeled and stooped with a savage heave. The Chinese pin-wheeled over his head and struck the cabin wall, both feet crushing through the thin panel. One of them caught in the hole it had made. The man hung there head down, groaning with the agony of a dislocated shoulder.

Tiny swept the room with little red eyes. There were no more opponents. He wiped his mouth and jerked his thumb at the hanging Chinese. "Should I finish the guy, Dan?"

Brice shook his head. "Lift him down and we'll get out of here." His hand closed on Lieu-tzu's trembling fingers.

Tiny yanked the man's foot out and laid him on the rug without interest or comment. They guided and guarded Lien-tzu up to the main cabin and thence out on deck. Sam stood on guard

beside the launch and grinned his relief when he saw them.

"Heard you shoot," he said and stepped down into the cockpit. He had released the frightened boatman, who was crouching over his engine. Tiny handed Lien-tzu aboard and followed.

Brice was casting off when a patter of feet checked him. Ying Ying and Su Su came running out on deck, wild-eyed.

"Take us with you!" Ying Ying gasped, "or we die! We shall be blamed! They will kill us slowly!" Both the sing-song girls were shaking with terror.

"Please take them," begged Lien-tzu. "It is the truth."

"As you will." Brice changed to English. "They'll be killed if we leave 'em here, Tiny. Here. Grab 'em—"

As he waved the girls forward, Tiny rose with a roar of laughter. His two hands went out and grabbed the frightened girls by the slack of their little waists. He lifted them high in air, then sat down with them one on each knee.

At first they shrank from him in alarm. When he patted their backs and grinned, they took heart, looked up into his big face, and relaxed. Tiny encircled two armfuls of pretty girl and looked liked a pleased Saint Bernard. Su Su and Ying Ying lowered their eyes shyly.

"Sweet cats!" Sam muttered.

Brice flung the painter aboard and dropped lightly into the cockpit. "Depart—the way we came," he told the boatman.

The engine caught and roared. The launch swept north, then east, then south, in a tight curve. Brice looked shoreward. The firing aboard the sing-song boat had been heard on the beach. Lanterns bobbed along the shore and voices hailed them.

Between Sam's gun at his back and threats from shore, the boatman was shaking so badly that he could hardly steer. In a moment Brice slid a handful of Mex notes into his fingers. These seemed to encourage him, for the launch steadied on her course, gathered speed. Though Brice half expected pursuit, none developed. The quiet, evil loveliness of the sing-song boat faded and dwindled astern.

Tiny kidded the girls in his best pidgin English. Instinctively guessing his soft spot, they twittered and laughed at him in a more universal tongue. Lien-tzu looked modestly elsewhere as the launch throbbed over the moonlit water.

When they saw the lights of Tai Ku Ting off the starboard beam, the boatman veered eastward into the moon's eye, then gradually northeast, the way they had come. Presently Brice spoke to him in Chinese. He shifted the helm more to starboard, approaching the end of the lake. The launch entered a more easterly channel leading to Soochow and slowed down.

Ten minutes later, passing an inlet, Brice saw the dark bulk of the *Mary Jane* for an instant. The others had not seen it. He waited a moment, then told the boatman to pull in and let them off here, on the right bank.

The man promptly obeyed, glad to be rid of such dangerous passengers. Brice, Sam and Tiny waded ashore, each with a clinging, half-frightened girl in his arms. They stood on the low, marshy bank and watched the launch stutter off toward Soochow like an agitated water beetle. Then Brice pointed out the distant pilot-house of the *Mary Jane* diagonally across the marsh and they started back along the shore toward it.

"How you found it from the other

direction beats me," Sam muttered. "I was lost like a dime overboard."

"Let's get a move on," said Brice absently.

The dinghy lay scraping the rushes where Sam had tied it. The tug was undisturbed. Five minutes saw them all aboard and the dinghy shipped. Tiny made for the engine room. Brice entered the pilot-house. Sam went to the bows and raised anchor. With the silent precision of a battleship, the tug was under way.

The girls had been left in the cabin. Presently Sam found them regarding each other with uncertain politeness. The feeling of caste in China is very strong.

Lien-tzu asked in broken English whether she might speak to "Mistah Blice, please?" Sam led her to the pilot-house. Brice invited her to stay there with him.

When Sam returned to the cabin, Ying Ying had ventured to find her way to the engineroom. Su Su remained to flutter her eyelids and make friends in the only way she knew.

For ten minutes Brice was intent on guiding the *Mary Jane* northward into Soochow Creek. The winding creek was longer but less used than the branch of the Grand Canal near Soochow.

V

AT LENGTH Brice was sure that he had found the creek in that network of waterways. He signaled for more speed and, turning smiled at Lien-tzu, his dark face like a hawk in the moonlight. "Now, little friend, tell me what you know of this."

Lieu-tzu lowered her eyes. "How did you—find me?"

"Ch'ang mentioned Felicitous Nights," said Brice. "This person

sought your father's friend, Li Nan-wang. *He* told where to find the sing-song boat."

"And you came!" breathed Lien-tzu. "The—courteous Li Nan-wang told you nothing more, inestimable friend?"

"There was talk of a certain official who desired you to marry his son. Their names were not spoken."

The girl shuddered, and then sighed. "The name of the official is Chew Men-sang. He approached my revered father on behalf of his son, Chew Kin-chong. Lien-tzu was afraid. Chew Kin-chong is not good, or kind. You saw. That was he in green and gold, who tried to stab you. My well-beloved father yielded to my tears. Oh, wicked, faithless daughter that he has—"

Lien-tzu was crying softly, her pretty head bowed.

"It is said that even the darkest cloud passes in time," muttered Brice. "What took place at your home to-night?"

"Men came in numbers, suddenly. They drove forth our houseboys. They seized my father without courtesy. They laid hands upon me in my room and tore my clothing—"

"Was Chew Men-sang or Chew Kin-chong among them?"

"Not so. Yet it is rumored that Chew Men-sang is high official of secret police. These men were not in uniform, but clad as citizens. They tore me from my father—" Lien-tzu broke down in tears.

Brice waited and let her cry. After a moment she controlled herself and went on in a low voice: "They rolled me up, sightless, in a great rug and bore me to the waterfront. There waited a swift launch which carried me to the sing-song boat. When they loosed me upon the floor, without dignity, Chew Kin-

Chong stood gazing down. It was in that cabin. He dismissed them. He said the lowly house of Ling had affronted the noble house of Chew. He said he would make the daughter of the house of Ling unsuitable for—honorable marriage with anyone—"

"Yet this person arrived in time?" asked Brice quietly.

Lien-tzu bowed her shamed head. "Due to your swift and gallant friendship, this person is—as yesterday," she murmured. "Kin-chong drew knives, saying that—afterward, if this person resisted, the knives would be used upon my face. He dropped one. This grateful person seized it and fled to the corner. Then you came—and thrust the face of death away from mine."

"You would have killed yourself?" muttered Brice.

"What else?" asked Lien-tzu in faint surprise. "Nor is it over. He will not forgive. He will seek a dreadful revenge on you—and me. He is very cruel—and wicked."

Brice smiled. "It is wrong to speak ill of the dead."

"Chew Kin-chong is—dead?" she gasped.

"He most unwisely broke his neck against the wall."

"Oh-h!" moaned the girl. "Then very surely and horribly will his father destroy us—all of us!"

"Perhaps. Yet he who rides death may be trampled by death." Brice touched her arm. "What of your father?"

Lien-tzu shivered and drew closer, looking up at him like a child. "Alas," she cried pleadingly, "this person does not understand! They told my father with cruel mirth that—the great honor awaited him! He has been chosen by the high command to—die for his country. This undutiful daughter heard no

more, and did not believe. Surely, he is there, at home?"

"Perhaps he has returned," said Brice, and fell silent.

"Life is sweet," murmured Lien-tzu pitifully. "Yet this unworthy daughter is not afraid to meet death."

"You are safe now, little friend."

The girl tried to cover her neck and shoulder with her tattered clothing. "If my father were slain because he yielded to my tears, life would seem more bitter than death," she gasped.

"That is foolish," said Brice almost roughly. "Were *all* your houseboys driven forth?" He turned away and shouted to Sam to bring him a coat.

"Perhaps not all," faltered Lien-tzu. "This unhappy person did not see little Foo-yin. It is my recollection that he was in the house. He may have fled when they first came."

"Do you know where he lives, Lien-tzu?"

"All three houseboys sleep in our home, always. They are from Tientsin, where my father was born."

"They may have returned," said Brice half to himself.

Sam appeared with a coat. Brice took it and draped it about the girl's shoulders. Then he watched the channel, thinking ahead in grim silence. The cards were badly stacked against him, but Ling Ch'i-wu had proved himself a good friend.

Miles nearer Shanghai, Lien-tzu spoke again timidly. "The launch that brought me, valued friend! Will it betray us?"

"Not so," Brice smiled absently. "We sank it. The crew of three men will not quickly reach Shanghai, wading like cranes through the marshes."

As though in answer to his words, something glanced from the searchlight

overhead and whined into the sky. A split second later he heard the flat report from the reeds near the bank, a hundred feet or so distant.

BRICE flung the girl prone with a sweep of his arm. Another bullet struck the outside of the pilot house. Then Sam darted in and caught up a rifle, thrust it at Brice and reached for the wheel. "You take him, Dan," he said easily.

As the best rifle shot, Brice kneeled in the pilot-house door, put the rifle to his shoulder and waited. A wink of light from the reeds, a thud on their armor plate, and then he fired. Water spouted briefly in the moonlight, close to the flash. Three men got up from the reeds like startled ducks, and ran splashing across the marshy ground. Two were bare-headed. The other wore a cap. Brice fired again.

The man with the cap spun half around and fell on his side. The others ran on, their howls of terror drifting back faintly. The man with the cap lay a motionless blob on the marsh.

Brice turned back to the wheel and held out the rifle.

"Thanks," he said. "Better clean and reload it, Sam. That'll delay 'em some more—if those deckhands talk at all."

"Nice shooting, guy." Sam took the rifle and went out.

Lien-tzu rose and drew close to Brice. She was trembling. "Did you—kill him?" she murmured unsteadily.

He looked down at her. "It is improbable," he lied. "The man would naturally remain quiet, fearing another shot. Yet he will not reach Shanghai and report us for many hours."

"Oh," sighed Lien-tzu. And Brice could not tell whether or not she believed him. "It was the man of the launch?"

"Without doubt. Would you like to rest in the cabin?"

"No-o," she breathed. "This person would rather remain here with her utterly self-sacrificing friend—"

An hour later they steamed quietly past the British jail, entered the Whangpoo and turned south along the sleeping Shanghai bund. Opposite the Chinese city, Sam dropped a light anchor. Then Brice summoned them all to the cabin.

"I brought the *Mary Jane* all the way back here," he explained to his pals, "partly on account of these two girls, partly because we're close to Lien-tzu's home in the Chinese City. Lien-tzu and I are going ashore. If the girls—"

He turned abruptly and spoke to Ying Ying: "Where are your homes? In the Chinese City here? This is Shanghai."

"Our parents live here," the girl faltered in alarm, "but we cannot return! We have been sold to the sing-song boat. In any case we would be caught and beaten. Now they will kill us, if you send us to our homes!"

"Can't send 'em home," Brice translated. "Maybe—"

"Wait a minute," chuckled Tiny, "I got an idea. You know Madame Fleuri, Dan! Runs the boarding house where me and Sam hang out. She's a regular guy—she'll look after 'em. And it ain't far, just north of Chinatown in the French settlement. How's about it?"

Without waiting for an answer, he grinned at Su Su.

Both girls shrank in horrified alarm. Ying Ying held out her hands to Brice: "Please do not let him eat us up," she wailed. "We have done you no harm!"

Brice laughed and Lien-tzu smiled in spite of herself.

"She thinks you want to eat her, you

cannibal!" Brice told Tiny. Then he answered Ying Ying in Chinese: "The large man is your friend, only inviting you both to sleep and eat at the house where he lives—and where you will be safe."

After a little uncertainty, the girls smiled their relief and grateful acceptance. They reminded Brice of a pair of lost kittens. If they all got out of this alive he guessed that Sam and Tiny would look after the girls.

"All right, that's settled," he agreed. "The five of us'll go ashore. Tiny'll take the girls home, come back here, and help you dock the *Mary Jane*, Sam. Let's go, Tiny."

"So Tiny and I dock the *Mary Jane*, while you go it alone," snarled Sam. "Listen, Dan, for the last time—*that's out!* We're in this up to our necks and we *stay* in it. Those Chinese cops knew you—and know we share the tug. Those guys on the marsh'll identify her, and she's bullet-marked. I'm going ashore with you. The tug'll be safe here, and we might need her in a hurry. If not, we can dock her later. Either way, Tiny c'n take the girls home and meet us here. He's sitting pretty with our landlady. So that's that."

"And it goes double," growled Tiny, slightly confused.

"You crazy fools," said Brice. "You'll get bumped."

"Nuts!" said Tiny and Sam in chorus.

Brice tried to stare them down with narrowed eyes. For once they stared back, as determined as he. At length he gaye it up with a shrug—and a warm sensation in his lean middle.

FIVE minutes later all six were on the Bund. Brice and Sam and Lien-tzu entered the Chinese City. Tiny marched off to the northwest between

the sing-song girls, their slim arms unresisting in his big paws.

As they neared the home of Ling Ch'i-wu, Brice left Sam with Lien-tzu and went ahead to reconnoiter. His Chinese costume had suffered in that battle in the main cabin. So he wove in his walk and turned in at Ling's gate as though drunk and off his course. Nothing happened. By the time he reached the front door, he was satisfied that the Chinese police had departed. He turned back and called softly to the others.

The front door was locked. Sam offered to get in through a window, but Lien-tzu checked him rather pitifully, understanding his gesture if not his words. She knocked several times, then stood back. Suddenly, she gasped and pointed.

"Look! The vision-hole! There is someone—" She ran to the door and called, her heart in her soft voice. "Ah, please open! It is Lien-tzu! Truly, it is Lien-tzu!"

The door began to open. Brice eased forward. Eyes showed at the crack, widened as they met his. The door closed, but on his foot. A moment later they were in the house.

A young Chinese boy lay sprawled on the floor, where the door had flung him. He saw Lien-tzu and scrambled erect.

"Foo-yin!" she gasped. "Where is my father?" Seeing his terrified stare, she added: "These are friends!"

"Daughter of Ling, he is gone!" the boy gestured miserably. "This worthless creature hid when they came, and stole out of the back door when they went. They took him, unbound, to the thunder-horse's stable. He disappeared in the—the train that rushes, bellowing all the way to Nanking. This worm could not follow, though he loves!"

"Did he hear anything said?" murmured Brice quietly.

"Did you?" pleaded Lien-tzu. "Did you, Foo-yin?"

"Only that he *must* go to Nanking—and other words so worthless a creature was unable to comprehend. Oh, low thing!"

"Not so! You followed! What were the words, Foo-yin?"

"One said in a voice like butter, that the noble Ling should be happy, because he was to have the—the *Mung tcha sai*. But that does not mean—anything that is real."

The girl turned to Brice, her young eyes despairing.

"The dreaming death," she whispered. "What does it mean? Oh, if this person can die in his place—"

"Never mind what it means," said Brice sharply. "He is at Nanking. We follow. Come! You are unsafe here, unsafe anywhere, perhaps, except with us. Come, little friend."

For an instant Lien-tzu gazed about her ravished home as though to fix it in her memory. Then, lips set and lovely face composed, she preceded them out of the house.

THE streets of the sleeping city were deserted, the moon almost overhead, as they hurried softly back to the river. A huge figure rose from a go-down entrance and joined them, so that Lien-tzu almost screamed with fright. It was Tiny.

"I'd 'a' got steam up," he explained reasonably, in a hoarse whisper, "only I couldn't row out there an' leave the dinghy for you. Couldn't be done."

Sam chuckled. "Well, get going now, Einstein."

Though the dinghy was small, they managed it in one trip and without shipping a drop of water. Once aboard,

Tiny made for the engineroom. "Steam up in five ticks, Skipper!"

"Right," nodded Brice and led the way to the cabin. He stood back for the girl to enter, and pointed to a berth. "Lie down and rest, and chase away your fears, Lien-tzu. It is said that courage and hope enlist the gods," he smiled.

The girl smiled wanly in return as she obeyed.

"Now gimme the dope," urged Sam. "That was Greek to me."

Brice told him what they had learned from Foo-yin.

"Dreaming death, huh? I give up. What's your plan?"

Brice sat and cracked his knuckles thoughtfully, while Lien-tzu watched him under her lashes. Finally he looked up and outlined what he intended to do.

Sam whistled under his breath, nodded and went out. "I'll make coffee for us," he called back from the doorway. "She might tear off a few winks—"

Brice followed. "Make some—weak—for her," he said.

In the pilot-house, a few minutes later, Brice warily maneuvered the *Mary Jane* about in mid-stream and signaled full speed ahead. The tug lifted her blunt nose on her course down the Whangpoo river, heading for the Yangtze Kiang and distant Nanking. Left alone below, Lien-tzu permitted herself to weep, very quietly, her blurred eyes trying to watch the door.

Before they swung out into the Yangtze Kiang, Sam and Tiny had downed scalding coffee almost strong enough to stand without the cups. Once they were heading up the great river, Sam took the helm. Brice went below for his own coffee and made a weak cup for Lien-tzu. He dissolved a fairly

strong sedative in it. She was exhausted and needed sleep. Nor would she guess, the taste being unfamiliar anyway. She drank it, unsuspecting.

Later, when he tiptoed in and covered her with a blanket, she was sound asleep.

For an hour Sam labored to mount and bolt the Barking Dog on the fore-deck. Tiny left the engineroom long enough to help him bring up the cases and build the breastwork that protected the gun. They left the Spitting Cat below.

At three in the morning, prowling the afterdeck, Sam noticed a steam launch astern. It carried no lights, but his sea-wise eyes detected the glow from the ports on the water. He watched it for a while. It neither drew closer nor fell away.

He reported to Brice: "Steam launch trailing us, sir."

"Aye, aye, Mister. I noticed it," Brice smiled.

"Lemme take over an' you get some sleep."

"Go to sleep yourself," Brice suggested.

"Nuts to you," grumbled Sam and wandered out again.

AT DAWN, the launch had fallen farther astern, but was still visible. At sunrise, Sam ran up the American Flag on the stumpy mast, came to attention and saluted it gravely.

The table was set and breakfast ready before they woke Lien-tzu. She rubbed her eyes, then swung her toes to the floor with a half-choked sob. Brice showed her where to wash and they left her awhile. When she called them, she was composed again.

Brice and Lien-tzu breakfasted together. The other two ate separately as Brice relieved one and then the other.

Lien-tzu wanted to wash the dishes. Sam let her do it, to keep her from thinking. After that she wandered down to the engineroom.

Tiny was sweating and naked to the waist, but she did not seem to care. He was a little afraid of her, and liked her. They could not talk, but he understood her restlessness, and he would have turned the drive-shaft faster with his hands, if that had been possible. She knew this by instinct and was a little comforted. For some reason she avoided the pilot-house.

While Lien-tzu was in the engineroom, Brice turned the helm over to Sam, went below and washed off his Chinese make-up. He got into his fighting kit; boots, riding breeches and tunic without insignia. Though he left his holster and his well-greased .45 in the locker, he stowed the small, flat automatic in a front breeches-pocket where it did not show.

They reached Nanking just at noon. Long before that, Brice had peered upstream and called down to Sam. When he appeared, he gazed upstream—and whistled softly. There was an American destroyer anchored off the Nanking waterfront.

"Get out that big tarp and cover the gun. Breastworks, too," Brice told him. "Make the whole thing look like cargo. Make it stick, Sam, or we won't get to first base."

Sam stumbled below and lugged the big tarpaulin out on the foredeck. By unpiling four cases between breastworks and gun, and covering the whole with the carelessly lashed down tarpaulin, he made their armament look exactly like a slovenly river cargo of this and that and the other.

They anchored off the main street. The pursuing launch gathered speed and came up hand over hand. Before it

reached them, it veered and eased into a slip, downstream.

Brice met Tiny looming out of the engineroom, and pushed him in again. "Listen, guy. I'm leaving you in charge. Not that I won't need you ashore," he added, as Tiny scowled, "but we'll need you worse, here. Keep your eyes and ears open and stay near the Barking Dog. We may come back in a hurry, and under fire—that is, if we come back at all."

Tiny's scowl changed to a smile. "You'll come back."

"Sure. Now wait a minute. Don't uncover the gun until you have to; say, until you hear a shot, and *know* we're playing target. That's a U. S. destroyer. We're an armed vessel, flying the American flag without a commission. That makes us pirates, if we shoot up the town—even *with* a darned good reason to."

"Yeah," said Tiny. "I'll get half a dozen shells handy."

Brice grinned and turned away, and ran into Sam.

"You're going all out, ain't you?" asked Sam mildly.

"Sure," nodded Brice. "You *would* stick aboard. Might as well get hung for a sheep as a lamb."

"We'll get hung, all right."

"Maybe. Anyhow, we don't want an international incident if"—Brice closed one eye—"if we can help it."

Sam stared, and nodded slowly. "Let's go," he said.

LIEN-TZU, Brice and Sam went ashore in the dinghy and made it fast to a go-down dock. Brice got the owner's permission to leave it there, and hired a big porter to guard it. They took rickshas to the largest hotel. In the lobby, Brice engaged a room for Lien-tzu. Then he led the girl aside.

"You are to stay here, little friend, until one sends for you, or we come for you. We go to visit friends in the government. Be courageous and do not lose hope. Rest in your room."

Lien-tzu murmured agreement. They watched her into the lift. Then Brice drew Sam outdoors by the arm.

"That launch means trouble," he explained. "I think they'll try to get Lien-tzu. Stick around and watch, but don't let her see you. If she leaves, follow her and see where she goes. Then meet me at the dinghy. You'll have to be careful that nobody sees what you're up to. It's the best plan I can think of right now. You might down a few highballs and play drunk—if it comes to following her."

"Right," nodded Sam. "When'll you be at the dinghy?"

"Half an hour, if I can make it. Not much longer."

They shook hands and parted. Brice hired a ricksha and was hauled at a jog-trot to the government buildings. There he asked for an interview with the official with whom he had contracted to capture Ling Chang. They were on the best of terms, and the official had a great deal of power.

By good luck, the man was in his office and granted the interview almost at once. When Brice entered, the official rose from behind an empty desk and held out his hand. He wore European clothes and spoke English perfectly.

"Well, my buccaneering friend, this is a pleasure," he smiled. "What can I do for you, Mr. Brice?"

The adjective was too close for comfort. Brice shook hands and accepted a chair, conscious that shrewd, bland eyes were appraising him, above the official smile.

"I came to ask questions," he said

lazily, disarmingly, "if your time permits, sir?" Without waiting, he plunged on: "Is a gentleman named Chew Mensang connected with officialdom?"

"He is, I believe, a—person unwise to offend."

"Is he the head of your secret police?"

The official lips tightened very slightly at the blunt question. "Let us agree that it is a fine morning, Mr. Brice."

"Thank you, sir. Now another matter. Do you know of a—mission, let us say, upon which a blameless Chinese merchant has been selected to die for his country?"

I know of no such mission, Mr. Brice. Is it permitted to inquire why you ask?" The question was faintly ironical.

"To do so," Brice bowed gravely, "might lead me to rely too much upon our mutual friendship."

The official smiled, with his lips. "I see that I am entertaining a diplomat. What else, Mr. Brice?"

"Another and widely different question," said Brice, to imply the opposite. "The world knows there is a movement in China to liquidate opium-addicts. No doubt, this is being carried out here, in Nanking, sir?"

"These are curious, perhaps dangerous, questions, eh?"

"The answers," said Brice, "will not escape my lips. Nor would I borrow your valuable time except on a matter of life and death—innocent life and shameful death."

"My hearing is poor today, Mr. Brice, as an official. As your friend, what is best for China is being enforced here."

"May I ask *when* the liquidations take place, sir?"

"Often at once—or when the per-

son in charge sees fit." The word *person* was very slightly accented. And the official had used it in reference to Chew Men-sang.

Brice inhaled deeply, and sighed. "May I ask where these enemies of China are detained in Nanking?"

The official stared for an instant. Then he rose.

"I fear that your time is up, Mr. Brice," he said regretfully. "You see how my work has accumulated?" He gestured blandly toward his empty desk and held out his hand. "I regret that I cannot help you. In parting, as friends, let me suggest that you inspect our beautiful bund. The section downstream a little way is perhaps the most—interesting."

BRICE shook hands and bowed himself out, trying to look doleful. He had been answered. Nanking is a manufacturing city. Its central waterfront is not beautiful. His host had meant that doomed opium-addicts were detained a little way downstream, until they were led out and executed.

On his long night trick at the helm, Brice had guessed the probable meaning of *dreaming death*. He was almost sure of it because of the taunt that Ling had been chosen to die for his country. Only in sleep, or under the influence of opium, could a man die while dreaming. And the former had no significance.

It was likely that Chew Men-sang had come up river aboard that launch. Therefore, Brice hoped that Ling Ch'i-wu was still alive. He had brought Lien-tzu ashore so that Chew Men-sang would see her. Great danger demanded great risk. He hoped that Chew Men-sang would spare Ling until he had captured Lien-tzu. It would be a more cruel satisfaction to slay father and

daughter at the same time and before each other's eyes.

Not being sure that he could learn from his official friend where the addicts were being detained, he had brought Lien-tzu ashore partly as bait. He hoped that her capture would lead him to her father. Because she would gladly die for her father, he had let her take what seemed a necessary risk.

Now, jogging toward the hotel in another ricksha, he regretted that risk. At the same time he was haunted by a curious, dull sense of finality. For once he had burned his boats behind him, not only for himself but for his loyal buddies. In many ventures he had undertaken, failure had meant death. But in this one, success might easily prove as deadly as failure.

Brice shook himself and smiled. It was all in the game. A moment later he had himself set down at the hotel.

Sam was not visible outdoors—nor indoors when Brice entered the lobby. He went to the desk and inquired.

"Miss Ling has gone out," the clerk told him politely. "She received a telephone talking not five minutes gone past. So did she walk at once with speed out from this nice hotel."

Brice thanked him and went out to the doorman. Yes, the young Chinese lady had employed ricksha and departed in generally northward direction of bund.

Since he dared not attract attention by running, Brice hopped into another ricksha. It dropped him close to the go-down. Sam came striding to meet him.

"She came out and took a ricksha," he said swiftly. "I followed. She came to a place on the bund. Sentries in front. She went in. I heard her scream once. They've got her, Dan."

"Downstream, eh? How far?"

"Two streets. You can see it from here. Converted go-down. Entrance on back street. Come on, Dan!"

"For the last time, will you keep out of this?" Brice snarled. "It's ten to one on death and it's not your funeral."

"We've faced longer odds. I'm *in*! Let's go." Sam drew a gun, thumbed off the safety catch and pocketed it.

"Right." Brice smiled grimly and led the way east.

THEY followed the bund past the converted go-down and turned inland, into a short block. The warehouse ran through to the next cross street, which lay not more than sixty yards ahead.

Reaching the corner, they looked west. There were two sentries at the warehouse entrance. Brice crossed, following the street they were on. Once out of sight of the sentries, he and Sam turned back. The gruesome neighborhood was deserted.

"They won't kill 'em in there," Brice stated harshly. "They'll bring 'em out in the open to shoot 'em. I think they'll come toward us, away from the main street. And if Chew Men-sang is in there, it won't be long. Here's the idea."

Brice kept glancing around the corner as he talked. He had just finished when the sentries came to attention and saluted. A richly-dressed Chinese of middle age appeared. He carried himself haughtily, but his dark face had the look of a triumphant bird of prey, the black eyes quick and savage.

"Chew Men-sang for a nickel," muttered Brice.

Behind the official came an officer wearing a holstered revolver, and two soldiers with rifles. A miserable scarecrow shuffled in their wake. The soldiers faced him east, toward Sam and Brice, and halted him. Another addict

drifted out, and another. Then Brice saw Ling Ch'i-wu.

The merchant walked firmly and did not appear drugged, but there was a fixed horror on his round, kindly face. A slim boy moved unsteadily at his heels. Brice stared. The boy was Lien-tzu. She had been changed into male clothing, her long hair concealed under a turban of rags. On her calm young face was a numbed and tearless despair.

One by one, four more addicts shambled out of the building and took their places in single file. Two soldiers emerged last to bring up the rear. Then, at a shrill command from the officer, the procession of death began to move.

As the head of it marched slowly past their corner, Sam and Brice flattened themselves against the wall. The first addict appeared. Ling and his daughter were almost opposite.

"Now!" muttered Brice.

SWIFT and silent as wolves, the two ex-marines charged the line, paused for an instant and raced on. Brice caught up Ling bodily and flung him over his shoulder. Sam carried Lien-tzu in his arms. They had run thirty feet with cracking muscles before anyone in the procession realized what had happened. Then a confused uproar broke out behind them.

Brice was in the lead with Sam at his heels. Gradually Sam overtook and passed him, for the merchant outweighed Lien-tzu by fifty pounds. Brice checked and set Ling on his feet.

"Run, for your life and your daughter!" he panted in Chinese. As he gave Ling a savage push toward the water front a revolver cracked behind them, followed by a shrill command.

Brice wheeled and drew his auto-

matic. Soldiers and addicts were milling at the corner. Chew Men-sang and the officer had started in pursuit of their escaped victims, but only just started. As Brice wheeled, the officer fired again.

Unhurt, Brice chopped down his automatic steadily in a quick shot. The officer dropped his weapon, clapped both hands high on his chest and fell with a bubbling scream. Brice turned and raced on. Sam had steadied Lien-tzu on her feet. They were almost at the corner, Ling a few paces behind. Now the girl and Sam vanished on the bund. Brice glanced back.

Chew Men-sang was laboring in pursuit, two of the soldiers at his heels now. They were passing him—

Brice tore on. Ling had disappeared. Brice gained the corner and wheeled sharp left. Sam and Lien-tzu were well ahead, running their best for the dinghy, but the merchant was nearer and slower.

As Brice overtook him and thrust him into more speed, merchants, porters and idlers along the Bund first stared after them, then began to run.

Again Brice looked back. The soldiers had run into view and plunged into the crowd. Enough pursuers intervened to prevent them from shooting.

Chew Men-sang had rounded the corner and was shouting at the crowd in his way. The soldiers had broken through.

Brice stared ahead. Sam and Lien-tzu were out on the dock. The girl stumbled into the dinghy. Sam freed the painter and wheeled with his gun drawn. Out on the tug, the tarpaulin had sailed to the deck and Tiny was pivoting the quick-firer.

Men intervened between Ling and the dock, now close at hand. Brice raced ahead, his gun raised. The men

scattered with howls of fear. As the merchant lumbered up, Brice thrust him out on the dock and wheeled. The soldiers were fifty feet away, running with their rifles at the slope. At sight of his raised automatic they checked and halted. Chew Men-sang howled at them from the rear. They came on slowly. Brice turned and ran out on the dock. Ling was stepping into the dinghy.

When Brice reached the boat, Ling and his daughter had crowded into the sternsheets and Sam was at the oars. Brice dropped lightly into the bows and pushed off, just as the soldiers gained the dock with Chew Men-sang at their heels.

Though Sam bent his back to it, the dinghy seemed to crawl away from the dock. Facing the stern Brice watched the soldiers drop on one knee and lift their rifles. He fired at the same instant they did. One of them toppled sideward. Brice grunted and caught the gunwale, pain searing his arm.

THE pursuing idlers had not ventured out on the dock, but the furious Chew Men-sang caught up the fallen rifle and steadied it clumsily. Something whizzed over the dinghy with a vicious report. The shell dropped at the feet of Chew Men-sang, blowing him to a crimson horror. The remaining soldier screamed and tottered away toward the Bund.

The dinghy bumped against the *Mary Jane*.

They all climbed safely aboard. Brice and Sam leaned to ship the dinghy. A bullet clanged on the tug's armorplate. Two soldiers had run out on the dock and kneeled to shoot.

Brice yelled at Tiny to hold his fire and ordered Sam below with their

charges. Before the rifles cracked again, he had dropped flat on the deck and turned his head.

A whistle had blown aboard the destroyer. Men were busy at the gun on her foredeck. The four-inch rifle swung venomously, not on the bund, but on the tug. Brice could see the muzzle only, see it depressed to the pointblank range.

The soldiers on the deck hesitated, then melted into the crowd. A small pinnacle veered around the destroyer's bows and came leaping for the tug, an officer half-erect in her sternsheets. Brice stood up, a hand on his arm, blood oozing between his fingers.

"What'll I do now?" yelled Tiny in a plaintive roar.

Brice smiled, eyes on the naval officer. "Stand up and salute, you fool!" he called back.

The pinnacle slowed alongside. The officer leaped aboard the *Mary Jane*. His keen face was set, his bright blue eyes swordlike with anger. "You're under arrest!" he snapped. Then he checked, staring. "Brice! Sergeant Brice! What the devil, Sergeant!"

Brice saluted stiffly. "I have to report, sir, that Chinese murderers just fired on our flag."

"Our flag! Those were soldiers! Are you commissioned?"

"No, sir. But those were—"

"Then you're no better than pirates, Brice—"

"Wait, sir. It's not as bad as that. We're armed with the knowledge and consent of the Chinese Government. We've fought for them—"

"So you start shelling their capital city! Pull down that flag, Sergeant! You're under arrest."

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant," Brice persisted. "There's more to this than you realize. They fired on our ship. We

returned a shell in self-defense. We were saving innocent—"

"There's an international incident in this!" the lieutenant barked. "Surrender your ship to me or we'll sink you! Hand me your automatic, and pull down that flag!"

Tiny had come up. "Will I take him, Dan?" he growled.

Brice shook his head. "No. Lower our flag and run up the Chinese flag. We'll look elsewhere for justice."

"What do you mean?" the lieutenant demanded. He had been checkmated and he knew it. Tiny had lumbered to obey. Brice remained at attention.

"Just this, sir," he said. "Those men were soldiers, but under the command of a murderer. This ship is practically attached to the Chinese Government. We have—friends. If you want to help, come with me to the government buildings. If not, well—it's been a pleasure to see you, Lieutenant."

"You mean I have no authority to arrest you?"

"Nor to seize this vessel, sir." Brice looked up at the Chinese flag, now at the masthead.

Lieutenant Bolton swore. "I knew you were slick, but this beats the Dutch! All right. Keep your weapon and step into the pinnacle. I'll see that you go there."

"You know me, sir. I don't lie. Let me handle this, and back me up. I'm in a position to smooth this over perhaps better than even you could. Will you do it, Lieutenant?"

"And if I don't?"

"I'll ask you to step off my ship, and I'll go alone."

"By gad, I believe you *would*."

"And could, sir," nodded Brice gravely.

"All right. I'll back you up, as far as I can."

AT THE government buildings they were admitted to the same official's office. Brice stepped forward and spoke stiffly. "Sorry, sir, but I have to report that men disguised as Chinese soldiers, under the command of Chew Men-sang, fired on our vessel. We were flying the American flag at the time. We lowered our flag to avoid complications. Let me present Lieutenant Bolton of the *U. S. S. Fury*, who saw the incident."

The official rose hurriedly, shook hands with Bolton and stared at Brice. "Where is Chew Meng-sang now?" he asked.

"I regret to report, sir, that during the excitement our forward gun went off. The shell happened to strike Chew Men-sang. Unhappily he was blown to rags."

Something almost like a smile flitted across the official features, and vanished. "This is a terrible thing, Mr. Brice. Was anyone else hurt?"

"Two of the men dressed as soldiers were hurt, sir."

"And you were wounded, I see." The official touched a bell. "What of—Lieutenant Bolton?"

"He came aboard to arrest me, sir, not understanding the situation. By that time we were flying the Chinese flag. He was kind enough to come along and verify my statements."

The official smiled openly. "I rather wish we had a portfolio to offer you, Mr. Brice—"

The door opened and a smart-looking Chinese *aide-de-camp* appeared. The official turned. "Go to the opium-addict detention-barracks off the waterfront. Tell the ranking officer to clear all soldiers from the waterfront at once. On your way out, order my car and ask them to send a doctor here to me immediately. Go."

The man saluted and went out. The official turned.

"Now, Mr. Brice, suppose you tell me what lies back of all this. Wait. Be seated, please, both of you."

Brice slumped into a chair, but straightened again. Leaning forward, he detailed everything that had happened since he had found Ling Ch'i-wu's house empty and guarded by police.

When he finished, the official nodded slowly. "It is clear, Mr. Brice, if what you say is true, that Chew Men-sang attempted to use his authority for personal motives and a great miscarriage of justice. This affair is dangerous and must be thoroughly sifted—so dangerous that I will investigate it myself. Perhaps you will take me down river to Shanghai on your—er—battleship. Meanwhile, no doubt, you will wish to return to your own battleship, Lieutenant Bolton?"

The lieutenant flushed and rose, but he was game. "As I have no authority over a ship flying the Chinese flag, sir, I feel quite unnecessary in this conference." He held out his hand.

The official shook it and bowed. Brice shook it. The lieutenant saluted and went out, smiling.

The doctor arrived and Brice had his arm dressed and bandaged. The official car drove them to the bund. Sam picked them up in the dinghy. There were no soldiers on the bund.

During the swifter voyage downstream, the official had talks with Ling Ch'i-wu and his daughter, and gradually unbent. The Lings were charming and so palpably harmless. Moreover, they had very narrowly escaped a shameful death.

In Shanghai, next morning, a gathering of Ling Ch'i-wu's many friends as-

never used opium. Friends of the Chew family called on the official, but were coldly received and quickly dismissed. Later he summoned the head of the Chinese City police and talked to him in private. Afterwards, he assured Ling Ch'i-wu that there would be no more trouble for him or his daughter from anyone.

Still later, Brice accompanied the official to the noon train for Nanking. Sam and Tiny had remained aboard the *Mary Jane*, by order. They were unguarded, under open arrest.

At the door of his compartment, the official turned and shook hands. "You are a clever man, Mr. Brice," he said. "You and your friends are cleared or will be. You are also a brave man. Yet I feel that we may have a tropical storm here in Shanghai and your ship is—vulnerable. Perhaps you and your men would enjoy a little vacation at Hong Kong, for example, until the storm blows over?" He bowed and entered the train.

LING CH'I-WU and his happy daughter waited in vain for Brice to return and be thanked. He telephoned instead, wishing them well and announcing his early departure on a vacation.

The head of the house of Ling re-

placed the receiver slowly and turned to the waiting Lily-bud.

"My daughter," he said, "it is unfortunate that you are not the son whom this merchant desired."

"It is indeed unfortunate, my father," she murmured.

"If you had been a dutiful daughter, would any of this have occurred?" he persisted gently.

"No, my father." Lien-tzu bowed her head in shame.

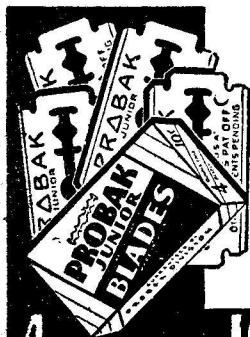
"Nevertheless," mused Ling Ch'i-wu, "you are the fragrance of the Wind of Dawn to your father, and the Peace of Twilight. So therefore it is my prayer that you will be happy in the *friendship* of this gallant and honorable gentleman who has saved us—but who is, alas, not of our race."

"It shall be so—my father," murmured Lien-tzu.

Ling Ch'i-wu touched the bowed head with his fingertips. Wheeling with dignity, he left his daughter alone.

Lien-tzu observed his departure as a respectful girl child should. A moment later, she mounted quietly to her room. She caressed the soiled embroidery, which had been intended as a gift to Brice. It dropped from her fingers.

She turned in silence and lay down upon her emerald bed, her flower-face hidden in her hands.



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Readjustment At Kirby

By CHARLES GREEN

Author of "Playing Safe," "Listen Pal," etc.

I

THE Kirby Prison did not permit its visitor even the merciful softening of distance. You went down a dirt road, flanked on the left by the naked red clay of a mountain-side. Two miles of it, the wall gradually leveling off, then you reached a sharp left turn. You swung around it—and you ran smack into the shock of seeing Kirby a hundred yards away.

Mr. Peter Fleming, driving a small dusty coupé, made that last turn to Kirby. He hadn't meant to jam on his brakes, for there was still some distance to the gate. But people seeing Kirby for the first time generally did that—if they still had the right to their initiative.

The walls of Kirby were of grayish-black stone, taken right out from the neighboring quarries. No attempt had been made at architectural softening: simply stone piled on stone, mortar holding them, until the walls reached the desired height. A steel gate pierced one wall. That was all.

Nothing outside those walls. Not a blade of grass, not a speck of color. Four black walls, on a gray-black plateau, broiling in the merciless sun. Primitive, harsh—savage in its fortified isolation.

"In character," said Mr. Fleming.

He removed his hands from the steering wheel and wiped off the sweat on his palms. Then he made the mistake of using the same handkerchief to wipe his steel-rimmed glasses. He put them on again anyway.



A buzzard hung suspended in the sky. Mr. Fleming watched it a few seconds, unconsciously touching his oil-filmed glasses. He had a habit of blinking, slightly twitching his facial muscles at the same time, and there was a nondescript vagueness about his elongated, bony face.

"Yes, in character," he repeated, and, throwing in the gear, drove carefully up to the prison gate.

Getting out, he looked much taller than one would have supposed, seeing him behind the wheel. Mr. Fleming's height was in his legs, stilt-like legs, supporting a gaunt, stoop-shouldered torso. As if aware and sensitive of his abnormally long legs, there was an apologetic awkwardness in his walk as he approached the grilled wicket in the gate.

A face already watched him through the wicker, smoke of the guard's cigarette drifting out lazily.

"What do you want?"

Mr. Fleming stooped so that his face was on the level with the guard's. He blinked, again unconsciously touched his glasses and said:

"I'm Fleming, the new warden."

FOR perhaps ten seconds, the guard's face remained motionless in the steel frame of the wicket. His cigarette was drooping now, supported only by being glued precariously to his lower lip.

"Yes, sir," he said.

The great steel bolts clanged back, and the gate swung inward, the guard's face now peering around its edge. His eyes followed Mr. Fleming as he entered with his awkward shamble, then moved to meet the eyes of the guard who stood with a sub-machine gun in the open door of the steel booth on the left.

"Where's Warden Kane's office?"



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To Lose

asked Mr. Fleming after another brief pause.

The guard pointed diagonally across the courtyard to one of the buildings.

"The door on the right there—see it, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Fleming. "Thanks."

In his detached, blinking fashion, he appraised what the black walls of Kirby embraced. A grim square tower, built of the same stone as the walls, stood in each corner. The square holes cut in the stone for ventilation were heavily barred; obviously each of these towers was a cell block.

The other buildings, unconnected with the towers, had been erected shed-like against the walls, and the drab monotony of them, the absolute absence of any color, of anything even faintly decorative, had the uncompromising, terrible loneliness of a skull bleaching on the desert.

"In character," said Mr. Fleming. "Quite!"

Unhurriedly, he crossed the rough cobbles of the courtyard to the door the guard had indicated. Entering, he found himself in a long, narrow ante-office. It was quite dark here, for the shades had been drawn to keep out the sun glare. The communicating door on the left was ajar, and from the office beyond it, a voice was saying:

"You ought to know me better than that, Malloy. I can make you talk—and I will. So why not save yourself a lot of trouble?"

The voice was mild, soft, its tone only casually persuasive. Mr. Fleming walked to the communicating door. He placed his hand on the knob, but he was checked from opening the door by what he saw through the two-inch space between the door edge and the jamb.

Men crowded the inner office. A half-dozen or so were guards, dressed

in blue shirts and denim trousers, guns strapped around their waists, clubs in their hands. Another man, lounging against the wall, wore a rather amazingly-filthy linen suit. They all watched the two men facing each other across a desk.

Mr. Fleming had an unobstructed view of the man sitting behind the desk. He was stripped to the waist, and his blubbery, heavy-breasted body had the unhealthy grayish-white color of a shark's belly. Purple blotches spotted it. Purple blotches also disfigured his face—a heavy-jowled, unshaven, sweat-dripping face.

Reclining far back in the swivel chair, hands folded in a curiously pious attitude on his stomach, he was beaming at the man who faced him. A man wearing the striped gray of a convict. Mr. Fleming could see only the back of the convict's sun-blackened neck, and his squat, beam-shouldered body. He had unusually long, gorilla-like arms that dangled limply.

"Well, Malloy?" the beaming man behind the desk prompted softly.

The convict scratched beneath his armpit with the casual indifference of an animal. "You're makin' a mistake, Warden," he said coolly. "I don't know of nobody planin' to crash outa here."

The warden kept beaming. "No, Malloy, I'm not making a mistake. I've been running this prison long enough to *know* when something is up. There is a little barometer in here"—he grinned and tapped his chest—"that never fails. Never, Malloy—get it? So don't try to kid *me*. I know further that no prisoner at Kirby would try a crash-out without getting your okay and advice first. So—how about it, Malloy?"

"I reckon," said Malloy, "you'd better tell your gorillas to start swingin' "

their clubs. 'Cause I sure as hell don't know what you're talkin' about, Warden."

MR. FLEMING'S hand tightened on the knob, but he still refrained from opening the door when Warden Kane threw back his head and began laughing. It was very soft laughter, and Mr. Fleming saw the convict's neck suddenly begin glistening with sweat.

"Clubs, Malloy?" the warden drawled. "Really, you ought to know me better than that. You ought to credit me with a bit more imagination than that. Look, what do you think this is?"

His right hand lazily reached to a desk drawer. It came up holding a three-foot section of what looked to Mr. Fleming like ordinary steel wire.

"What do you think this is, Malloy?" Warden Kane repeated softly.

"Wire," said Malloy.

"Right. But you'll notice that little bits of solder have been dropped on it here and there. See 'em? Now why do you suppose I've had that done, Malloy?"

The convict remained silent.

"I'll tell you why," Warden Kane shouted abruptly, jerking forward. "I'm going to have you strapped down to that table. Then I'll run one end of the wire under your hide, and let it come out again six inches away. I'll pull it back and forth, back and forth, and wherever those bits of solder have thickened the wire, it'll tear your flesh and scrape your bones, and file all those little nerves under your skin. And you'll scream and you'll scream, and you'll faint, and you'll come-to screaming again. Now, damn you, what's hatching at Kirby? Who's going to

make a break? How? When? Your last chance to start talking, Malloy!"

Mr. Fleming's hand was very tight on the doorknob now.

"I ain't got nothin' to say, Warden!"

Warden Kane glanced at the hard-mouthed, red-headed giant standing nearest to him.

"The men in the mess hall yet, McCrea?"

"No, sir."

"Have 'em all lined up outside these windows. Bring Chris Hurley in here. Hurley is Malloy's cellmate. Anything Malloy knows, Hurley knows too. Let Hurley see what's happening to Malloy—let Hurley hear him scream a while—and Hurley will talk his head off when I'll threaten him with the same medicine."

The blotched, unshaven face beamed up at the convict again.

"Hear that, Malloy? If you won't talk, Hurley will. So you'll lose anyway. Are you thinking, Malloy?"

"Yeah, I'm thinkin', Warden," the convict replied slowly. "I'm thinkin' of what would happen if I was alone with you for five minutes. I'd hold that bald head of yours down with my foot, and I'd rip out your lower jaw. Then I'd gouge your eyes out with the bone. And then I'd slit your fat stomach open, and stuff sand in it, and—"

The red-headed giant called McCrea hit him first—with a club. Malloy lurched into another guard, who promptly smashed him in the face. Still another guard hit him with the club again, and Malloy went sprawling to the floor. At no time did he attempt to raise his gorilla-like arms.

McCrea kicked him twice now—once to the side of the head, once in the stomach. As the convict rolled over, Mr. Fleming saw for the first time his

face. It was a sun-blackened, brutal face, the blue eyes in sharp contrast with his black skin. Blood trickled down one corner of his mouth, but there was a grin on his lips.

"Yeah," he said very distinctly, "stuff sand in your fat stomach, and—"

Three guards began kicking at him with their heavy, square-toed shoes, and Warden Kane shouted:

"Cut it, boys! I don't want him knocked out!"

"Nor I," said Mr. Fleming, opening the door.

IT WAS a dramatic appearance. Every man in that office froze in the precise same position he had been before Mr. Fleming spoke, and the scene looked like a suddenly-arrested motion-picture film. Warden Kane had raised his hand when he'd shouted his command to the guards; his hand was still up. One of the guards had his foot drawn back for a kick at Malloy; his foot was still in mid-air. And Malloy's grin still remained fixed on his lips.

The only sound was the shuffling of Mr. Fleming's shoes as he entered further into the office. He paused, blinked, touched his glasses and said apologetically:

"I'm Peter Fleming, Warden Kane. I suppose you've been notified I was due to arrive today?"

Kane's hand remained lifted. He looked like someone burlesquing a traffic cop. His mouth sagged a bit, and there was fascination in his blood-shot eyes. And the silence lived on. Including Mr. Fleming, they were all still so many figures of stone.

Mr. Fleming cleared his throat. His stilt-like legs moved toward the desk. He deposited a long manila envelope before Kane.

"My credentials and official appoint-

ment," he said. "I'm to take charge of this prison immediately upon my arrival."

Kane seemed to have become aware for the first time of his up-raised hand. He lowered it to pick up the envelope, but his eyes remained on Fleming. They were slowly moving up and down now, beginning with the crown of Mr. Fleming's dusty Panama, moving down to the bespectacled, long-boned face, the gaunt torso, the stilt-like legs—and then back to Mr. Fleming's face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whispered.

Mr. Fleming turned to the convict, who was now up on one elbow. He blinked down at him a little while, then motioned with his left hand.

"Get up!"

The convict got up off the floor.

"Are you hurt?" asked Mr. Fleming.

Malloy wiped his nose with the back of his hand. His blue eyes, appraising Mr. Fleming, were inscrutable.

"No, sir, I ain't hurt."

"Return him to his quarters," said Mr. Fleming, addressing no one in particular. "Is the headkeeper here now?"

The red-headed giant took a hesitant half-step forward. He glanced first at Warden Kane, then said:

"I'm the headkeeper—sir." The salutation of respect was obviously an afterthought of which McCrea was still not quite certain.

"You will remain here, please," said Mr. Fleming. He pivoted his gaunt torso to the man in the dirty linen suit slouching against the wall. "Who are you, sir?"

The man edged slightly away from the wall. He was small, thin, sallow-faced, and had the look in his eyes of a dog which has been brutally beaten

when a pup. His trembling hands and constantly-twitching facial muscles betrayed dipsomania.

"I'm Dr. Lasher, the prison physician," he replied.

"I'd like you to remain too, Doctor. The rest of you may--go. I shall address the entire prison personnel in the morning."

No one moved. Warden Kane was now the focus of those incredulous eyes. Kane, his hands gripping the edge of the desk, was tetering back and forth in the swivel chair. Without pausing, he said:

"No, boys, this isn't a pipe dream. That's your new boss--the new warden of Kirby Prison. Believe it or not!"

There were a few more seconds of silence, then feet began scraping. One by one, the guards filed out. Malloy paused in the communicating door, turned and stood there looking at Mr. Fleming, who blinked back at him from behind his spectacles. There was no expression in the convict's eyes; and no one could have guessed what Mr. Fleming was thinking.

They just stood there looking at each other, until one of the guards still in the inner office growled: "Come on, get goin', Malloy!"

He nudged the convict with the club, and Malloy turned and passed through the door. There was a slight swagger in his walk.

"WELL," McCrea said tonelessly, "he's had what you might call a last-minute reprieve, eh? That wire would have done the trick, all right, all right!"

"But," said Kane, still teetering in the swivel chair, "our new master at Kirby apparently objects to such tactics--don't you, Fleming?"

Mr. Fleming walked to a chair, sat down and placed his hands on his bony shanks.

"Yes," he admitted, "I do."

"You would rather," said Kane, his blotches darkening, "have a break on your hands, eh? Guards murdered, a dozen convicts machine-gunned, have maybe some of 'em escape on you: bloody hell that would make nice black headlines in every newspaper in the country." His voice lifted: "You'd prefer that, eh?"

"How," asked Mr. Fleming, "do you know a break is being planned now?"

Kane softly banged his fist on the desk top. "A break is always being planned here! That's all they live for; that's all they think of, every minute, every hour, every day of their lives. Do you know the caliber of men who are sent to Kirby? No short-term prisoners here; no men for whom there is any hope of redemption. Killers--"

He paused, suddenly gasping for breath, and Mr. Fleming noticed the doctor leaning forward, a terrible and curious eagerness in his eyes.

"You still," Mr. Fleming persisted, blinking apologetically, "haven't told me what specific evidence you have of an impending break."

Kane glared at him with his blood-shot little eyes. "I don't need any specific evidence. I've been warden here long enough to be able to read their minds. Sit on a bomb long enough, as I have been for the past ten years, and you acquire a peculiar sort of sensitivity. I know that some hell will pop here soon, and Malloy would have told me all about it if you hadn't barged in. Because, on his side of the fence, Malloy is boss of this prison."

"Thanks for tipping me off," Mr. Fleming said quietly. "I shall try to take adequate precautions."

"Adequate precautions!" Kane placed his hands over his face and held them that way a few seconds. He looked up and said: "Tell me, Fleming, what were you before your appointment here as warden?"

"I taught in a University."

Kane shook his head. "Pour me a drink, McCrea. . . . And so, Fleming, that gave the gang of old women, who shoved through this State reform sweep, the quaint idea that you might be able to run a hellhole prison like Kirby, eh? A college professor—oh my! How about that drink, McCrea?"

Mr. Fleming glanced at the back of his long, bony hands. "Penology has been my life's study," he said. "I'm considered—er—an authority. Why are you under the impression that I am incapable of running this prison?"

Kane took the drink from McCrea, tossed it down, then with a swiftly-savage gesture smashed the glass against the wall. He grabbed the far edge of the desk and lurched upward, supporting his blubbery bulk on his arms.

"Why?" he shouted. "Because you have trapped here some three-hundred-odd human wolves who'll retreat only before superior cunning and superior hatred. They've the courage of desperation, and hatred—such as a fool like you could never imagine—gives them patience. They're always waiting, waiting, *waiting* to tear you apart the moment your back is turned. Now ask me why I've had so little trouble at Kirby! Ask me *how* I was able to hold them at bay! Damn you, you long-legged fool—ask me!"

HE lurched around the desk and began weaving toward Mr. Fleming, a half-nude, shapeless mass of man, panting, sweating, bestial in the fury that now possessed him.

"Ask me!" he half screamed.

"Very well," said Mr. Fleming, "—how?"

"Ah!" Kane panted. "I'll tell you how. Because they know my hatred for them is as great as theirs for me, and my will greater. They know I've an imagination—and, oh, how they fear my imagination! How they fear the thousand and one little tricks they know me capable of! *That's* why there has been little trouble at Kirby, the toughest prison in America.

"Can you pit your will against theirs? Can you pit your will against a man like Pat Malloy, who spent three months in solitary—three months of silence and darkness—and when anyone else would have been dragged out a raving maniac, Malloy staggered out sane and cursed me. Can you break the will of a man like that? Can you find anything in your penology books that will enable you to convince Malloy that you're stronger than he? Because when—*when* you'll do that, then you'll be able to control Kirby. And you'll never do that, you poor fool!"

He was whispering now, his face purplish black. "No, only one man can run the Kirby Prison. Only one man who can convince them that he is stronger. Only one man who can instill the fear of the devil in them. *I am that man!* You hear me? I, Roger Kane, Warden Kane of Kirby Prison— I, Warden Kane of—"

He broke off, his mouth open, and began making pawing motions with his hands. Then they darted to his chest, crossed and slowly began sliding upward to his throat.

"Warden!" McCrea shouted.

Kane's tongue protruded from his mouth. His teeth clamped down on it. His head tilted back, back, and the prison doctor screamed suddenly:

"He's dying! As I said he would. As I hoped he would. Dying, dying, dying—damn his black soul—the sadistic beast—"

McCrea hit him, and Dr. Lasher went sliding over a leather chair. He was still screaming hysterically when he fell at the foot of a filing cabinet. Mr. Fleming sat perfectly motionless, only his hands were now gripping his knees.

And so was Kane motionless, feet planted far apart, a terrible arch in his back. Quite without warning, the great bulk of him suddenly toppled forward. It brushed Mr. Fleming's knees. A dust spurt shot up and the room trembled as the body struck the floor. Kane's hip pinned down Mr. Fleming's right shoe.

"Dead!" Dr. Lasher screamed. "At last, it's happened. At last—"

"Another word out of you," McCrea cut in, "and I'll kill you, you no-good drunk!"

Mr. Fleming extricated his shoe from beneath Kane's hip. "In the future," he said, "you will control yourself, Mr. McCrea. No one employed by this prison shall strike a blow—unless it is in self-defense. The penalty will be immediate dismissal. Dr. Lasher, will you please see what's wrong with Mr. Kane?"

The doctor pulled himself up by grabbing at the side of the leather chair. There was an ugly blue bruise on the side of his jaw. He suddenly began to tremble and said, his teeth chattering:

"I know what's wrong with him. He's dead. Heart. I warned him. I was a fool for warning him, but, thank God, he kept up his drinking. Nights—oh, so many nights I lay up awake, hoping, hoping that it might happen tomorrow—"

"I asked you to take a look at Mr. Kane, Dr. Lasher!"

THE prison physician began to sob, his throat muscles working convulsively. But he staggered to where Kane lay. Mr. Fleming watched him try to roll over Kane's bulk. He hadn't the strength to do it, merely clawing at Kane's naked shoulder.

"Help him, Mr. McCrea," Mr. Fleming said quietly.

The head keeper, in spite of his name, had broad Slavic features; they were grimly impassive as he looked steadily back at Mr. Fleming. Without a word, he joined the doctor and rolled Kane over on his back. Kane's eyes were open. His lower jaw sagged. The blotches on his face and body were almost black now.

"Yes—dead!" whispered Dr. Lasher. McCrea said hoarsely: "I'm a dumb mug, but sometimes I kinda feel things. There never was—and never will be—another guy like him. He'll tell the devil to shove over, and he'll run the works in hell. And we'll have hell right here in Kirby, once they find out he's dead."

Dr. Lasher, on his knees and looking up, repeated: "Dead! He is dead! Warden Kane is dead! Know what it means, McCrea—to you and me and the convicts here: we're free now. Yes, even the convicts are free now." He began trembling again. "McCrea, we're free, get it? *He's dead!*"

From outside somewhere, a sound began to seep in. It started as a metallic clatter, faint, defying identification. And it mounted, mounted, strangely rhythmic, having the weird, spine-tingling effect of distant tom-toms.

"It's—it's uncanny!" Dr. Lasher gasped. "They couldn't possibly know yet. They—*couldn't!*"

"Who?" asked Mr. Fleming.

"The convicts. Banging their cups in the mess hall. Celebrating his death—"

"Don't be a fool!" McCrea cut in curtly. He swung to Mr. Fleming. "This is for you, sir. They're goin' to test out the new warden. Malloy's in back of that."

"Test me out?" echoed Mr. Fleming. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they ain't wastin' any time to find out if they can get you buffaloe. To see just how much they can get away with. Once you give in to them, they'll never stop. They'll keep askin' for more and more things. You've got to put your foot down right now—and put it down *hard*. Believe me, sir, I'm givin' you good advice."

"Thank you, Mr. McCrea," Mr. Fleming said mildly. He blinked and rubbed the stubble of beard on his long, bony chin. "And how would you suggest I went about this business of—er—putting my foot down—hard?"

McCrea's face lost some of its grimness. "Well, that's easy," he replied eagerly. "They'll probably bellyache about the food. All right, you put them on bread and water for a week. Give 'em an extra hour at the quarries. Cut out their tobacco rations. Threaten two weeks in solitary to the next man who complains. Get the idea, sir? They'll think twice before they do any more bellyachin'. That's the way Warden Kane would have handled it."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Mr. Fleming. "All right, let's get over to the mess hall."

II

THE rhythmic banging was louder when Mr. Fleming followed McCrea into the courtyard. It kept up with a savage insistence, terrifying in its very strangeness: three-hundred-odd men banging their cups against the tables to voice a protest.

"Just bear in mind what I told you,

sir," McCrea said with a kind of contemptuous diffidence when they neared a long, shed-like building. "Bread and water, another hour at the quarries, no tobacco rations—for one week. That'll cure 'em for a while. It won't take you long to—well—to learn the ropes, sort of."

"Oh, sure," said Mr. Fleming.

They crossed a short hallway. A guard with a sub-machine gun stood at the door terminating it. He stepped aside, and Mr. Fleming trailed McCrea into the mess hall of the Kirby Prison.

The din died out with the abruptness of a blaring radio suddenly turned off. The silence was absolute, tense, spine-tingling after the bedlam a second ago. The low-ceilinged room reeked with the stench of unwashed bodies and old grease. The prisoners faced each other at a dozen long, greasy tables, and Mr. Fleming felt the almost physical impact of the three hundred pairs of eyes watching him.

Watching him thus, in absolute silence, second after second: fat men, thin men; young and old; men of a dozen different nationalities. But all were seen—blackened from their daily grind in the quarries. And all had the common stamp of Kirby in the twist of their mouths, in the trapped predatory-beast expression of their eyes.

Hatred swirled like something tangible in the grease-laden atmosphere of that mess hall; Mr. Fleming, standing in his awkward, self-conscious manner just inside the doorway, could feel the poison of it.

"I'm the new warden here," he said quietly. "What's the trouble?"

Still silence—and the impact of those three-hundred-odd pairs of eyes. A man stood up at the table on Mr. Fleming's right. It was Malloy.

"Warden," he said, neither respect nor defiance in his voice, "we wondered if you'd care to make what we thought is a fair test. We think that a pig could turn up its snout at the slop we're served here. Maybe we're wrong. Maybe we're too fas-fastijous. If you can take a couple swallows of this stuff they call stew without vomitin' it right out again—well—we'll know that we was wrong."

Mr. Fleming shuffled over to Malloy's table. He picked up one of the plates. It contained something grayish, with little islands of grease floating on top of it. Mr. Fleming did not have to taste it; the odor was enough to turn his stomach over.

He lowered the plate and turned to the head keeper, glowering near the door.

"Mr. McCrea, will you ask the cook to come here immediately?"

"The cook?"

"The cook," said Mr. Fleming.

McCrea looked dazed. Then his face reddened to match his hair, and he savagely relayed the command to one of the guards. Mr. Fleming was aware of the breathing of those three hundred men—and their eyes. No one made a sound yet.

Malloy remained standing.

The enormous, fat cook came in presently, looked around, bewilderment on his sweat-glistening face.

"The warden would like to see you," McCrea growled. "There!" He jerked a thumb toward Mr. Fleming.

"The warden?" the cook repeated.

"The *new* warden," McCrea said savagely.

The cook went waddling between the tables toward Mr. Fleming.

"Do you like your job here?" Mr. Fleming asked him.

The cook stared, speechless for a

few seconds. "Why—why, sure, sir," he stammered.

"I," said Mr. Fleming, "will eat the same food as the prisoners do. I hope I won't have to obtain a new cook for Kirby. Get yourself a clean apron and try washing your hands once in a while. That'll be all!"

He turned awkwardly, and that spine-tingling silence trailed him as he crab-legged out of the mess hall. McCrea caught up with him when he was crossing the courtyard.

"Well, you've done it, sir," the red-headed giant said ominously. "I tried my best to tip you off—"

"Let's wait," interrupted Mr. Fleming, "until we get back to the office."

THIRTY seconds later, Mr. Fleming sat down in the straight-backed chair he'd occupied earlier. He glanced at Kane's body, at Dr. Lasher, the brightness of whose eyes indicated that he'd been nursing the bottle while they were gone, then blinked up at McCrea towering over him.

"Now, Mr. McCrea. You said I've done it. What did you imply by that?"

The head keeper, thumbs hooked in his gun belt, rocked slowly on his heels. Apparently he did not dare to say what he wanted to say. There was something disturbing about Mr. Fleming's vague calmness.

"Well, Mr. McCrea?" Mr. Fleming prompted gently.

"All right," said McCrea, "I'll tell you what *they* think now. They think you're soft. They think you're yellow. They're laughin' at you. They think Malloy made you back down—and that makes *him* the tin god at Kirby. There's goin' to be hell to pay here, because they're convinced they can get away with anything they want. This complainin' about the food is only the

beginnin'—and I know what I'm talkin' about, sir."

"I see," Mr. Fleming murmured. "Perhaps then, under the circumstances, you would like to resign, Mr. McCrea?"

The head keeper jerked forward, his hands releasing the gun belt and sliding to his thighs. Stupefaction suddenly gaped his mouth, bulged his eyes. He shook his head and said incredulously:

"Resign? Me resign from Kirby?"

"Well," said Mr. Fleming, "since you are so convinced that there will be hell to pay here because of my attitude toward the prisoners—since you are so convinced that I am incapable of controlling them—I thought perhaps you would prefer to leave Kirby. You see, Mr. McCrea, I've certain theories of my own on how a prison should be run. You, as my head keeper, must either accept them and back me up or—clear out. It's perfectly simple, isn't it?"

McCrea straightened and brushed his hand across his thick throat, leaving distinct trails in the grime-caked sweat there.

"I've been here ten years, sir," he said. "I guess my life is all kind of tied up with this prison. There ain't nothin' else that I'd rather do. I'm stickin', sir—and I'm taking orders."

They shook hands with a kind of embarrassed gravity, and Mr. Fleming said:

"Have Mr. Kane's body removed somewhere until arrangements can be made for its further disposition. Then I want to examine the prison records, and the system used in keeping them. Who kept those records, incidentally?"

Dr. Lasher spoke up unexpectedly. "I did—which was another little extemporaneous duty that Kane had imposed on me. I've done it, of course, with my customary inefficiency."

"The bottle and efficiency," said Mr. Fleming, "seldom join hands."

"I can lick it," Dr. Lasher said, "now that Warden Kane is dead."

"I hope so," said Mr. Fleming. "Now as soon as the body is removed from here, we'll get down to work, gentlemen. We've a busy evening ahead of us!"

THEY did! Neglect and indifference had made a bewildering chaos of the prison records. There was orderly efficiency in the way Mr. Fleming went about straightening it out. The questions he asked, in his mildly-insistent, unhurried manner, were always to the point. It wasn't long before respect crept into Dr. Lasher's eyes.

"Mr. Fleming," he said impulsively, "if theoretical knowledge were all that's necessary to run a prison, you should do great things with Kirby. Only—"

"Only what?"

The physician dropped his eyes. "Forget it!" he mumbled. "Now in the bottom drawer—"

"Only what, Dr. Lasher?"

The prison doctor shrugged his thin shoulders. "I believe one must be a merciless, devilish, cunning brute to control the devils imprisoned here. And I'm afraid you'll never be that, Warden Fleming. Kane, undoubtedly, was the right man for Kirby."

"Would you," Mr. Fleming said quietly, "turn on the light switch, Doctor? It's getting dark."

Dr. Lasher switched on the glaring, unshaded overhead light, and they worked on. McCrea, pausing only when Mr. Fleming asked a question, tirelessly paced the office. He moved his big body with an effortless, catlike grace.

The next time Mr. Fleming looked up, he saw McCrea peering out of the window. The giant shoulders were

hunched, and there was a curious strain in his attitude. Mr. Fleming stared at him a while, then asked:

"Is anything the matter, Mr. McCrea?"

The head keeper whirled away from the window.

"Not yet," he replied curtly, and gave a vicious hitch to his gun belt.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Warden Kane was sure that the cons were up to somethin'. He could always tell somehow. I feel like I'm sittin' on top of a bomb that's liable to go off any second."

And it was in that psychological moment, dramatic to the point of being stagey, that a guard burst through the communicating door.

"Riotin' in Tower C, sir," he reported tersely. "It sounds like they've all gone crazy."

"Tower C?" McCrea snarled. "That's where Malloy's cell is."

"How," Mr. Fleming asked calmly, "would Warden Kane have handled this?"

"There wouldn't be any riotin'—if he was still warden," McCrea clipped back. "He gave 'em a lesson four years ago that they'll never forget."

"What had he done then?"

"You really wanna know, sir?" McCrea said with tense eagerness. "You'll do the same—"

"What had he done then?" Mr. Fleming repeated.

"There's only one entrance or exit into them towers—a steel-plate door. You open it, you drop a couple of tear gas bombs inside, you close the door again. The gas spreads, and them windows are small, and the gas stays there a pretty long time. It don't kill 'em, but they won't spend what you might call a comfortable night. An' they'll never try it again." He took three swift steps

forward and crouched over Mr. Fleming. "Take my word for it, sir, it'll work!"

"I've no doubt but that it will—work," said Mr. Fleming, getting up. "Well, let's go over and see what they want."

"The bombs—"

"No, I don't think we'll bother with bombs, Mr. McCrea."

"Yes, sir," McCrea panted, and brought down his feet too heavily as he led to the door.

WALL spotlights, naked and glaring, bathed from three focus points the gray stone of Tower C. Guards with sub-machine guns on top of the walls crouched behind the spotlights, gnomelike and sinister against the sky. Other guards were grouped before the open door of the tower.

Inside, a monster gone berserk roared its defiance. For there was little human in the howls of the eighty men caged there. Eighty madmen, yelling at the top of their lungs, banging their bars—and Mr. Fleming, approaching the tower door, was again aware of hatred as something isolated and tangible. Hatred—fierce, brutal and primitive; wild beasts, chained and helpless, throwing themselves, snarling, the length of their chains. . . .

"Take me directly to Malloy's cell," he told McCrea.

Still a dozen feet from the tower door, Mr. Fleming smelled the stench emanating from it. It grabbed him by the throat, and he thought for a moment that he was going to be ill, when he crossed the threshold. There were no sanitation facilities in those old towers, and Warden Kane apparently had never encouraged the convicts to wash their bodies. The stench was an undisturbed accumulation of years.

The howling maniacs on the ground tier became dumb and motionless the moment Mr. Fleming entered with McCrea. And this strange silent curse, radiating from Mr. Fleming, spread swiftly to the tiers above. Within three seconds, there wasn't a sound in the tower, although the echo, the memory of that bestial roar still lived and shrieked on.

A single red electric bulb illuminated the ground tier of cells. It threw a blood-like cast on Mr. Fleming's bony face as he stood, blinking, just inside the steel door. There were cells all around him—six-by-six cubicles, timber partitioned, fronted with bars. Each was a cage for two men, whose faces Mr. Fleming could not see as clearly as he could feel their eyes: faces pressed to the bars, fists gripping the bars—eyes glaring at him.

By lifting himself on his toes, Mr. Fleming could have touched with his head the heavy weathered timbers comprising the ceiling of this tier and the floor of the tier above. They reminded him of the dug-outs he'd seen in France. On the left, stairs led to a trapdoor-like rectangle cut in the timbered ceiling. McCrea stood at the foot of these stairs, motioning impatiently to Mr. Fleming.

"Malloy's cell is on the top tier," he explained.

Mr. Fleming climbed the stairs behind McCrea. He did not think the stench could conceivably get worse, but it did, and he was glad he'd forgotten to eat dinner. The second tier was precisely like the first: same cubicles—faces and fists and eyes. On up behind McCrea—another flight of stairs, another trapdoor opening. And still on up—to the fourth and top tier.

Here Mr. Fleming allowed himself a moment to debate which was more

unbearable—the stifling, lung-tearing heat on the top tier or the horrible stench. McCrea's big body moved on in the narrow corridor between the cells. It jerked to a stop, and Mr. Fleming heard him snarl:

"What the hell are you up to now, Malloy? So help me, one of these days I'll—"

Mr. Fleming interrupted mildly: "That'll be enough, Mr. McCrea."

He walked up to the cell McCrea faced. Malloy's gorilla-like arms spanned its width as he gripped the two outside bars. He was stripped to the waist, and his deep-chested, heavily-muscled torso suggested terrific brute strength.

"What do you want, Malloy?" asked Mr. Fleming.

The simple directness of the question startled the convict. His hard blue eyes flickered, lost for an instant their inscrutability.

"**W**ELL, here's how it is, Warden," said Malloy, his voice again neither respectful nor defiant. "We ain't got much rights left. I ain't arguin' whose fault it is. We're payin' for what we did to get us sent up here—an' we're payin' plenty. But is it too much to ask for the right to be able to sleep nights?"

"What, specifically," asked Mr. Fleming, "is preventing you from sleeping?"

And, having said it, he felt like a fool. For Mr. Fleming could think of a number of reasons why he himself would find it difficult to sleep in those black, hot, stinking cubicles.

"Lice," replied Malloy. "And bed-bugs. Warden, I've been here six years now. My mattress was lousy when I got it. It's still the same mattress, and the lice and bugs had plenty of time to mul-

multiply. The straw in that mattress o' mine is alive with 'em. So is the mattress of every other man here. Them mattresses oughta be burned. We want new mattresses, Warden. Like I said, we got a right to be able to sleep nights."

A voice from a neighboring cell echoed savagely: "They oughta be burned!"

Another voice picked it up. And another. And still another. It spread to the other cells, to the tiers below, swiftly gaining in volume, a savage chant: "*They oughta be burned!*"

Faces pressed against the bars. Open mouths, howling. Fists thrust through, terrifying, though impotent, by the very savage intensity of their fury.

"*They oughta be burned!*"

McCrea smashed out at a fist that got too close to him. Mr. Fleming stood perfectly still, blinking behind his spectacles. And so was Malloy motionless, arms still outstretched across the bars, the one prisoner who wasn't yelling. A suggestion of a smile hovered on his lips.

The shouting died out with the same abruptness that it had started. Mr. Fleming said:

"Malloy, the men will get new mattresses just as soon as I can put through the requisition."

McCrea cursed under his breath and turned away. Malloy said lazily:

"Maybe you mean it, Warden, but—I think you're stallin'. Maybe we'll kind of make it *necessary* for you to get us new mattresses. You know—kinda force things along a little bit maybe."

McCrea lost control of himself. He swerved back to the cell, and his big hairy paw darted between the bars. It fastened itself to Malloy's throat, while his other hand reached back for the butt of his gun.

"What did you mean by that?"

Malloy neither moved nor answered. He was grinning openly now, and McCrea, his eyes going bloodshot, forgot the gun and clamped both hands to Malloy's throat. Then Mr. Fleming lightly placed his arm across the head keeper's forearms.

"No, Mr. McCrea," he said quietly. "Let's get out of here. You hear me, Mr. McCrea?"

McCrea's hands slid off—and scraped across Malloy's chest. Nail scratches, instantly oozing blood, now showed on the convict's skin. He still hadn't moved—nor stopped grinning. Without a single word, McCrea turned jerkily and walked to the stairs' trap.

And then a voice in one of the neighboring cells shouted again:

"*They oughta be burned!*"

Again it started that savage chant. It hounded Mr. Fleming and McCrea during their descent to the ground tier, pursued them when they walked out into the courtyard.

"*They oughta be burned!*"

McCrea clutched Mr. Fleming's arm. His face twitched, and he looked as if he were ready to grovel on the ground for the favor he meant to ask.

"A couple bombs, sir," he pleaded. "Just two, sir. I tell you it won't hurt 'em. *Surely* you ain't gonna let 'em get away with that!"

Mr. Fleming waved to one of the guards.

"Close and lock the door," he said, and added to McCrea: "No, Mr. McCrea, I don't think I want to use gas."

McCrea breathed heavily through his nose. His hand still clutched Mr. Fleming's biceps.

"At least punish Malloy," he panted. "Slap him in solitary, and let him rot there a few weeks. He started that riot."

"We've no proof that he started it. He was simply spokesman for the rest of them."

"But his open threat sayin' that he'll force—"

"That," Mr. Fleming interrupted thoughtfully, "is precisely what I am thinking of now. There was some reason why he made that unnecessary threat. It seems to me that the entire scene had been carefully rehearsed in advance. I wonder, Mr. McCrea—I wonder!"

It was quiet inside the tower now. The group of guards near the door were dispersing. One by one, the searchlights withdrew their white fingers. Mr. Fleming could hear on top of the wall above him the heavy, measured footsteps of the guard patrolling that section with a sub-machine gun. The night was hot and black, and there was a threat of storm in the air.

McCrea said: "Why should that scene be rehearsed? They want new mattresses, and Malloy thought if they raised hell about it—"

"I'm thinking of Warden Kane," said Mr. Fleming. "His psychic ability to sense trouble brewing. I, too, haven't forgotten it, Mr. McCrea."

Fleming moved away. More awkward than ever on the rough cobbles, he slowly encircled the grim gray tower. On two sides, six feet or so separated it from the prison walls which met there. Looking up, Mr. Fleming saw that the top of the tower was just about level with the top of the wall.

McCrea, following him, said angrily: "But what can they do, Warden? Them tower walls are three feet thick. They're locked in their cells and the one exit out of the tower is locked too. There are guards with Tommy guns on top of the walls; there are guards al-

ways patrolling the court yard. How *could* any of them crash out?"

"It is just," said Mr. Fleming, "that I don't like the way Malloy had made a fuss about the mattresses. It's—" He shrugged his gaunt shoulders. "Well, good night, Mr. McCrea. I'm going to fool around in the office a while longer. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Warden."

Mr. Fleming paused to take a last long, thoughtful look at the top of the tower. He touched his glasses, sighed and shambled back to the office.

Dr. Lasher sat on the edge of the desk, the squat bottle of Scotch alongside of him. His hands were in his pockets, and sweat beaded his face. He looked like someone in high fever.

"I was alone with him," he jerked out when Mr. Fleming entered. "Five, ten minutes of looking at it, of anticipating what it would feel like going down my gullet—I hadn't taken a drink. Yes, I can lick it, sir, now that Warden Kane is dead."

"Why do you say that?" asked Mr. Fleming. "What hold had Warden Kane on you?"

Dr. Lasher tried to light a cigarette, and Mr. Fleming understood now why he'd held his hands in his pocket. The physician's hands had a quivering, violent life of their own.

"I hated him. That was the bond between us—hatred. For the mild, weak person that I know myself to be, the very intensity of my hatred for him used to amaze me. He knew I hated him. He knew I would awaken, shrieking, in the dead of night, haunted by the frightful things I'd seen him do to the prisoners here. It—it amused him!"

"Why did you stay on here? You might have resigned, you know."

"As a medical man," said Dr. Lasher, "I could see that he was

doomed. I wanted to watch him die before I left. It became an obsession with me. But he lingered on, year after year, and every day I hoped it would happen. I had to drink—or go insane. And all the time he knew *why* I was staying on here! He *knew* it, and he would laugh at me—”

“Steady!” said Mr. Fleming, when the little physician began to tremble again. “Suppose you take a couple drinks and go to bed. I would like you to help me finish straightening out the records in the morning.”

“Take a couple drinks?” Dr. Lasher repeated, his eyes glittering. “You advise that?”

“Certainly. You must sleep, and, as I said, I’ll need you in the morning.”

Dr. Lasher reached a trembling hand to the bottle, then jerked it away and slid off the table.

“No,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t want him to go on laughing at me from hell. I’m through with it—if it kills me. Good night, Warden!”

“Good night,” said Mr. Fleming, and quietly watched Dr. Lasher stagger out of the office.

A FLY-SPLATTERED, yellow-faced clock on the desk showed a few minutes after nine. Mr. Fleming walked over to it and wound the spring. He stood near the desk a while, then gently flipped off the half-chewed cigar adhering to one edge of it. It joined the filth already littering the floor.

He looked around the office, and his eyes returned several times to a calendar hanging on one of the walls. It was three years old, and the dirty lithograph above it showed an Indian maiden propelling a green canoe over purple lake. Mr. Fleming approached, detached it carefully from the wall, and tore it into neat squares.

It took him some time to find the wastepaper basket, but it was already overflowing with rubbish. Mr. Fleming sighed and let the torn bits of the calendar drift to the floor. Then he sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk, and began teetering in it until the scraping of the swivel bolt suddenly reminded him of the silence.

And the silence, in turn, reminded him of Tower C, and Pat Malloy, and Warden Kane’s ability to sense trouble brewing. From then on minutes passed very slowly. Mr. Fleming did not know where his sleeping quarters were, and he’d forgotten until now his luggage in the back of the coupé; both seemed unimportant now. He kept thinking of Pat Malloy, and Tower C, and Warden Kane’s warning—and the fact that *he* was now the warden of the Kirby prison.

At ten o’clock, Mr. Fleming resolutely took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and went to work emptying the six drawers of that huge desk. He found such curious items as a crumpled tuxedo shirt, an empty beer bottle, a mouse trap and a deadly-looking hand-grenade. Apparently Warden Kane had believed in stuffing a drawer until it could not hold another single thing, then forgetting about it.

The pile grew to an impressive pyramid on top of the desk when all the drawers were finally empty. Mr. Fleming looked at it helplessly, then frowned as he suddenly caught himself listening. He could only hear the silence. Doggedly, he began sorting the pyramid, replacing some of the things.

By midnight, he had to face the fact that there was nothing else he could do with the desk. It was as neat and orderly now as a druggist’s showcase. He pushed back the swivel chair, stood up and said very distinctly:

"I am tired now. I have driven many miles. I've a busy day ahead of me tomorrow. I'm going to sleep. I *will* sleep!"

He stepped around the desk and approached a narrow cot near the left wall. Dust clouded from its plush cover when he sat down to remove his shoes. Mr. Fleming sneezed and went on taking off his shoes. Then he walked in his stocking feet to the electric switch, turned off the lights, returned to the cot. Fumbling in the darkness, he found one of his shoes. He carefully placed his glasses inside of it, and stretched out on the cot. It was about six inches too short for him.

"*I will sleep!*" he said.

Three minutes later, he was asleep.

III

MR. FLEMING had a nerve-quivering awakening. The prison siren was on the wall just above the administration building. It was a huge thing, designed to be heard for miles. Someone set it off now, and the tremendous volume of sound poured in through the open windows like a flood of angry water. It almost hurled Mr. Fleming off the cot.

He jerked up to a sitting position and yelled out his housekeeper's name. Then he remembered where he was. He jumped off the bed and began groping in the unfamiliar room for the light switch. He found it finally, snapped it on, ran clumsily back for his shoes.

The glasses, without which Mr. Fleming was utterly helpless, fell out of the left shoe when he lifted it. They did not break. He put them on, and winced as the scream of the siren lifted again to its brain-numbing, incredible peak. Stooping, he put on his shoes, double knotting the laces as he always did.

The siren died out reluctantly, and Mr. Fleming could now hear men shouting in the courtyard. But the gunfire he expected did not follow.

"Strange," he muttered, and ran to the desk.

His right hand scooped up Warden Kane's heavy, blue-barreled revolver; his left, as an afterthought, grabbed a flashlight he'd also salvaged from one of the desk drawers. Stumbling in the blackness of the ante-office, it didn't occur to him that he might use the flashlight. He found the outside door, jerked it open, and, a second later, was out on the cobbles of the courtyard.

Tower C, diagonally on Mr. Fleming's right and perhaps a hundred feet away, again stood stark and exposed as three spotlights focused on it. The heavy steel door was open. Black smoke billowed from it, diffusing the glare of the lights. And like rats escaping a burning ship, losing individuality in their number and compactness, a screaming horde of convicts poured out into the courtyard.

In those first few stunning seconds, Mr. Fleming was just aware of violent motion—waving arms, bodies running from the pursuing smoke: human lava disgorged from some freak volcano.

Four guards, standing shoulder to shoulder with drawn guns, checked the howling horde twenty feet from the tower door. Other guards flanked them on the left, and here Mr. Fleming saw McCrea. The giant head keeper was barefooted, and wore only pajama bottoms. His hairy arms brandished a sub-machine gun. Even above that howling bedlam, Mr. Fleming heard him shout:

"Against the wall—! I'll blast the first man who hesitates. *Against the wall—*"

The human stream deflected, rolled to the prison wall. A spotlight pursued and pinned them there.

Mr. Fleming began running toward the tower. As bright as were the glares of the spotlights, equally intense was the darkness outside their influence. A low-ceilinged, pitch-black night; and it still hadn't occurred to Mr. Fleming, as he stumbled over the cobbles, that he might have used his flashlight. He could now smell burning wood.

McCrea was yelling: "Anybody gone for the fire extinguishers?"

"Schmidt and Keller," a guard replied.

"Chances are a thousand to one they won't work anyway. Ain't been looked at in five years, I guess. . . .

"So you rats think you're smart, eh? If Warden Kane was still here, he'd let you stay there and fry. Malloy, this is one little stunt—say, where is Malloy?"

The hoarse shout checked Mr. Fleming, now only a dozen feet from the tower, and three feet from the nearest spotlight rim. He stared, as McCrea and the guards were doing, at the cringing row light-pinned against the wall. There was a dead silence for a few seconds, then a voice, shrill with incredulity, from one of the uniformed guards:

"He ain't here, Mr. McCrea! Think maybe the smoke got him?"

Another guard said: "I opened the cells on his tier. Seen him come out with Hurley."

MCCREA'S big, half-nude body dropped to a crouch with the sub-machine gun. Mr. Fleming saw the angle of his jaw, and he anticipated a massacre at the wall where the convicts cringed. He opened his mouth to yell something, but McCrea spoke first.

Spoke in a kind of slow, panting whisper:

"Smoke didn't get him. Not a guy like Malloy. He wouldn't hang back there to be cooked alive. So he's out here somewhere. Sneaked off somewhere. Hiding somewhere. And this gives me the break I want. Just what I want, boys—to blast Malloy all over this coutryard. To pump more lead in him—"

He straightened jerkily, and his panting whisper rose to a savage shout:

"Wall guards! Stevens—hold your spot on these rats at the wall. Machine-gun the whole lot of 'em at the first funny move anybody makes. Carney, Brill, Henderson—stay here and back up Stevens. Same orders, get it?"

"You, Zimmerman—start swinging your spot along the east wall. You take the west wall, Hennessy. Ronson—hold your spot on the gate. You okay at the gate there, Miller?"

A voice drifted back from the gate booth: "Right. Got a message ready for him if he shows up around here!"

"Okay! You guys whose names I haven't called come with me. He's inside these walls somewhere, and I'll get him. Get him before our chicken-hearted warden comes blinkin' out to gum up the works. To hell with fightin' the fire. The loss will be worth it—if we get Malloy. Come on, men!"

The wall spotlights moved, sweeping the darkness ahead of them. One just barely missed Mr. Fleming. A reddish glow began to outline the black cavity which marked the open door of the tower. Mr. Fleming could now see, as well as smell, the smoke. The actual burning wood was still out of his line of vision, but he could hear it crackling inside.

He took a deep breath and plunged to the tower door.

The heat breasted him, like an ocean wave meeting someone wading out from a beach, when he crossed the raised threshold. He saw tongues of flame licking partitions between the cells, eating under the stairs, swiftly victorious in the old dry timber. Here and there, flames spurted gaily as one of the straw mattresses would catch fire. Only a matter of a few minutes before the inner wooden structure of the tower would be a roaring inferno.

The first two steps of the stairs were already burning; Mr. Fleming's long legs straddled the flames to the step above. And continued moving, consuming three steps at a time. Emerging on the second tier through the square opening, a hot spark from somewhere flicked his throat. He rubbed his left forearm across the burn, and kept going.

There were no open flames on the third tier. It was a smoke-choked darkness—and only now did Mr. Fleming recall the flashlight in his left hand. He pressed the button. The smoke became visual as a ghastly, swirling fog.

Only one flight was left—to the top tier. Mr. Fleming climbed it warily, holding down the flashlight beam. He removed his finger off the button altogether just before his head came above the edge of the stair-opening.

He stood in smoke-choked darkness again—listening. He could hear the crackling of fire below, faint shouts outside; if another man shared this tier with him now, Mr. Fleming could not hear him. He pressed the flashlight button.

The yellow beam fought its way through the smoke. Directly ahead of him was one of the barred windows. Or, rather, what *had* been a barred window. Only two-inch stumps of the bars remained in the lower sill; the bars

had been cut and torn loose from the top. Six feet beyond the window, the flashlight exposed the gray stone of the prison wall.

Mr. Fleming flicked his wrist to the left, directing the beam at the cell where he'd seen Malloy a half-dozen hours ago. He saw him again now. . . .

THE convict stood with his back to the wall, his long arms outstretched. Perfectly still, without moving a muscle even when the flashlight beam settled on him, he looked as if he were crucified there. He held club-like a three-foot section of a window bar in his left hand; in his right, was a crude, tri-pronged hook. A rope dangled from the end of that hook.

"So nice of you to drop around, Warden," he drawled, and closed his eyes.

They remained closed a few seconds. His head tilted back. Then he opened his eyes and began cursing, softly but with a terrible intensity.

Mr. Fleming walked the dozen feet to the cell, sidled in through the open door. He held the heavy .38 close to his right hip, the blue barrel steady on Malloy's chest.

"Without moving your arms—just by opening your fists—drop what you're holding, Malloy," Mr. Fleming said quietly. "Do it *now*!"

The convict glanced down at the gun. His big chest heaved as if he'd been running. He opened his left hand, and the bar clattered to the cell floor. The hook and rope followed. Malloy wiped his palms on his trousers, spat, and said out of the corner of his mouth:

"You're dyin' o' thirst. You find water, an' raise the cup to drink. Then—wham! The cup is slapped right outa your hand!"

"That water wasn't good for you, Malloy. Poison in it--and it would have got you, sooner or later!"

"The hell it would!" said Malloy.

Mr. Fleming shrugged.

"We've little time to waste, if we want to get out of here alive. Walk on ahead of me!"

Malloy lurched to the door, then turned jerkily. His eyes narrowed, and he crouched forward a bit.

"Say, Warden, you came up here alone! How come? How come McCrea or none of the screws are with you?"

"Malloy, we'd better get moving!"

The convict crouched lower. His fingers were now hooked talon-like.

"Look, Warden! Maybe I've suddenly gone nuts. You gotta humor a guy who's nuts. Everybody knows that. You answer my question, and I'll go along with you peaceful. But until you do, I ain't budgin' from this spot. How come you're alone?"

"There's something on your mind, Malloy," Mr. Fleming said quietly.

"Maybe. But I'm stickin' to what I just said. How come you're alone, Warden?"

"All right! McCrea and the guards are under the impression that you've sneaked off somewhere after leaving the tower. They're searching for you now. I reasoned that you must be up here. No one noticed me enter the tower, consequently no one followed me in. Does this satisfy you?"

"And how!" Malloy panted. "--And how!"

Mr. Fleming gestured with the gun toward the cell door. "Walk on ahead of me!"

"Sure!" said Malloy. He laughed and repeated with a kind of savage gaiety: "Sure!"

Mr. Fleming drew farther back against the wall. The blue barrel of the

.38 slowly followed Malloy as the convict swaggered to the cell door. But Malloy never passed through it. His gorilla-like right arm darted out. He caught one of the bars and jerked the door toward him. There was a loud metallic click as the lock snapped in place.

MALLOY turned lazily, leaned back against the bars and grinned up at Mr. Fleming. "Maybe you get the idea now, Warden?"

There was a brief pause. "Not exactly," confessed Mr. Fleming.

"I'll explain," said Malloy, mockery in his voice, in his eyes. "This cell is locked now. There's a fire under us. It's a pretty swell fire, so far as fires go; McCrea ain't got the equipment to put it out. Besides, McCrea is too busy lookin' for me. And nobody knows that we're up here now. So, unless somethin' is done about it, you an' me will be cooked alive. You follow me so far, Warden?"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Fleming.

"Now you're holdin' that gat on me. It ain't gonna do you any good to plug me, 'cause you'll still burn anyway. From the way those flames are roarin' downstairs now, I don't think they'll hear the shots. They wouldn't hear you if you yelled your lungs out. Even if somebody did, by the time they get it through their thick skulls that it's comin' from here, we'll be dead anyway. Within five minutes, the smoke and heat will kill us, if the flames don't. You still follow me, Warden?"

"Yes," said Mr. Fleming.

Malloy grinned again. "Okay, here's what I'm buildin' up to. I've got a key that'll open that door. That's how I was able to come out nights and file them bars. That's how I was able to go downstairs and start the fire in such

way that the men wouldn't burn to death before anybody could get to 'em. I've got a key that'll let us outa here, see?"

"I see," said Mr. Fleming.

"No, you don't—yet! This key ain't on me now, so it won't do you a bit of good to plug me. I've got it hidden in this cell somewhere. Give you a day to look for it, give you enough time to rip this cell apart—and maybe you'll find it then. But in the five or ten minutes that you have, you *won't* find it—and I guarantee you that, Warden!"

"What, precisely," asked Mr. Fleming, "are you driving at, Malloy?"

"Ain't you figgered it yet, Warden? It's simple. You're holdin' the gat; I've got the key that'll let us outa here. Give me that gun—and out we go. Hold on to it—and we'll both croak here. That's the set-up, Warden—how about it?"

Smoke raced like a torrent from the stairwell, along the passageway between the cells, to the natural vent of the open window. Tentacles of it came in to investigate the cell, swirling about Malloy's legs, creeping over to Mr. Fleming. The flashlight was losing its battle with the murky haze.

"No, Malloy," said Mr. Fleming.

"You'd rather be burned alive, eh?"

"I want you to show me where you hid that key."

MALLOY laughed harshly and moved away from the cell door. The barrel of Mr. Fleming's gun, still held at his hip, followed the convict as he crossed to one of the cots. Malloy sat down on the edge of it. Muscles rippled and rolled beneath his sun-blackened skin.

"You're a fool, Warden!" he said. "You know you'll crack before I do."

"Oh, yes?" murmured Mr. Fleming.

"Why do you think so, Malloy?"

"Because I ain't got nothin' to lose anyway. If I croak up here, I'll just be transferrin' from one hell to another. The hell below can't be much worse than the one right here at Kirby."

"Kirby," said Mr. Fleming, "has been *made* the place it is. It needn't—and won't—continue to be so. I've looked up your record, Malloy. You've four years left of your minimum sentence. Why not wait—and walk out a free man four years from now?"

"Oh, can it, Warden!" Malloy sneered. "I'm crashin' out tonight—or I'm croakin' here."

"As you please," said Mr. Fleming.

Malloy leaned forward on the cot. "Look!" he said. "You threw out a hook before; I'll try one now. Maybe you think I'll double-cross you. Maybe you think I'll pump a couple slugs in you the second you hand me that gat. Well, I won't! I always keep my word, Warden. Gimme that gun, and I'll give *you* every break to save your hide—if you can. Is that what was holdin' you back?"

"No, Malloy."

"What, then, you fool?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you."

"Try it, anyway."

"Well," said Mr. Fleming, "all my life I've had a certain ambition. I've realized it finally, only to find that I must jump a difficult hurdle before I can attain what I really want. I'll risk my life to clear that hurdle, Malloy."

"That don't make no sense to me."

"No," agreed Mr. Fleming, "I guess it wouldn't."

"Just one question, Warden," said Malloy, "before we cut this dizzy rag-chewin'. How did you figger out I was up here?"

"That wasn't difficult, Malloy," Mr. Fleming replied mildly. "You planted

cleverly enough an excuse for a fire, but I reasoned that men locked in here, as the prisoners were, would not risk a horrible death just to get new mattresses. They would risk their lives only for one purpose—escape!

"Since you were missing, naturally, then, you must have been the one upon whom they banked to help them escape. With several machine guns up on the walls, with a score of guards in the yard—what could you have done had you sneaked off after leaving the tower?"

"Not a thing," Malloy answered promptly.

"Right! But with the window on this tier only a few feet below the top of the wall—with the possibility of cutting the bars and reaching the top of the wall somehow—of being able, under the concealment of smoke, to sneak up on the nearest wall guard and gain possession of his machine gun—of sweeping the other wall guards off with a single blast and turning the machine gun on the guards in the courtyard—"

"Okay, Warden," said Malloy, "You've got it. I guess you can't always judge how much brains a guy has got by what he looks like. You looked like a long-legged old fool to me!"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Fleming, "appearances are deceptive at times."

IV

THE investigating tentacles of smoke lengthened, and became avid in their writhing search. The murk thickened; it was difficult now for Mr. Fleming—though the flashlight was pointblank on Malloy—to see clearly the convict's face. His eyes watered. The heat was beginning in earnest to exert its torture.

He felt as if there were a steel band around his skull, just above the eyes, and someone was turning the adjusting screw on it, slowly tightening the pressure of the band. A steel mesh seemed to imprison his lungs, giving them, as seconds went on, less and less room to expand.

The fire below, still an invisible threat, made itself heard with a progressively sinister swishing and crackling. It was easy enough to visualize it eating the timbers, extending its destructive arms higher and higher, gaining momentum toward the inevitable collapse of the inner structure of the tower.

Malloy said: "I just figured out that the breaks are still on my side, Warden."

"How it that?" asked Mr. Fleming.

"If you pass out first, I get outa here. If it gets me first—well, you'll stay on to burn alive."

"Yes," said Mr. Fleming, "that's quite true. Only I do not think I will lose consciousness before you do."

"That's a dumb crack," Malloy snarled. "How can you *think* that? You don't know—"

"I do know—somehow," Mr. Fleming interrupted firmly. "It is just that I will not allow myself to lose consciousness."

"And that," said Malloy, "is another dumb crack. Suppose you keep quiet!"

"Cheerfully," said Mr. Fleming.

Hot seconds dragged. Malloy kept rubbing his throat. Mr. Fleming could hear him panting like a spent animal. He himself tried to breathe as sparingly as he could. The steel band on his skull, the steel mesh imprisoning his lungs, still continued to constrict mercilessly.

Something crashed far below. Malloy leaped off the cot.

"There it goes!" he yelled. "There goes the whole works!"

"Oh, no!" said Mr. Fleming. "Not quite yet. I judged it would take a little while longer—"

Malloy, fingers hooked and shoulder high, suddenly came weaving toward him. Mr. Fleming moved the blue barrel of the .38. He said nothing. Malloy stopped, lowered his arms and retreated to the cot.

"You long-legged fool!" he panted. "Ain't you even goin' to *look* for the key? Will you just stand there like a statue, knowin' what's happenin' under you, knowin' that your flesh will be sizzlin' soon, skin crackin', turnin' black—"

"I am waiting," Mr. Fleming said quietly, "for you to tell me where the key is."

"I'll see you burn first!" Malloy screamed.

Then he suddenly seemed ashamed of his outburst. He sank back on the cot. Sat there, crouching forward, clenched fists softly hammering his thighs.

"Let's talk about somethin'." he said. "Anything—until them floors crash. You married, Warden?"

"I'm a widower," replied Mr. Fleming.

"Got any kids?"

"Two. They're in a private school now."

"Nice kids?"

"Yes, Malloy, they are very nice children."

Something else crashed below, and Malloy jerked. "How—how old are they?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, Janet is thirteen. Albert is eight."

"You carry insurance?"

"Certainly. Quite a heavy policy. They'll be well provided for."

"I've always liked kids, too," said Malloy. "Always wanted to have a couple of 'em. But I could never get hooked up with one dame long enough."

"THE smoke is rolling in heavier," said Mr. Fleming. "Won't be long now. I shou'd say three minutes, on the outside, then—"

"Then down we go," Malloy panted. "Down to feed the furnace under us. Down to sear and sizzle and burn—Do you like pigeons, Warden? When I was a kid, I was crazy about pigeons. Used to have one little white one—a little white pigeon with pink eyes. . . ."

He jumped off the cot again.

"You're standin' on it!" he screamed. "Standin' on the square I cut in the floor. The key is under it. Get it, and let's get outa here! *Let's get outa here!*"

"Thanks," said Mr. Fleming. "But—we won't bother with your key, Malloy. Because I've a key that'll open that cell—in my pocket. Got it from McCrea—earlier."

He wedged the flashlight under his arm, reached in his left trouser pocket and threw something that made a metallic clang on the cell floor at Malloy's feet.

"I'm always particular—very particular—about keys—whenever I move in somewhere. Open the door, Malloy!"

The convict stood motionless a moment. Mr. Fleming could not see his face. Could only see vaguely the squat bulk of him five feet away. Then Malloy's bulk changed shape. Stooping now, groping on the floor. Lurching, a second later, toward the door.

Mr. Fleming saw Malloy at the door, right hand thrust through the bars so that he might insert the key from the outside. The convict's left hand held

his tri-pronged hook with its attachment of rope. He seemed much larger to Mr. Fleming now—a swaying, shadowy giant.

Malloy almost fell on his face when the cell door swung out abruptly. He caught himself by grabbing at the bars. Then he moved to the left.

Mr. Fleming followed, saying to himself:

"I must not lose consciousness. Not now! I must not lose—what I have risked so much to gain. . . ."

Malloy stopped, and Mr. Fleming lurched into him. He recoiled instinctively. They were at the window now, Malloy securing one end of the rope to the stumps of the bars in the lower sill. Mr. Fleming could not accept now the evidence of his own eyes—that his clothes were *not* on fire. For he felt his flesh burning. Invisible fire shriveled his skin.

With a kind of startled amazement, he suddenly realized that Malloy was gone. He still held the revolver in his right hand, the flashlight in the left. He stared at both stupidly, then thrust the revolver in his belt. He did not know what to do with the flashlight. Finally, very carefully, he deposited it on the floor.

Approaching the window, he straddled the sill, then brought his other leg over so that he was sitting on the stumps of the bars. He saw the rope burning between his thighs. The roaring dragon now living inside the tower breathed flames from the lower windows.

"Malloy must have made it," he thought. "But I won't. The rope is burning!"

He raised himself on his hands, turned and slid over the far edge on his stomach. Then he grabbed the rope, closed his eyes, hung on a moment. Before he knew he was actually doing it,

the rope was burning his palms as his fingers relaxed.

THREE times, the dragon inside panted its malediction of fire. Three times, Mr. Fleming felt the searing, savage embrace of the flames as he shot through them. Then his feet struck the cobbles of the courtyard, and he went sprawling away from the livid arms that were reaching for him from the ground-tier window.

He picked himself up and sagged against the prison wall and said incredulously:

"I'm alive! The rope hadn't burned through and—I'm alive!"

Then he felt himself jerked away from the support of the wall. A muscular, naked arm crossed his left shoulder. It clamped viselike across his chest. A hand shot around his hip and yanked the revolver out of his belt. Malloy's voice said:

"You pulled a swell gag, Warden, and I know now why you done it, and you deserve to win. But there's life outside them walls that I'm still crazy to claw into. Sorry, Warden, but I'm still tryin' to crash outa here!"

Mr. Fleming made no attempt to struggle with Malloy. He could no more have got out of Malloy's gripping arm than he could have broken the embrace of a grizzly bear.

"What are you planning to do, Malloy?" he asked.

"We're going to edge along the wall toward the gate. You'll be between me and the wall. Maybe that'll hold 'em from firin' when they spot us. It's a long shot gamble, but I'm takin' it, Warden."

Mr. Fleming said: "You can't make it, Malloy."

"I'm goin' to try it, Warden."

"You can't make it, Malloy—be-

cause the gun you're holding isn't loaded!"

"Warden, you're pullin' a dumb gag that—"

"See for yourself, Malloy! I emptied that revolver when I found it in Kane's desk. A loaded gun makes me—er—nervous!"

"It's true!" Malloy whispered three seconds later. "*It's true!*"

The convict's arm released Mr. Fleming. Malloy, standing against the wall, sat down abruptly. He began to laugh, hands on his stomach, his body rocking gently. The glare of the flames a dozen feet away showed tears running down his face.

"The hell of it," he said, looking up, "is that nobody will believe this yarn!"

Mr. Fleming thought he'd better sit down too. And so they sat peacefully side by side, Malloy still laughing and rocking his body, Mr. Fleming carefully polishing his glasses with the hem of his shirt.

A sharp voice hailed from the top of the wall: "Who's down there?"

A whistle shrilled. Malloy said:

"You made *me* crack, Warden—and I thought I was a pretty tough hombre. And you had the key in your pocket all the time. And you held me off with an empty gun. You may be a little screwy, Warden—but you're a man!"

"Thank you, Malloy," said Mr. Fleming.

Malloy impulsively stuck out his hand. Mr. Fleming met it wincing at the convict's grip.

"I want to shake your hand again," he said, "four years from now. When that gate is opened for you and you walk out a free man. You can still have those kids you want. And there are some men who have what it takes to lick a prison record and start all over again. I think you can do it."

"You've taught me a lesson in what it takes," Malloy said, "that I'll never forget. I'll take my punishment for tryin' this break, then I'm tooin' the chalk line, Warden. And that goes for the rest of the cons here. I kinda want that handshake with you—four years from now."

Mr. Fleming sighed and put on his glasses.

"Punishment, Malloy? Oh, I don't know. Any readjustment must entail a bit of confusion. I believe we understand each other now. That's all I really want, Malloy. For it will help the birth of the *new* Kirby Prison!"

McCrea, charging with a group of guards around the angle of the tower, found them thus, sitting peacefully side by side against the grim gray wall of Kirby.



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By EUSTACE L. ADAMS



Stunt Man

HOLLYWOOD is the Baghdad of America—the place of fabled dreams where anything can happen, and nothing is entirely surprising. Take Dexter Hathaway, for instance. Three years ago, you hadn't heard of him. He was a nobody, hanging around the corners of Wilshire Boulevard. And then—like that—he became a star. One of the biggest.

But in mounting the dizzy ladder of his success, Hathaway couldn't quite manage to shake the mud of his alley-background from his dapper heels. As a matter of fact, the mud on those famous heels was worth twenty-five thousand dollars a month to a ring of blackmailers; until finally, desperate, Hathaway decided to pay the hush money no longer.

Since, every time a star like Hathaway is called upon to risk his expensive neck, the first thing he thinks of is "Get a double!"—in his hour of need, Hathaway calls upon Jerry Banning (who is telling the story) to take his place.

A plastic surgeon works upon Banning's face. Erl Gorley, Hathaway's

smooth secretary and man-of-all work, does likewise on Banning's personality. And between the two of them they manage to turn Jerry Banning into a fairly good imitation-Hathaway. And Hathaway, under the name of Philip Rogers, heads for the South Seas, obscurity, and safety. If the thwarted blackmailers are going to pour acid into anyone's face, it might as well be Banning's. Isn't Banning being paid five thousand a month for that very purpose?

And Banning, becoming more like Hathaway every minute, manages to fool Clifford Furber, Hathaway's best friend. In a rough-and-tumble fight, he sends the blackmailers' collecting agents running out into the night, screaming for help. He hasn't—officially—met Maida Watkins, Hathaway's co-star, yet. And the fact that Banning is a little in love with the lovely Watkins may give him a little trouble there. But all in all, Banning is doing very nicely.

There's just one force in this precarious equation that Banning hasn't been prepared for. He didn't know about Florida

This story began in last week's Argosy

Craig. Gorley hadn't mentioned her, because she and Hathaway were supposed to be washed up. But when Banning returns from the Lake Arrowhead hideout where the Hathaway-dress rehearsals have been held, he finds Florida Craig in Hathaway's house waiting for him.

No one had told him that Florida Craig had a key to the house. Or that when he came in, Florida would come and throw her arms around him and kiss him. Not having been warned, and being only human after all, what does Banning do? What would you do? Well, so did he. He kissed Florida Craig right back, and enjoyed it very much. . . .

CHAPTER VI

NOT FROM YOUR PAST

I WOULDN'T have any idea how long it was that Florida Craig and I stood there in a clinch that would have closed up Joe Breen's office for a month. With my lips pressed flat against hers, I had no thought that this kiss was not meant for me, no thought that in the eyes of my mind I had seen only one girl who set my senses afire, Maida Watkins, and she as far out of my reach as—as the moon itself.

But then she turned her face away and pushed me back with gentle force.

"That," she said, a little unsteadily, "was nice. You're improving, Dex. Have you forgiven me?"

It was difficult, at a time like this, to remember my rôle, to remember to pitch my voice to Hathaway's timbre. "Forgive you?" I echoed, trying to get a grip on myself. "Sure, I've forgiven you. Why not?"

"Before you went away," she said, her voice very ragged, "I thought you were off me for life. When I speak my mind, I speak my mind. And you didn't seem to like it so well."

"Miss Craig," Erl Gorley said, as nervous as a flea on a hot stove-lid, "Mr. Hathaway isn't well. Would you mind—"

"Isn't well?" she said, her big dark eyes slanting up at me. "When he gets well, Gorley, warn me. I'll put on a catcher's mask. I think I've developed a case of cauliflower lips already."

The impact of this girl's personality had caught me 'way off base. My heart was pounding with an uneven rhythm. I was conscious of the faint taste of her lipstick on my mouth. It had been a long time since I had been kissed like that.

Behind Florida's back I could see Erl Gorley making frantic gestures at me, signalling for me to get away from her and to go upstairs. I looked him straight in the eye and didn't move; right this minute, I felt, was as good a time as any to let him know he couldn't tell me to go here and to go there like a ten-year-old. I realized, of course, that I ought to be safely away from a girl who knew Dexter Hathaway—me—well enough to catapult herself into his arms and to give him a welcoming kiss that would have made a brass Buddha burst into flames.

It was as if this Florida Craig were reading my thoughts. Lighting a cigarette, she looked up at me, amusedly, from beneath the longest and heaviest lashes I have ever seen. She jerked her dark, glossy head toward Gorley.

"What's bothering Little Nemo?" she asked. "Afraid you'll swoon, maybe? Tell him to run along and you and I'll have a little talk."

Gorley's face flamed crimson, then all the color ran out of it, leaving his dead pan as white as milk. It was clear to me that there was some long-standing feud between these two and I wondered if, perhaps, it had any bearing

on the mysteries which surrounded me—now Dexter Hathaway.

Rather to my own surprise, I heard myself say, "Don't let me keep you, Gorley. I'm feeling fine now."

His furious eyes cut toward me. I made no effort to avoid them. I waited to see if he wanted an argument. Maybe my face warned him not to say anything. He hesitated just an instant, gave a jerky little bow and disappeared in the direction of the living room.

I glanced down at Florida. She was doing a curious thing. She was sniffing the air. "I don't smell it, Dex," she said in that stirring voice of hers. "Are you off it, or have I a cold?"

"Am I off what?" I asked, stalling for time.

She lifted her gaze to mine. For the first time I noticed there were tiny gold—or were they crimson?—flecks scattered in the inky pool of her eyes.

"Your line isn't durabness, Dex," she said, reproachfully. "Not with me, it isn't. You know what I mean. Are you off the weed?"

"I've been off it for a while," I said, carefully.

"Think you can stay off?" she asked, eagerly.

"I'm hoping," I said.

She was pushing me pretty fast and the first thing I knew I was going to be out over my depth. What I needed now, as I had needed it when those blackmailers invaded the Arrowhead cottage, was time.

SO I turned away from her and tramped toward the library. She was right behind me with a calm assumption that she was welcome. I promised myself that I'd give Erl Gorley a going-over when I got him alone. If he had neglected to inform me, in detail, about a girl who had the run of

the house as Florida Craig had, and who was so obviously a part of Hathaway's life, how many more shocks was I going to get? My rôle seemed, suddenly, far less secure, far less simple, than a few moments before when all I had to worry about was blackmailers, and nitric acid—and perhaps a bullet or two!

I was halfway across the dim, high-ceilinged library when the telephone buzzed like the warning rattle of a diamondback. I wheeled, trying to place the instrument. But Florida knew where it was. Her unfathomable eyes were upon me as she lifted the instrument and spoke into it.

"Yes?" she said. "Yes, this is the Hathaway residence." Then her voice changed. It became so smooth and sweet that I knew the person on the other end of the line was a girl—and that it was a girl Florida Craig did not like. "Why, yes, Maida, darling, he just this minute came home. . . . He looks just worlds better. You have no idea!" Her sloe-eyed gaze touched me, reminding me, caressingly, of the fervor of that kiss. "Yes, Maida, anything I can do for you?"

I had an instant's vision of Maida Watkins, cool, sweet and virginal-looking, with her suny head attracting all the light there was, listening to Florida's possessive voice. I jumped for the phone, but it was too late.

"She hung up," Florida said, coolly.

I was sore and for a moment I forgot my part. "Is that a habit of yours, answering other people's phones?"

"If anybody should know that," she said in a purring tone, "you should."

That snapped me back to attention. The safest answer was none at all. I was just turning away from her when the phone *whirred* again. This time I beat her to the instrument.

"Yes," I said, eagerly, while she lounged close behind me, quite frankly listening.

But this voice was not Maida's, low and husky. It was crisp and curt, a man's voice. "Hathaway?" it said with the exact intonation of a business man ringing up for a conference.

"Right."

"You have until noon tomorrow, exactly, to put that suitcase with twenty-five thousand dollars in it at the spot where it was put before."

"Save your breath, sweetheart," I retorted. "And I'm saving my money. Remember what happened to your buddies? How's the mug with the sore face?"

"In much better health than you'll be unless you put out that money," the man answered in a voice so thick with restrained anger that it shook me up a little. "Listen, you ham sweet-scented scenery-chewer," it went on, "it won't be a pleasant feeling to wonder if the next man you meet on the street, or the one who opens your car door, or the man standing in the elevator with you on the way up to your agent's office, is the one who is going to give you the works. Think that over while you're trying to get to sleep to-night!"

"I've already thought it over," I answered. "And—"

"Just a minute," the voice cut in. "Haven't you brains enough to know you can't break away from your past?"

"I've already broken away from it," I said, wishing there were some way I could trace this call. But I couldn't ask Florida—who would probably know—if there was another trunk-line leading into the house. And the call couldn't be traced from an extension. "I'm hanging up on you and you can take a long running jump at the moon!"

"**W**AIT a minute!" the voice said, and it was only curiosity which held the receiver to my ear. Florida Craig was standing so close to me I could feel the brush of her shoulder against my back. I knew she was hearing both ends of the conversation. You know how sometimes the other voice carries well beyond the receiver? It was doing that now. And Florida was hardly breathing.

"Maybe you think," the man said in a brittle voice, "that you've broken away from your past, but you haven't. When you're dying, Dexter, when you're falling forward into darkness with the salt taste of blood in your mouth, the last thing for you to remember is that you broke your promise to your old partners. So hang up if you want to and enjoy life while you can—"

I did hang up. Thoughtfully I put the instrument back on its laquered stand. I turned and there was Florida, her mobile face all pinched with worry.

"I suspected something like this," she began, "but I never—"

She stopped suddenly and pulled her slim body around. She looked steadily at the heavy've vet drapes which kept the late afternoon sun from shattering the cool dimness of the library. I followed the line of her wide-eyed gaze.

"Keep talking!" I whispered.

On the balls of my feet I moved toward that window. Vaguely I heard Florida's voice going on and on, but what she was saying didn't register at all.

With my left hand I grabbed a handful of that heavy drape and swung it aside. With my right I went in after the bulk of the man whose vague silhouette Florida first, then I, had seen hidden there.

My fingers found his throat and they dug in good and hard. And even as I saw his face, I knew that I was looking at Louis, who had been masked last night. Brown eyes, with a cast in one of them. A predatory nose—Latin perhaps. This I saw before I let him have a backhand slap on his big nose—and that made the second time I had hit it. The first time was last night, with my elbow. I slapped it again with my open palm and the staccato sound of that slap was echoed by a gasp from Florida.

I heard footsteps running into the room. I swung just long enough to see if it was the big lug who had pushed me around last night. But it was only Erl Gorley and he had his cannon in his hand.

"I'm taking this bird," I said to Gorley. "Keep away."

The man reached into his pocket with a hand that was as fast as a striking snake. I pushed my right hand against his elbow, pinning it against his side. Quickly, then, I ran my hand down his sleeve and felt the outline of an automatic there.

I stopped slapping him then. I gave him a quick jolt to the jaw that made his knees sag. I held him up as the strength went out of him.

"Gorley," I said. "Go in after that gat."

But it wasn't Gorley's hand that raced into my field of vision. It was Florida's hand that darted into that pocket, Florida's that came up with the gun. Then she stepped back.

"Attagirl," I said.

NOW the man was waking up. His eyes looked like two tiny peep-holes into hell. I wrestled him back against the edge of a reading table. I braced my left hip against his two legs

and began to bend him backward over the sharp edge, pushing harder and harder against his throat. His face was getting pretty purple, so I loosened up my clinch on his windpipe.

"All right, rat, talk," I said. "Who planted you here? Tell me before I crack your spine!"

He wrenched one knee loose and did his best to gouge me, but I had seen that one before. I caught it on my hip and gave him a shove backward across the table that brought a scream of agony from him. By the muscular resistance of his body I knew a couple of inches more would do the trick. No spine could stand being bent across a thin edge like that.

"Mr. Hathaway!" Gorley bleated.

"Going to talk?" I snarled at my visitor, and I gave him another good backward inch.

"Yes," the man said in a strangled sob. "I'll talk."

Still holding him by the neck I hauled him up. But I kept him jammed against the table edge just to remind him what he was there for. His face was not pretty to look at. Under his olive skin it was suffused and mottled with purple and his popped eyes were bloodshot. They darted this way and that in panicky search for some way of escape.

"You said you were going to talk," I snapped at him. "So talk before I get tired of waiting. Who sent you here?"

"If I tell you," he whispered, "they'll kill me. They'll put me into a sack—alive—and drop me into San Pedro Harbor."

Beside me I could hear Florida's slow, steady breathing. She was standing at my right shoulder, gazing at my prisoner with calm appraisal. Erl Gorley had ranged around to the left. His icy blue eyes were full upon the

quivering Louis. He had his lower lip between his teeth as if to keep himself quiet and there was one tiny drop of blood on his lower lip to show the pressure of that unconscious clamp.

"If you don't tell me," I said to Louis, "I'll kill you myself, here and now."

Both Florida and Gorley stared at the grim sound of my voice. I forced myself to remember that I was not Jerry Banning, who had to be hard in a hard profession; I was Dexter Hathaway, who had no reputation at all for hardness.

"It was the syndicate!" the man screamed at me. "The syndicate you used to be in yourself, blast you! And now—"

I was careless. I let the tension run out of my muscles. So when, suddenly, he threw his body against me, it staggered me. He went away from that table in a frantic rush. He was running at the second step he took. His voice loated back to me, shrill with the terror of desperation.

"—and now they'll kill me!"

To this day I'm not sure he knew what was beyond that great picture window of plate glass. But knowing what I do now, I think he didn't care. Before I was halfway across the room he had reached that immense sheet of glass. He left his feet in an awkward dive. There was a crash. Bright splinters of glass rained to the floor, catching and breaking the afternoon light as they fell. I saw his body make a slow arc out into the sunlight and start heading down.

He was still falling when I reached the shattered window and looked out. Far, far below were the pink-tiled roofs of a clump of houses at the bottom of the cliff. For a while I thought that slowly-twisting, rapidly-shrinking

figure was going to hit them. But he didn't. He hit an outcropping shoulder of the mountain some distance above them. He rolled through a clump of bushes and then stopped.

ERL GORLEY was beside me, looking down. Florida Craig, her straight, slim body outlined vividly against the dark background of the bookcases beyond, had not come to the window. She stood by the table, just staring at me through eyes as round as silver quarters.

"Gorley," I snapped. "Telephone the police."

He closed his eyes and took a long breath. "Yes, sir," he said after a moment. "That will bring trouble."

"Not at all," I said. "Tell them he was probably a second-story worker and when he was cornered he jumped through the window to get away. Reasonable enough, isn't it? True enough, isn't it? Are you sure he knew he was committing suicide?"

The old discipline had come back to Gorley's pale face. And something new had come into his expression. It might have been respect. But from where I stood, studying him, it looked very much like hatred.

"Any questions, Gorley?" I said.

"Of course not, sir," he said, pulling his inscrutable eyes away from mine.

He hurried over to the 'phone and I could hear him giving the police a carefully expurgated account of the intruder. I watched him, bothered by obscure impressions that I could not sort out and identify, even in my mind.

"What syndicate did you belong to, Dex?" Florida asked me, coming very close and pitching her voice so that Gorley could not possibly overhear.

I looked at her fully. "Did you ever hear me talk about what I did before

—before I got into pictures?” I demanded, wanting very much to know, myself.

She shrugged faintly and disappointment came into her dark eyes. “No,” she said. “But you’d be surprised how much I might be able to help if you’d only let me. I’m—I’m not Máida, you know.”

And with that she wheeled away and walked over to the window. Erl Gorley came from the phone.

“The police will be here soon,” he said, levelly. “I suggest you let me handle them. On account of your—your illness, you should not be subjected to the strain of an interview. If they insist, I’ll have them call Dr. Flanders. He’ll stop them.”

“Dr. Flanders must be very accommodating,” I murmured.

And from the window, Florida said in a slurred voice, “He is, at a price.” She looked over the edge of the broken window, glancing down at that precipice below. She shuddered. “Would you really have broken that man’s back, Dex?”

“Certainly,” I said, grimly.

She turned abruptly and came toward me, her almond-shaped eyes enigmatic.

“Somebody has been feeding you red meat, Dex,” she said. She came to a step directly before me. The golden flecks in her eyes were more noticeable than ever. The highlights from the window slid across her smooth cheeks, accentuating her prominent cheekbones, seeming almost to lift them and to make her look Oriental. She was very beautiful. “A few more days on that diet, Dex,” she said, “and you certainly *will* be a different man. I’ll be inching along now. I never did like cops.”

Without another word she moved

gracefully out of the room, not even looking back as she turned into the hall.

Erl Gorley came over to me with his strange catlike tread. Behind his expressionless face an inner storm was raging. I could tell by the color of his eyes. They had changed from a cold blue to the shade of black you see on the under-side of a midsummer thunder-squall.

“WE’VE got to do something about that woman!” he raged. “She’s dangerous! If she put her mind to getting something—or somebody—there isn’t anything she’d stop at!”

“That’s all right,” I said, watching him carefully. “I like people who know what they want and go after it. What are you so worried about? What is she making up her mind to go after that you don’t want her to get?”

I could see him fighting for control. He almost won it, but not quite. “She wants to get Dexter Hathaway—you!”

“And that, of course, wouldn’t fit in with your plans?” I said, softly.

“It—it would spoil everything?” he cried.

“Exactly what would it spoil?” I asked him.

He swallowed hard. With a visible effort he steadied himself. “There was nothing in the contract,” he said, “covering your getting—getting married in Dexter Hathaway’s name.”

“So?” I purred. “Who spoke of getting married?” And when he made no answer I put my face down close to his. “Listen, Gorley, there are two strikes on you now. You’ve been holding back on me. There are too many things you didn’t tell me. I think you might do some talking.”

“I told you,” he flamed, “that it was a dangerous job you were taking!”

"I'm not talking about that kind of danger," I retorted. "You must have known that Florida Craig was an essential part of the picture. Why didn't you warn me about her—tell me about her?"

"I told you I thought—"

"Don't repeat," I snapped. "You thought they'd had a fight. But you didn't tell me she had the run of the house, or that she knew Hathaway well enough to know he was on the marijuana, or that she was out to get him."

His eyes became uneasy. I thought it was a pretty good time to make myself clear. I put up my hand and grabbed both his coat lapels, gathered them together and yanked him toward me.

"Listen, Gorley," I said, "there's nothing in the contract, either, about keeping a secretary who forgets—or holds back—too many things he ought to remember and give out. Watch your step, Gorley, or out you go, and with a footprint on you that you'll wear until the day you die!"

He stood there, his face bright crimson, his icy eyes big and round, trying to get his breath. From the broken window came the thin screech of a police siren. A prowler car was climbing the switchback road from Laurel Canyon. The flunkie who had let us into the house came hurrying in. I let go Gorley's lapels just in time.

"The reporters, Mr. Hathaway!" the servant bleated. "They have heard that someone died here and they insist upon coming in." He looked at Gorley's face and swallowed hard. "Is— is there anything wrong?"

"Gorley," I said, softly. "I feel a nervous breakdown coming on. Please take me to my room. Then I'm sure you can carry on with the police force alone."

CHAPTER VII

PAYABLE ON DEMAND

GORLEY was pretty slick, all right. He worked the cops into a lather of indignation about the house-breaker. He practically had them sending flowers up to my room, so convincingly did he describe my deplorable state of health. And if the reporters were any less convinced, their stories in the papers gave no reflection of their doubt. Or so Gorley said. I didn't bother to read them. I had too much on my mind as it was.

"From rags to riches in a week," I told the mirror as I was dressing the next morning.

Oh, not from rags, really. The fact of the matter was that Sleepy Smith and I were the two top stunt-men in Hollywood, and had been for nearly three years. We made plenty of money but we never seemed to hang on to any of it. What was the use of saving money when tomorrow you might be dead? But no professional stunt man in the world has money in the sense that Dexter Hathaway had it.

These things I had been thinking about in the night. And the more I thought things over, the lower I got in my mind. It looked to me as if the man who had been Dexter Hathaway had slipped me a pretty hot potato to handle.

I didn't feel any too merry about this syndicate to which I was supposed to have belonged. I knew they were efficient enough. It had been just my good luck, and the fact that my muscular reactions were trained down pretty fine, that they hadn't doused my bare ribs and belly with nitric acid up there at the Arrowhead cottage. And their liaison was good, too. On top of the fact that they had discovered the moun-

tain cottage when Gorley had rented it with all secrecy, they knew just when I was coming home to Hollywood and they managed to get their man Louis into the house.

Here was another thing that worried me. Louis had preferred to commit suicide—and I was sure that was just what he had done—rather than face the vengeance of the gang for the very little information I had forced out of him. That proved they were plenty tough. And if they were that tough, they wouldn't exactly be playing ring-around-the-rosy with me for refusing to pay them. Especially since they apparently considered that I had once been one of them and had double-crossed them by pulling out. For which double-crossing—the one unforgivable sin in extra-legal circles, there would be a double penalty. Money—then death.

The whole set-up was a phoney. Hathaway and Gorley had held back too much essential information. Of that I was entirely sure.

From where I sat the chances of carrying on this impersonation with any kind of success didn't look so hot. Even though I had passed the critical inspection of Florida and of Clifford Furber, it still looked doubtful. Things were beginning to jam up already.

All yesterday afternoon after Louis' death a stream of people had invaded the house. Reporters, studio executives, actors and actresses, the police, "my" agent—they had all rushed in and out. Only the tact and firmness of Erl Gorley had kept them away from me. He told them I was worn out, exhausted, abed under the doctor's orders, and he had refused to permit even Cliff Furber, who had just returned from the mountains, to come up to my room. So I remained up there alone, with a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of Hath-

away's excellent scotch. The more I smoked and drank, the more I thought. By six o'clock, I'd emptied the big brass ashtray twice—and it was piled high again.

Sitting in a great modernistic chair at the window which overlooked the lights of Hollywood and Los Angeles, I tried to figure things out. Even those lights looked hard and unfriendly. Mocking. The dangers which pressed in on me were nothing you could get set for with crash pads and helmets, with stand-by squads of doctors and firemen. You just had to take the falls as they came along, one at a time, just hoping your head was bright enough and your muscles strong enough, to lick them before they licked you. But no muscles, however good, could ward off the drive of a steel bullet; no skin, however toughened by tropic suns and out-of-doors living, could withstand the corrosive etching of nitric acid, which could eat its way through chilled steel. I was out of my depth and I knew it. I was mad. And—yes, scared.

Two other things rode my brain during the long watches of that night. Two faces—girls' faces. One not really beautiful, but with some elusive quality to it that made you wish your life had turned out differently, and that you hadn't fumbled things so, and that you hadn't been such a fool when you were younger—at the marrying age. Even from the screen you could see that; practically every man who saw Maida Watkins go through a love scene made up his mind then and there that he would marry a girl like that some day—or wished he would have the chance to. That was Maida—the sweetheart every man wants, and is proud of wanting.

And the other—Florida Craig. Beautiful, with a dark and deeply dis-

turbing beauty almost Oriental in its glamour. That made you think of incense in a room, and made you hear temple bells on a scented night-wind. An insolent, wicked, pulse-stirring beauty recalling the wild, dreams of youth when life and love and laughter and adventures were the only things that counted. And that was Florida—siren, Lilith—the luring call of uncertainty and shadow.

There they were, the two women who were already in Dexter Hathaway's—my—life, as different one from the other as day is from night. What incredible dangers had the man seen, or foreseen, that would make him run away from two girls like that? And what was going to happen to me, who never had had sense enough to run away from anything?

THE coroner's jury returned a verdict of accidental death," Gorley told me late in the afternoon. "So the affair of Louis is out of the way."

"Yeah," I said, somberly, "it is. That makes two of the blackmailing syndicate put on ice. One with half his face burned off by acid. The other as dead as a salt mackerel. How many more of them are there, do you suppose?"

"Once I asked Mr. Hatha—pardon me . . . Mr. Rogers—that question, and all he said was, 'Enough!'"

"If the supply is inexhaustible," I said, gloomily, "I'm going to get tired of this. It might be easier to turn the whole thing over to the police."

"If it had been possible to do that," Erl Gorley answered, setting his lips, "Mr. Rogers would have done so before he made that first payment of twenty-five thousand dollars. Don't forget that in return for a salary of

five thousand a month you gave him your word of honor to—"

"To be a target for them to shoot at?"

"The words you used when you were employed were 'a sitting bird,' so you knew what you were up against. You knew it in plenty of time to back out before the—"

"That'll be enough," I snapped, irritably. "I'm not backing out of anything. I—"

The telephone bell rang. Automatically Gorley answered it. He listened for a moment, his face devoid of all expression. He covered the transmitter with the palm of his hand and turned to me.

"It's the man who says he represents the syndicate," he said.

"I'll take it," I said, quickly. Then, into the receiver: "Hi, sweetheart," I called. "Can I send flowers for the dear departed buddy who left here by the wrong exit yesterday?"

"Don't bother," said the remembered voice, smoothly. "He was awkward and can be spared without any wasted sympathy."

"And how is my old pal, Pete?" I said, solicitously. "Does his dear little face bother him this morning?"

"Yes, but he, too, was awkward," came the reply, unruffled. "I think very soon I shall have to see to this thing personally, but I should hate to do that because I can use twenty-five thousand a month, and of course my attending to you would end that forever. And, if you'll pardon me for reminding you—it would end you, too."

"I faint with alarm," I cooed into the receiver.

Now his voice hardened. "Dexter," he said, crisply. "I'll give you one more chance with that money. This is the last warning."

"A sign of weakness," I said to myself, and felt better at once.

But his voice was going on again. "If you'll put that suitcase with the twenty-five thousand in it at the usual place in the desert, we won't call on you again for at least sixty days, perhaps never."

"How could I be sure of that?" I asked, my brain spinning with ideas like a dervish dancer.

"You can't," he said, crisply. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

"I'll take a chance," I said. "I'll have the suitcase there."

"This time," he said, "you'll go alone. I don't trust Erl Gorley. You'll proceed to the place in your roadster, and arrive there exactly at midnight. You'll put the suitcase under the clump of sagebrush, and go away."

"How'll I know you've got it?" I asked.

"Don't worry," the voice said with a thin laugh that bit into me like the sharp edge of the knife. "You'll know it. That is, you'll be alive tomorrow night; that's how you'll be able to tell."

"Right," I said, and remembering Dexter Hathaway's character, I contrived to put a thin ripple of fear into my voice. "I'll put the suitcase there."

There was a click at the other end of the wire. I turned to Gorley. Anger was blazing in his eyes and his fingers were working on the edge of the table.

"You haven't twenty-five thousand at your disposal," he said in a nasty voice. "The bank account you can draw against has only ten thousand, as we told you. The reason you were hired was to save us from—"

"Cool down, Gorley," I said, angrily. He took one look at my face and did three quick steps to the rear. "The next time you start talking to me like

that," I went on, "I'll attend to you—in person. Now, shut up and draw me a sketch map of the place on that desert."

His face white, his hands shaking with pent-up anger, or fear—I wouldn't know which, nor care—he drew me a sketch of the Wickenburg Road to a point several miles beyond Indio.

"That's Imperial Valley," he said, his voice desperately controlled. "Go through Indio, and Coachella. At the *Danger—Curve* sign here"—his pencil jabbed a tiny hole in the paper—"stop. Walk straight into the desert at right angles to the road. At one hundred and ten fairly long steps you'll find a large clump of sagebrush. Put the suitcase under that and go away. That's all there is to it."

"Fair enough," I said. "Now get a suitcase, fill it full of paper, or old rags, and fix it up the way you fixed up the other ones. How many miles is it out there?"

"About one hundred and thirty-eight from Los Angeles, but—"

"Never mind the buts," I snapped. "I don't know the answers to them yet, myself. I'm tired of having these mugs bothering me and I'm going to do something about it."

"If they find a suitcase without money in it," he said, coldly, "they'll bother you one last time, and that'll be all. And then where will Dexter Hathaway be? It wasn't a part of your bargain to try and get killed."

"Are we playing riddles?" I said, impatiently. "I'm going to get this turkey, or at least have a crack at him and—"

From the doorway came a girl's voice, cool and insolent. "How about letting me have a crack at him, too?" Florida Craig asked.

CHAPTER VIII

SCENE PLAYED BY MOONLIGHT

BESIDE Florida stood the butler, as itchy as a dog full of fleas. "I was about to announce her, sir," he said, apologetically, "but she walked right in behind me."

I gave him the old eye. "Next time anybody does that," I said, grimly, "out you go on your ear."

"Even if it's I?" Florida asked, calmly, coming into the library.

"Even if it's the Queen of Sheba and all her little princesses," I answered. "One of my weaknesses is a positive thirst for privacy—for not having people come trooping in on me in large, unsolicited quantities. I'm likely to smack them down first and ask who they are later."

"I'd love to have you smack me down," Florida said, pulling out a tiny mirror and lipsticking her very red mouth.

"Stick around, darling," I snapped at her. "Anything can happen." I turned away from her. Gorley was standing very still. "On your way, Gorley," I commanded. "Get those things ready for me just as soon as you can."

He disappeared and even the set of his retreating back was unhappy. Quietly Florida watched him go. Then, she said to me: "You're planning things," she said. "You're going to get yourself into a jam. So count me in."

She took off her tiny hat and flung it at the great chromium-and-scarlet leather divan. She gave a shake to her dark head, causing her inky hair somehow to settle smoothly into place. I stared at her, my mind working busily. I remembered how swiftly she had gone in after Louis' gun—whole

seconds before Erl Gorley got around to answering my command. This girl had plenty of what it took, and, after all, somebody had to be in the car, no matter what my mysterious enemy had said about going out to the desert alone. But still, I hated to bring a girl into a jackpot like this.

I picked up the telephone and called my business agent, who was likewise agent for most of the stunt men I knew. Carefully I pitched my voice to Hathaway's timbre.

"I want to get in touch with Sleepy Smith," I said, and even as the name left my lips, my heart warmed to it. With Sleepy Smith sitting beside me, we could chase the devil himself into the seventh pit of hell. I couldn't tell Sleepy who I was, but I knew ways to get him interested. Just tell him the assignment was tough, and that there might be a fight. That would bring him running like a greyhound after the mechanical rabbit.

"Sorry," Jim Logan said, briskly. "Sleepy is on location. He's doubling for Wyndham Leroy at Catalina. Climbing masts or yardarms, or something. Anyone else do?"

Briefly I thought of Ted Hamilton, and Kid Burton, case-hardened buddies, both, and with guts enough to tie a lover's knot in a tiger's tail. But they wouldn't quite do.

"When'll Smith be back?" I said, disappointedly.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I guess. What studio is this?"

But I hung up, my thoughtful eyes on Florida, who was standing there with her dark head cocked on one side, her wide eyes glowing with excitement.

"If you want Sleepy Smith, it must be good," she said.

"You know Sleepy?" I asked, surprised.

"I've met him. Maybe you've forgotten. In the old days I used to take the falls for Daysie Macklyn, in horse operas. That was before they discovered that even if I couldn't act, I could chase people into a theater in droves by smouldering at the camera."

"So you," I murmured, "were a stunt girl, eh?"

"It's strange to me that some of my well-meaning friends—Maida Watkins, for instance—hasn't reminded you of it."

I made up my mind suddenly. It might puzzle them if I drove out into the desert with a girl, but I didn't think it would do more than that. If they watched the roads, and saw me driving out with a man, it might tip over the vegetable broth.

"I'm driving out beyond Indio pretty soon. Leaving a suitcase for my little brothers of the syndicate. Want to come?"

Something came into her eyes. The corners of her lips twisted down. "So you're paying them off, are you?" she said, in a clipped voice.

"I'm leaving a suitcase," I repeated. "Want to come?"

"So much for illusion," she sighed. "I had begun to think that you were really a changed man."

"You can run along, now," I snapped. "It was a mistake to ask you."

"Oh, I'm going with you," she said, carelessly, "but I was just hoping—"

I made an unpleasant noise with my lips and tongue.

She looked straight at me. "I'm going with you," she said, "or else I tip the cops off to a blackmail racket. Just beyond Indio, you said?"

"Nerts."

"When do we leave?"

"In half an hour," I shouted at her.

Then I knew I was making a chump of myself, and cooled off. "Sit down and have a drink. I've got to get ready. And if you fall over a chair and break your beautiful neck, it'll be all right with me." I grinned at her.

"Always the great lover," she purred as I stormed out of the room.

UPSTAIRS I had too many things to think about to worry about Florida. I put on one of Hathaway's dark brown polo-shirts, brown slacks to match, tan socks and a pair of brown buckskin shoes with crepe rubber soles. They weren't hard to find in that wardrobe. If I had wanted to dress in bright purple, I have no doubt I could have found a complete outfit. I strapped on the armpit holster Erl Gorley had bought for me. In it I put the revolver Florida and I had taken from the happily-defunct Louis, in preference to my automatic. If a grain of sand got into the automatic it might jam, and where I was going to be there would be plenty of sand. And one more thing; when I pull a cannon, it's to use then and there. I don't want to waste time, and hands, charging a gun when I'm all ready to go into action. I examined the revolver carefully, spun the cylinder, and slipped it into the holster. Hathaway had a suede leather hunting jacket; what for, I don't know, for all the hunting that lug did was for girls. But it fitted me, and was dark. I found a dark cap and a dark handkerchief, then I was ready.

So, it appeared, was Gorley. He knocked at my door.

"Everything is in order, sir. The suitcase is packed and covered with oilcloth, like the others. And the rifle—it's a gun Mr. Hathaway bought to shoot mountain lions, and never used, sir. But it's always been kept clean

and oiled, and I have plenty of ammunition."

"Okay," I said. "Put it in the car. And give me some bullets for this revolver, if you have them. And a few clips for my automatic."

Upon sudden impulse I had just decided to take the automatic, too. I could leave it in the side pocket of the car. So now I was loaded for bear and the rest was up to me. It felt good, getting started. Better than sitting still. Anything was better than that.

Florida and I climbed into the roadster. The motor purred powerfully and we rolled down the driveway. I caught myself wondering if the syndicate had men posted around the house; and then I felt Florida's gaze on my face and tried to quit worrying. It was funny how I wanted to show off in front of her. . . .

They were watching me, all right. We had just pulled out of the gate, when I heard the popping of a motorcycle behind us. I took the automatic out of the door pocket and laid it ready to hand on the seat beside us. The rifle and the suitcase were stowed away in the rumble. I slowed down. The motorcycle went by, not fast, and the man on the saddle turned for a lingering look at us, pinning most of his hard-eyed scrutiny upon Florida.

Then he was off at full speed, dragging a funnel of dust behind him as he careened around the corners of the snakelike road down the mountains.

"In a few minutes," I said, "my friend of the telephone will know that you're with me."

"It's a good thing," she said, comfortably, "that you didn't take Sleepy."

I stared at her in astonishment. There was no sign of trepidation in her voice. She seemed actually to be enjoying this show. A side of her, that

was, which I had never imagined. But then, all I knew about Florida Craig was that she was the gal on the screen whom all the other women hated. But now I remembered what she had told me about doing stunts—doubling—for the girl stars in Westerns. The two didn't fit. But nothing seemed to make sense these days. The whole thing was as crazy as a cubist painting.

In silence we slid down Laurel Canyon, cut across the boulevards and zigzagged through Los Angeles traffic. Darkness began to close in as we straightened out on the Pomona highway and the tires whined at a higher pitch on the smooth concrete. Florida stretched like a sleepy kitten in the soft upholstery of the big British car. She didn't try to talk. She was just there, and it was nice having her beside me.

WE ATE a quick dinner at a joint along the road. Over steaming mugs of coffee, Florida said, quietly, "Over there near the door. The man who is playing the slot-machines. Do you know him?"

I looked at the man through the mirror. His back was toward us, but the mirror allowed me to get a side view of him as he bent over the slot-machine. He was big and there was something about his posture that tugged hard at the strings of my memory. He had a small mouth. And mean. I had seen that mouth before.

"Dexter!" Florida whispered, pressing her slim hand hard on my arm. "Sit still!"

With an effort I made my muscles go loose. I pulled my feet back up to the rest on the stool. I hadn't realized how close I had been to marching over to that turkey and letting him have it.

"That guy," I whispered to Florida,

"brought two men up to the Arrow-head cottage and tried to pour nitric acid over me."

I heard Florida's breath gasp inward through her red lips. But she kept her eyes down. "I could tell he knew you," she murmured. "He came in just after we did and kept glancing at us through the mirror."

My muscles were quivering, I was so eager to go over there and smack him. But what I needed now was brains, not muscle. If he was tailing us, my plan was completely ruined. I had to get rid of him somehow. Feeling the way I did, I wanted to get rid of him by marching up to him, pulling my gun and giving him the business. I had only to remember the way he had lain across my legs while Pete dripped that nitric acid on my bare ribs, and I saw everything through a red haze of fury.

"Let's go," I said in a strangled voice. "If I don't, I'm going to start something I'll be sorry for."

Without protest Florida slipped off her stool and followed me to the door. The big lug dropped another nickel in the machine and pulled the handle, not looking up. Walking across the sidewalk toward the Sunbeam roadster, I saw a small sedan parked directly behind it. Small but, I knew, fast. If that was his car, we could outspeed him in the Sunbeam, but not enough to give me the additional margin of time I needed.

Picking up the Indio route-signs and heading down the street, I watched through the rear-view mirror. Just before traffic closed around us I saw him hurry to the curb, pop into the sedan and start after us.

"That's it," I said, in a dry voice, and stepped on the gas.

The Sunbeam purred louder.

There was a three-quarter moon. It washed the bleak, black mountains with a silver patina, painted a sort of snow cap on the great jagged crest of San Jacinto Mountain. We settled down at a steady seventy-an-hour pace, passing car after car, mostly Palm Springs-bound. After we passed the right turn toward Palm Springs and headed out into the desert, we lifted the speed to eighty.

Now it was hot. We were driving through an invisible river of hot air which felt like the heat from the open door of a baker's oven. And it was lonely. The scattered lights of Palm Springs at the base of San Jacinto were feeble pinpricks on the desert far beyond our right mudguard. And ahead there was nothing. Just the blackness of the super-heated desert, with ragged mountains like a picket fence to our left.

"I can't see his headlights," Florida said, just before we stopped.

"He could run without them," I told her. "With this moon and this white concrete, he could get along all right." I took one final look around me. We had lost every light now. Indio was a good dozen miles ahead. We hadn't passed a car since we had run through White Water.

"This," I said, "is as good a place as any."

I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped, leaving my headlights on. I cut my engine and stillness flowed over us.

"Wh-what's the matter?" Florida gasped.

"Sit still," I commanded. "That automatic is right beside you on the seat. Remember where it is, but don't use it unless there's nothing else to do."

"Dexter!" she protested. "Don't be a fool!"

I DIDN'T bother to answer her. I unbuttoned my suède jacket and loosened the revolver in my shoulder holster. Then, walking forward along the car, I lifted the hood of the engine. Having done that, there was nothing to do but to wait. In that desert quiet I could hear Florida breathing. I could hear my own heart beating in anticipation.

And pretty soon I could hear a car coming.

It seemed strange, hearing that car without seeing its headlights. It sounded as stealthy as bare feet padding across an inky-black room. And then, suddenly, a pair of headlights burst into incandescence and that small, fast sedan was almost upon us. I stepped out into the middle of the road and held out my hand. The car coasted to a stop some twenty feet away but the man sat still in his seat.

His face was a shaded white blur—motionless and dangerous.

"Sorry, stranger," I called, politely, "but I'm in trouble here. Could you take a message up to Indio for us?"

"What kind of a message?" came a voice which went through me like an electric shock. Last time I had heard that voice it was ordering Pete to pour a drop of nitric acid on me.

But I held myself still. "I guess I busted a wire, partner," I said, earnestly. "And we've just got to be in Indio by eleven o'clock. I could fix it if I had even a pair of pliers, but I guess my chauffeur left the whole tool-kit in the garage at home. So if you could tell a garage man to bring out some tools, I'd be obliged."

I could almost hear that man think. I could almost read his mind as he wondered whether or not this was a trap, whether or not it would be safe to stop and have a look—or what to do.

I could almost feel the heavy weight of his gaze upon me, looking me over as I stood there silhouetted in the bright gleam of his headlights. And suddenly I had a hunch that he wasn't going to get out of that car at all. He was remembering—and I knew it almost as well as if I were remembering it myself—how I had managed to drive three of them out of that cabin at Arrowhead.

I heard his gears click. "All right," he said, coldly. "I'll send somebody back."

And I knew who that somebody would be. He wouldn't *send* them back; he'd bring them. Three or four plug-uglies who would get the suitcase out of the rumble seat—and then do with Florida and me whatever they happened to feel like at the moment.

But Florida's voice struck through that silence. It was an uneven voice, shaking with anger. "Mister," she called, "would you mind taking me with you? I've had enough of this ride. I don't want to sit here all night with this—this—"

Her voice broke off in a choked sob. I squinted at her through the blinding radiance. Her face was in her hands and her shoulders were hunched over. She looked the picture of desolation.

The man in the car didn't say a word. But when he came ahead, I could see the dim white oval of his face, turning from me to Florida. And he came along slowly, speeding his engine and throwing his clutch, cautiously, ready to give her the gun at any moment.

"YOU'LL stay here!" I shouted at Florida. "You came with me and you'll go home with me." The car was coasting slowly up to me, but I had my back turned toward it, not paying

any attention. "You think," I snarled at the girl, "just because I'm nuts about you you can give me the bird, do you?" Every nerve in my whole body was quivering as I listened to the sound of that car. It was ten feet from me now. Five feet. The radiator and mudguards were sliding slowly past my back. But still I shouted at Florida. "If you get out of that roadster," I yelled, "you'll have to—"

I chopped my words off short. I spun around. My whole body lanced itself toward the runningboard of that car. The man saw me coming. Instinctively he fed his engine the gas. The car leaped like a kicked cat.

But I was ready for that—and for him.

My body slammed against the car door. I got my right foot on the running board. I wriggled through the open window like a snake, both hands reaching straight toward him.

I went after his throat, but the car, gathering speed, swerved wildly and I missed. My open hands slid past his face, slid past his ears. I got a double-handful of his hair and leaned backward with it, pulling him sidewise down against the seat.

Our bodies strained together. My arms ached. His mouth was pulled back, hard. He grunted.

I felt the car careen. I felt it go over the shoulder of the road into the gully. I threw myself away from it as it heeled wildly and went over on the right side—the side upon which I had been standing.

I heard Florida scream as the car tipped over. But I was running swiftly around the rear end to the other side—to the left side, which was now upturned toward the moor. I could hear the man scrambling around in there. It was a job clambering up over that up-

tilted running board, but I made it. And just as I flopped on the door, his head and shoulders followed his gun arm up through that window. He was holding an ugly black automatic and was trying to crawl through the window.

I got both hands on that gun arm.

"Remember the nitric acid, rat?" I snarled at him.

He swung the gun—almost got me covered. But almost wasn't enough.

I put my weight behind my two hands and brought that gun-arm down against the window sill. There was a sharp crackling sound. He screamed and the gun slid down across the sloping steel of the body.

I grabbed it just before it skittered to the black ground. I reversed it and smacked him just once over the head. That once was plenty. He didn't even grunt.

He just slid back through the window and brought up with a dull thud at the lower window. I didn't know whether I had hit him too hard or not. And what was more, I didn't care.

Brushing my clothes off and carrying my captured gun, I walked back to the Sunbeam. Florida was out of it and just starting toward me, the automatic which had once belonged to Louis in her hand.

"Back to the car," I snapped at her. "This'll hold him up at least an hour. Maybe all night. But what we need is that one hour."

"Is—is he dead?" she whispered.

"I wouldn't know," I said, following her and getting into the car.

I started the engine and we went away from there, following the endless ribbon of white concrete which led through hot air and moon-painted darkness into Indio—and beyond into the desert again.

CHAPTER IX

SAND-SHADOWS

"HERE," I said, stopping the car, "would be the place." I have been in many of the lonely places of the world—the fetid jungles of the Malaysian Peninsula, the deserted wastes of the South Pacific, the Everglades. But never did I feel the complete emptiness of any spot as I felt it now.

There was the road, with only our car upon it. And far over to the left were the ragged peaks of the Coachellas. Except for these, there was just the silver-tinted desert, hot with a biting heat that baked into your very bones.

The road sign was gleaming brightly before our headlights. I got the suitcase out of the rumble seat and glanced at the sketch map that Erl Gorley had made.

I took exactly one hundred and ten steps straight out into the desert and there, perhaps two more steps from where I had come to a stop, was a large and scrubby clump of sage brush. It was all just as Gorley had said. Under this I placed the suitcase.

Then I marched back to the car, making sure that my feet planted themselves solidly, to leave adequate footprints.

"All right, Florida," I said, climbing on the runningboard. "Drive, slowly, for about fifty feet. Make it seventy-five."

Without question she did as she was told.

Then came to a stop.

I got the rifle out of the rumble seat, inspected the oily rag that was around the breach. I filled my pockets with cartridges.

I grinned at her.

"Fifty or sixty miles straight ahead," I said, "is an oasis in the desert called Desert Center. There's an eating-place there and a big swimming pool. Some overnight cottages, too, I think. Check along for there. There's a garage there, just behind the gas station. Run the car in there, get it out of sight of the road and let them oil and grease it. You take a cottage and turn in for the night. Maybe you can use a swim first. You—"

"Dexter!" she cried, putting her hand on my arm. "What are you going to do here?"

Her stare was insistent.

"I'm going to hide behind one of those clumps of sage," I said grimly. "You come back about ten in the morning. If I get through before then, I'll wait beside the road here and sooner or later a tourist car'll come through. I'll thumb my way in to Desert Center."

"I'm going to stay right here with you," she declared. "You couldn't pay me to leave now."

"Now wouldn't that be fine?" I laughed. "You'd expect them to come and pick up the suitcase with this car parked here by the road? Pull in your neck, darling. You're leading with your chin!"

Her dark and lovely face stirred unhappily. She slipped the gear into low, hesitated, and threw it again into neutral.

"I won't leave you here!" she cried.

"Oh yes, you will, darling. You'll do just exactly what papa tells you to. Be nice now."

I leaned forward and kissed her fragrant lips. She turned, quickly, and her arms came out, but I sidestepped quickly. After all, I was only human—and she was the most desirable woman I had ever known.

"Scram!" I told her. And turned my back deliberately upon her and walked out into the hot desert.

This time I walked lightly, trying to make as slight a trail as possible. I passed two clumps of sagebrush, but still kept on. I was pretty choosy about my cover. I had a hunch it would make a lot of difference to me before very long.

Then I found a piece which suited me. It was not more than sixty feet from the one under which I had hidden the suitcase. It was thick enough so I could be entirely hidden from the road. I stopped there. I looked back over my shoulder. I hadn't heard the Sunbeam's engine-purr.

"Are you going?" I called back to Florida, "or not? Go away, will you! Are you going to gum the works?"

She did not answer. The motor did that for her. It roared and the tires squealed as she let in the clutch with a vicious jerk. The fan-shaped lights moved ahead, pulling the opal tail-light with them. And the car rounded the curve in the road, leaving me all alone.

I PROPPED the rifle against the shrubby branches of the sagebrush and lay down. For a long time I lay there, all keyed up, reaching for

the gun every time a pair of headlights came into view. One car slowed up almost abreast of me, and I quickly unwrapped the oily rag from the breach of the gun. But the car went on.

Things began to stir around me. There were occasional rustlings and squeakings as the savage business of life and death went on in this wilderness of heat and sand and scrub.

And after a while I dozed off, waking every time the approaching hum of a motor car knifed into my subconscious mind.

Then I snapped to attention at a familiar sound.

It was no longer dark. It was dawn and the entire desert was painted pink, and the summits of the Coachellas were bright with sunlight. And from Los Angeles-way an airplane was coming low and fast, straight toward the spot where I lay, tense as a taut wire, behind the sagebrush.

From the road they couldn't have seen me, but I knew that from the air I, in my dark clothes against the light sand, would be as sharply visible as a black cat against a white carpet.

Now, looking back, it seems funny that I, a flyer myself, should have forgotten the possibility that they might be coming in a plane. Yeah, it's funny now. But it wasn't funny then.

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HE WAS a big man with features burned the color of mahogany. His eyes were pale—pale gray or blue; and when he shoved the ragged felt back from his eyes, it left a band of white skin across his forehead. Not that he would ever have been taken for a *mestizo* otherwise; no, there was a look about this man that dirty whites and a sticky, sweat-wet shirt did not disguise. His voice was somehow raw and hoarse, as though it was hard to speak.

"Manning?" he had asked.

I looked at him again, and nodded. "That's right."

He was standing on the piling above, legs spread under him. His pale gray or pale blue eyes studied the half-mile width of muddy river here and the green pack of jungle growth beyond. His big-boned hands kept working, opening and closing; and he didn't

speak again for so long that I went back to tinkering with the launch's dirty little engine. The carburetor line had fouled.

"They told me over on the beach where I would find you," he said in his raw, slow voice, as though it was a struggle to get each word out. "I'm going to need a boat and a man. Three weeks or a month."

"Sure, I'm for hire." I wet my lips. "But that don't mean much. What's the rest of it? F'instance, I don't run guns anywhere."

He said, "I'm Hugh McCain. It won't be guns."

McCain! Hugh McCain! I know I stared at him like something come back from the dead, while I climbed over the side of the launch and up a ladder to the piling.

There can be too much secrecy surrounding an expedition such as Hugh McCain and a tramp driller named Joe Foelick had taken into the steaming, low-country jungle back from the coast

nearly a year and a half before. Six months ago Siddons Oil had spread a wad of money across the *monte*, trying to find some trace of McCain or his equipment, without success; and so wherever white men gathered from the Guatemalan border south, there had been talk and rumor. Rumor of some great oil-deposit that Hugh McCain had found in there, which the Siddons people would have liked to stake out for themselves against the future. My own hunch had been that eighteen months was simply too long a while for a white man to be lost in that country and still be alive.

"How long now?" I asked him.

The straight line of his mouth twitched, and his pale eyes studied the tangled, dank walls of living green that edged the river.

"I made it into Puerto Bolivar early two weeks ago, and wired word north from there," he said in his rasping voice. "Young Siddons will be in here tonight to go back in with me. Star Line boat. This is all in the strictest confidence."

"Siddons. Young Siddons," I muttered the name over, and knew what it meant.

AFTER twenty years in the tropics, doing this and that, I wanted to get in on something big—even though it was only a look. McCain was still seeing something back in that dank, sweating interior lowland, still living it. He couldn't rid himself of the thought of it, no more than he could speak smoothly like other men from throat-muscles grown stiff through disuse. And now, after two weeks outside, he was going back in again. Add the name of young Siddons to it, and any fool would have realized how big this thing was.

No, I hadn't yet heard of a girl named Mary Vaille.

But young Siddons—that's Tommy Siddons—came off a Star Line fruit boat late that afternoon. He was a clean-cut youngster, tall himself and big-shouldered as McCain. I was standing with McCain on the cargo-dock when a hoist lifted him in a swinging chair from the boarding boat below and set him down on the dock-planks. Siddons looked around him, and then came over to us. He turned from McCain to me.

"I'm McCain," McCain said then. "Howdy. Have a good trip?"

"Yes," said Tommy Siddons. "Splendid!" He flushed a little and pulled back his hand, fussing with a button and trying to make it look less conspicuous that McCain had refused to shake hands with him. But his voice remained even enough. "I'm mighty proud to meet you, Mr. McCain," he said. "Gosh, what they're saying about you up at the home office!"

"Skip it," said McCain, and nodded to me. "This is Ben Manning. He's going in with us."

Young Siddons waited a moment. "I'm glad you got Mary's cable," he said to McCain. "That makes it a little easier."

Then he turned to me. Once I'd seen old "Yank" Siddons, the power behind the throne, and this boy of his had the same kind of look about the eyes and mouth. Hugh McCain had been too long back in that green hell, I thought, whatever he had found. He'd had too much time to nurse small grudges, imagined or otherwise, against Siddons Oil as now personified by the boss's son. Plainly the two had never met before, and I figured it would wear off.

A native boy that I could trust had been putting stores aboard the launch—

mostly gasoline; and I got up at three the next morning to check things over. At daylight Hugh McCain dropped down the ladder from the piling and stood aboard gaunt and big, and hollow-eyed, as though he hadn't slept much that night. He stopped and jerked a thumb suddenly toward the native boy.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Pete," I told him. "Best all-'round work boy in the Central Americas. Only don't tell him I said that."

McCain shook his head. "We won't need him."

I explained, "I'm not much of a cook. Not much of a hand to hunt dry firewood, especially after dark; or cut jungle; or even pick a sleeping spot that won't be swarming with ants. But Pete savvies all such things, and his price is included along with the launch. He won't cost you a cent extra."

Neither of us had heard young Siddons, till he threw down a bag of gear. He grinned.

"The boy's okay, Manning," he said. "And the company pays your bill."

I'll swear that up until then it hadn't struck me strange that old Yank Siddons would have sent his own boy down here to go back into that fever-reeking country with Hugh McCain. But now, suddenly, I didn't understand at all. Siddons Oil might better have sent any one of a dozen, seasoned and experienced geologists of McCain's own tough stripe.

THERE was a rising band of sunlight over the jungle wall when we chugged out into the oily-brown muddy stream. Here was civilization on the coast, a strip of beach and a ramshackle white man's hotel, a street of native shacks and a cargo dock with a few miles of narrow-gauge rails be-

hind and a decrepit toy train that hauled produce out. The first turn in the river hid it; the green walls of jungle closed. . . . And beyond?

Beyond, somewhere, Hugh McCain had sweated and labored and prospected oil-ground, but the secret was still as much McCain's as it had ever been. He had turred up at Puerto Bolivar, and that was all I knew. But how long had McCain been working his way out afoot to Bolivar, months or weeks? What had happened to the other white man who had gone in with him, a tramp driller named Joe Foelick? Where had McCain left him?

The launch had been tied up to shore and Pete had scrambled together an edible meal, that night, when Siddons turned to McCain quietly. We were sitting around the blaze of a dry wood fire, under the black overhung foliage.

"This is one of Mary's latest," Tommy Siddons said. "I thought you might like to see it."

He held out a small snapshot which he had drawn from pocket, and I saw McCain stiffen. McCain's face had turned hard as stone; suddenly every muscle in the man had become taut, but the look of him was immobile as rock. Then wordless, McCain took the snapshot; his fingers trembling slightly, he turned the picture of a girl toward the blaze.

She was a rather small, slim girl, I could see; golden-haired and smiling. Not an especially beautiful girl by any classic standards, I thought, but the kind of a girl that grows on you, whose voice and mannerisms are full of a charm only hers. You could guess that much. And different—she was different as day and night from the girls down here. In the picture she stood under the shade of a wide old elm with a clipped lawn at her feet and the beginning of a

formal little garden hedge behind, as if only to accent the difference.

For a long, long moment McCain stared at her. And Hugh McCain had been in the jungle a year and a half, never seeing any woman, living through what hell only McCain knew.

"Yes, Mary looks well," he said.

He stood up unsteadily, his face set like stone, and we heard him going off into the darkness, stumbling. Suddenly I understood the meaning of Tommy Siddons' words on the dock, when he had said, "I'm glad you got Mary's cable. That makes it a little easier." This girl up home, Mary, had been McCain's girl a year and a half ago, when he had gone into the jungle. And now—she wasn't! Now she was Tommy Siddons' girl.

I looked across the fire at Tommy Siddons.

"I know the way it looks to you, Manning," he said. "It looks as though I stole McCain's girl from him while he didn't have a chance, when he was lost down here."

"Well, what did you do?" I asked.

"It didn't happen that way. I mean, I didn't try to steal her," he said. He stared into the fire, biting his lips. "McCain had been gone a year, and everything showed he wouldn't turn up again. You know the money the company spent down here, searching for him. I'd just come home myself—I'd been in the Texas field—and somebody had to see this girl of his and explain the truth to her, gently as possible. She—Mary loved McCain. They'd planned to be married as soon as he got home from this trip, and McCain was going to settle down in the States. I don't know how it happened, Manning. But I loved her from the first moment I saw her. I arranged it so I would see her again, and then again. I'd never

known McCain, never seen him, and everybody thought he was dead."

"Uh-huh," I said. "But it didn't turn out that way. And now his girl is going to marry you. Well, that's pretty tough on McCain—or were you figuring some other way?"

"I—I don't know," he said. "But if Mary would be happier with him—then I'd pull out without a word. I love her that much, Manning."

Deliberately, he had come down here to match himself against McCain. I understood that much; and this was out first camp in the jungle, the monotony hadn't yet closed in. A matter of twelve hours' travel in the launch would still have carried us back to that strip of beach on the coast and a ramshackle white-man's hotel.

"Suppose," I said, "that you try to forget it. Try very hard! And hope that McCain can do the same."

BEFORE next daylight it was McCain, not Pete, who started the fire; and I woke up to see him hunched over the rising blaze, big and gaunt, his pale blue or pale gray eyes fixed on young Siddons who was still asleep. I shouted to rouse Pete out, and McCain stirred, turning away. But I wondered how long he had been sitting, squatting there, staring at Tommy Siddons. I wondered how much he had slept that night, and I wondered what kind of thoughts were going on behind his pale impassive eyes. I wondered . . . but no matter! It was tough.

The muddy stretch of river water narrowed perceptibly that second day; the next McCain swung the nose of the launch into a tributary that flowed in from the east. Tommy Siddons forgot to shave that morning, and he let his beard grow after that. It changed the clean-cut, boyish look of him; after

all, he was only five years younger than McCain. The difference lay in the hardship, what McCain had been through. We fell into the habit of silence.

One morning McCain disappeared on the bank and was gone half the day. He came back to say that he had found a certain landmark left there. We went on up-stream. We spent hours working the shallow-draft launch over a series of sandbars, carrying every ounce of provision and the spare gasoline ashore to lighten the load, then dragging the launch up current, tilting her and working her through. Siddons was ashore, chopping a trail along the bank over which to pack on the provision. I remember the way he screamed when he reached to shove a limb aside, and the limb wriggled and pulled itself from his fingers. It was the first time I had seen McCain smile."

"Work your way out to the coast afoot," he said, "and you'll forget to even notice snakes. Except the poisonous ones."

Tommy Siddons shook off a shudder of repulsion and went on chopping trail, his jaw stiff. But it was plain that McCain hadn't forgotten a detail of what he had been through for Siddons Oil—to find, in the end, that Tommy Siddons had taken his girl. The jungle was finally closing in.

After that we spent as much time on the banks, hauling the launch through shallows or chopping out some tree-growth that lay, still living, fallen across the channel. It was hard to keep track of time; every day was the same. Sweat dripped from every pore and sour clothes stuck to our bodies, day and night. Finally McCain gave up the boat.

"I figured the water would be higher," he explained. "We go on afoot."

Pete and I found a shallow side creek, where we tied up the launch with a couple of two-inch lines, doing a job of it, in case the rainy season broke before we got out again. Siddons and McCain were both on the boat, making up shoulder-packs. My back was turned when a gun went off, startling as a blast of dynamite against the green silence. I whirled.

MCCAIN was standing in the stern, the flat black automatic he carried at hip in his hand. Before him, young Siddons crouched on his hands and knees over some duffle—a white, terrible expression on his face. I jumped the distance from bank to the boat in a stride. Not till then did I see the rifle that lay under Tommy Siddons' hands among the duffle, and realized that it was the rifle that had been fired. McCain's eyes were pale points of flame.

"Why so fast?" he asked mockingly. "If you killed me now, Siddons, there's a fortune in oil that would go to waste. Foelick died in here for Siddons Oil, but somehow I lived through to reach the coast. You might as well wait till I show it to you."

"Something in the duffle caught the trigger," Tommy Siddons said. "I didn't—I don't know how it happened."

"Skip it," said McCain. "But get this! I'm bringing you in here because I want you to see the ground and write your report. I want that report to reach the company. Then I can sell my share. Maybe I won't be so wealthy as the heir to Siddons Oil, but it will be enough. Siddons do you think Mary has entirely forgotten me?"

For answer, Tommy Siddons rose on shaking legs, and before I could yell to stop him, he had flung his rifle at the water. It hit with a splash and was

gone. That was our only rifle, although both McCain and I carried sidearms.

McCain shrugged, and turned away. There was something about McCain, in the swing of his bony, powerful shoulders, in the look of his mahogany-brown features with that band of white like a scar across his brows where the brim of a hat had shielded his eyes. It occurred to me that his sort of men have always had a fascination for a certain sheltered type of women.

I found myself watching the two men after that, contrasting them and wondering. I recalled some yarns about old Yank Siddons in his younger days; like all his stripe, old Yank had fought hard—to win—and other men had gone down. The boy had the same look about the features, and this wasn't the coast. How hard would Tommy Siddons fight before he was through, and by what means in the end?

This was the jungle, pressing in. It did something to a man; and we went on afoot, packing fifty-pound loads. Our shoulders galled before the day was out, and it was agony to shoulder a load after that. We took turns cutting, hacking, our way on—I doubt if we made three miles a day. When dusk fell we dropped the loads and Pete opened tins and we ate; then slept in our same sweated clothes. I lost track of time altogether; there was old fever in my blood and it was bothering me. But I kept wondering about that gun.

"What's oil mean?" I heard Tommy Siddons whispering once, over and over. "Curse the oil!"

It was Hugh McCain and the girl up home that had brought Tommy Siddons into this, not oil. I don't think he knew he was talking aloud, but McCain heard. He turned and smiled for the second time I had seen, mockingly. One day was like the next.

THEN late one afternoon, we walked out into what had once been a sort of clearing. But now it only seemed to mean that we could walk on a space without chopping our way through with a *machete* every step. It was Tommy Siddons who stumbled and, slowly climbing to his knees, stopped and bent over again. He had tripped over a rusty oil-tool, hidden under ground-creepers. Looking up, I realized that I was staring at a sort of shack beyond.

We had reached the ground. But that's about all I remember of it. That night fever took me again. . . .

Next dawn I was lying under the shack, staring up at the roof of rusty tin, with Pete crouched beside me. "It was an accident. Something in the ~~duffle~~ caught the trigger of the gun," I was trying to explain to a girl with golden-yellow hair. I could see her face plain against the tin roof of the shack. But she didn't seem to believe me.

Then again, McCain and young Siddons had just come in, boots smeared with mud and something else that dripped black, and Pete was cooking food for them. I turned over and tried to point them out to the girl, to show her both were standing there alive, talking.

"I don't understand it," Tommy Siddons was saying to McCain. "I can't understand how you did it!"

"We came in the other way," McCain answered, in his rasping slow voice. "There was high water, and we'd picked up a tribe of jungle *Indios* to help us. We got the whole outfit across before the bunch deserted. The test-rig had been made special, and once it was on the ground two men could manage. I'd found oil-seepage on the surface, and Joe Foelick was a driller. After that nothing could stop him!"

"There must be a million barrels collected in that one natural pool," Siddons said, awe in his voice.

"When she blew in, we couldn't hold her," McCain explained wearily. "We didn't have equipment for that. But Foelick estimated five thousand barrels a day, and she's been flowing here, day in and out. In another fifty years the pressure will give out and stop, I suppose."

"Equipment!" Siddons said. "We've got to have it in here in another month, before the rains get really started. I'm on the ground; the company will back my order to the limit. Any amount of money. Men—"

But then I saw the girl again. She wanted to know about the gun once more, and how the accident had happened. She couldn't understand why Tommy Siddons had come down here in the first place. I tried to tell her: to match himself against Hugh McCain and prove to himself that he was worthy of her, as good a man. It was the only thing he could do.

"Hush," said Pete, in his guttural Spanish. "Eat some of this. Food, *señor*."

Young Siddons was still talking. "How did Joe Foelick die?" he asked. "I want to set down all the facts in this report."

"We'd both started for the coast," McCain explained. "But Foelick wasn't strong. He'd been down with the fever for days before we started. One morning, out in the jungle, he couldn't get up. He died there on the trail. Hardship and exposure."

"I can understand it," Siddons said. "But we'll leave Manning here with Pete. If we go back light, they'll have food enough to last till help comes in. It's men and equipment we've got to get in now. . . .

THAT'S the last I remember for the time, that and a rusty tin roof and the face of the girl in the picture, real as life. She was pleading with me to do something, to stop them, and not let McCain and Tommy Siddons head back for the coast alone for any reason. I promised a thousand times, I'd do something. But it was eleven days later that I sat up and faced Pete, clear-eyed.

He grinned like a wizened little monkey and told me it had been eleven days. A freak, sudden storm had lashed over the jungle; water had streamed through every depression and collected in the hollows. Fresh green tendrils were starting everywhere. McCain and Tommy Siddons had been gone since then, nine days.

I tried to get up and fell back. It was four more days before I could travel. Pete carried a pack of two blankets and what grub was left.

Following the trail hacked through the thickets, three days took us out to where the launch had been tied. Sign of high water had flooded everywhere, and the launch was gone, of course. I told Pete to look around. There was a fire-blackened spot on the bank where camp had been made, and quite plain on the soft earth I found two sets of tracks, McCain's hobnailed heels and Siddons' plain boot soles.

"Both of them were all right here," I said.

I'd explained to Pete that we could better wait here on the river for the men and equipment Siddons intended sending in, especially if the rains shut down. Then I heard Pete whistle behind.

He was holding up a long end of rope, ten feet or more of the two-inch line with which we had tied up the launch. The line had been chopped off

square with a knife. Pete waded along through the shallows and pointed to a gnarled end of root above waterline, where a patch of paint had been scraped loose from the side of the launch. I walked back to the spot where the fire had been and thought it over.

"Pete, did that boat drift loose?" I said. "Or did they pole it out?"

Pete shook his head. "Who knows? But drift maybe."

"I think so, too. One man cut it loose and let the launch drift away—after night maybe. Without a boat, both men walked on from here."

"*Sí*—but why?" asked Pete. His wizened cheeks shook.

"You wouldn't understand," I said. "But there's a girl up home. One of these men wants to prove to himself that he's as much a man as the other. Or maybe—maybe only one went on from here."

Pete scoured the brush. "*Aquí!*" he called. "The tracks of both."

"Could one be hurt?"

"Not yet, *señor!*"

At dusk we came to their next camp—another fire-blackened spot on the ground, bits of old ash and the stub-ends of limbs that hadn't burned, and tracks. Siddons' smooth-worn soles, and McCain's hobnails. We were two weeks and more behind, but the tracks and the cutting of the two men led on. For five days. Six . . . How long now had it been since we had left the coast? I didn't know.

FOR two days I had had to stop, racked and weak with fever-chills. Anytime now the rains would start; the sky one morning was leaden black, but not enough moisture fell to wash out tracks. We had to follow; there was nothing else left to do, except watch the banks for the launch that had

been cut adrift, hoping. But Pete still carried food, rations cut in half, and half again—and I knew that the man who had cut the launch adrift had not first taken spare stores off.

Again we stopped over the fire-black mark of a camp. Pete bent over suddenly; his hand swooped to earth and came up with something. He held it out in his brown, withered palm—the brass shell of an exploded cartridge that had not yet had time to corrode. A shot had been fired here, two or three weeks ago. It was nearly dark.

Next dawn we searched. Pete found the track where one man had gone off alone, hacking his way on toward the coast. The track was that of smooth-worn boots. Young Siddons then! Something cracked in me, and the face of the girl came back before my eyes.

"No, this wasn't an accident," I explained. "No, this couldn't have been—"

Pete had been scouring ahead. He turned and came back; I realized that he was shaking me.

"See! Look there—"

"What is it?"

"A man—what was once a man!"

He lay pitched into the jungle growth, what was left of him—a few bleached white bones and a shred or two of cloth. A stem of vine grew up through the bones of his chest. I recoiled from the spot.

"But this was long ago. Too long ago—that vine!"

"Still here is the mark of another camp long ago," Pete said. "And this man was white. *Por cierto*, no native would have golden fillings in his teeth! Here a white man was shot! But long ago, months ago."

"Shot?"

"*Sí, señor*—through the back of the skull. A gun did that. Look closer."

I remembered about Joe Foelick then; vague, feverishly-heard words swam through my brain. "We'd both started for the coast," McCain had explained to Siddons, for his report. "But Foelick wasn't strong. He'd been down with the fever. . . . He died there on the trail. Hardship and exposure."

"Died with a bullet through his skull!" I echoed hollowly. "While McCain was with him. McCain killed Joe Foelick here!"

Whoever had purposely cut loose the launch, McCain had been leading the way toward the coast since then. McCain knew the jungle and the ground. He tracked along the narrow bank of the river, following old landmarks of that other trek toward the coast with Joe Foelick. The trail we followed after him and McCain had brought us here.

And now, within yards of the spot where Foelick had been killed long ago, Pete had picked up the bright brass of a new cartridge shell. From this place, only young Siddons' boot-track led on.

We followed Siddons' smooth-soled track once more. Pete pointed. Here he had run, hacking his way blindly through the growth. He had turned the other way. Again, he had stopped and waited, hours perhaps, for the mark of his boots had trampled the ground, turning this way and that, all in one spot.

"Like something hunted and at bay," Pete said. His black beady eyes fastened on something else. It was a strip of rag, stained with discolored blood; and Pete added simply, "He was hurt!"

Fifty yards on, we stopped and stared. There, suddenly, on the ground we saw Hugh McCain's hobnailed track once more. McCain's track came from the deep undergrowth aside, halted and then went on, following Siddons' trail. So finally we knew the truth. From the

camp behind, we had been trailing the wrong man. McCain had been alive off in the brush, stalking, hunting down the younger man and closing in.

But this thing had happened two, three weeks, or more ago. . . .

THAT night is rained. Rain fell in steady-torrents, leaving the ground puddled, running with rivulets of muddy water. Rain dripped from every branch and twig overhead; it descended in little streams from the leaves. The dank growth steamed and grew. Finally the rains had set in.

I don't remember much of it; there isn't much to tell. Five days later, Pete caught sight of a dugout on the river and two dripping, brown-skinned natives like himself. Nine weeks from the day when Hugh McCain had stood on the piling, the man I thought he was, and asked to hire the launch, the dugout came in sight of the beach. But the thing I remember best is a dry, clean bed somewhere.

Neither McCain or Tommy Siddons had come out, of course.

There were questions, yes. But nobody on the beach had recognized young Siddons, or guessed McCain's identity. Nobody knew about that million-barrel pool of oil collecting in the jungle, and a prospect gusher struck at a few hundred feet flowing day in and out, one year to the next.

After that last thing Pete and I had seen on the trail, I figured that McCain would make it out again—alone. He'd done it once; he knew the jungle, following his old landmarks. Sure, the thing was big, bigger than I could calculate; and Hugh McCain wanted more than a hired geologist's share of it. So he'd killed Joe Foelick on the way out, months ago, because the driller would have hampered him—and he'd gone

back in with Siddons, Pete, and me only to get Tommy Siddons' report on the ground. McCain had cut the launch loose, so that no trace would be left; none of us was intended to reach outside again, except McCain. But there were markets in the world where Hugh McCain could reappear with his information, backed and verified by the report that Tommy Siddons, of Siddons Oil, had written on the ground, and collect himself a fortune.

I didn't intend to talk to anybody—except one man. That man was old Yank Siddons. Yank Siddons would know how to handle it, and it was up to him. Accordingly, I planned to catch the first boat down to Puerto Bolivar and get in connection with him there, where it all wouldn't be so conspicuous. A Star Line fruit boat came in one afternoon.

I WAS standing on the cargo-dock, waiting my turn to go aboard. The swinging chair on the end of a hoist lifted two passengers come ashore by the boarding launch. One was old Yank Siddons. The chair swung around in mid-air. The other was a girl, rather small and slim and golden-haired—not a particularly beautiful girl to look at by any classic standards, but the kind that held your eyes and made you look again, a lump of something growing big in your throat, the sweet way she smiled. . . .

I turned and left the dock, breaking into a shuffled run as quick as I was out of sight. Anything to get away, right then. Yank Siddons was the man I wanted to see all right. But not the girl—not *this girl*! Not with Tommy Siddons left back in the jungle somewhere, and the other man she had loved—a murderer! I didn't want to see her now, and have to tell her.

Pete brought me word just before dark. Yank Siddons had been talking, asking questions along the beach, and they wanted to see me right away. I sent Pete back saying I was sick. Then I got out. Tomorrow I'd see them, the next day. Anything to put it off. After all. I had come out alive, and two others hadn't. Oh, I could prove my story through Pete and make old Yank Siddons believe it. But just how was I going to answer that other question in her eyes? . . . I didn't sleep.

Next daylight I was walking along the river bank, dreading more than ever to go up to that white-man's hotel on the beach and tell my story. The rain was a steady downpour that sopped through clothing and ran in rivulets next your skin. It beat on the leaves and growth and dripped with an incessant drumming roar across the jungle.

I remember I had turned, finally. The only sound was the roar of beating, dripping rain; the steamy mist of it hid everything beyond ten yards. It was through this mist that I saw two men coming along the jungle trail.

Two men? . . . No, two human scarecrows! Two emaciated figures that shambled along and looked like men, walking, plodding one foot before the other along the trail. Tommy Siddons must have weighed a hundred eighty-five or ninety when he went in; now you wondered what held his bones together. Pads of leather cut from the uppers of worn-out boots tied to his feet. A few rags of clothing. The bones of his face stuck out through sagging, loose skin.

Hugh McCain walked ahead. He passed me on the trail without noticing, while I stared. I was seeing ghosts. I looked into Tommy Siddons' face, while he went by. His lips moved.

"It's all right, Manning," he muttered unsteadily. "I'll get help in, despite anything. Just hold on!"

McCain was going on ahead, his shambling figure misty in the rain, his two arms bound behind him with the leather of what had once been a belt. Tommy Siddons turned and followed after him. Then suddenly, Siddons stopped and stared back at me again, rubbing one arm across his eyes.

"Manning, it's you in the flesh!" he cried. "But how could that have happened? How did you get out?"

"Never mind, it'll keep," I said.

BY WHAT iron will had Tommy Siddons made it, bringing out Hugh McCain? By what steel fiber of character and purpose stronger than his own weak, exhausted body? Here was something big—bigger than a million-barrel pool of oil there in the jungle, a gusher flowing eternally.

The last Pete and I knew, Siddons had been hurt and McCain was hunting him through the jungle like an animal. I could see the mark a bullet-wound had left, scarred in the flesh across Siddons' shoulder. Through all the incredible, tangled miles from there, in the end he had brought out a murderer.

But not till we reached the gravel

up to the ramshackle hotel on the beach did I realize what the rest of it meant. A group of men had come swarming out onto the veranda, Yank Siddons among them and the girl with golden-yellow hair and sweet, trusting eyes. Then it came home to me, utterly grim. This girl had once loved McCain; maybe she still did. And now the other man she loved was bringing him out, a murderer! McCain had failed to kill young Siddons, true enough; but the bones of that other white man lay back in the jungle—a bullet through his skull! He would have to pay the bill for that.

I watched the girl coming down the rickety steps of the hotel—but she didn't seem to recognize McCain. Then old Yank Siddons, who had hired McCain and knew him well enough, passed with only a sidewise glance. The truth broke in a sudden flash.

This man wasn't McCain, and never had been! He had used McCain's name and gone back with us, to get Siddons' report on the ground, so that he could sell his knowledge. Otherwise, no one would have believed his story. This man had killed Hugh McCain long ago, on trail.

Joe Foelick, tramp driller, was the murderer Siddons had brought back!



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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : BY W.A. WINDAS



WINDAS 1937

• PUMPERNICKEL •

This bread was named through German corruption of the French language. Napoleon once asked German peasants for food. Disgusted with the bread they gave him, he is said to have remarked that it was only fit for his horse, Nicole, to eat. In French, "Bon Pour Nicole". To the ignorant peasant "Pum-per-nickel".



• HAND SALUTE •

It seems strange so many object to soldiers having to salute officers on the grounds that it seems servile. As a matter of fact, the hand-salute originally showed one was a FREE man. It could not be used by slaves.

• DECIMATED •

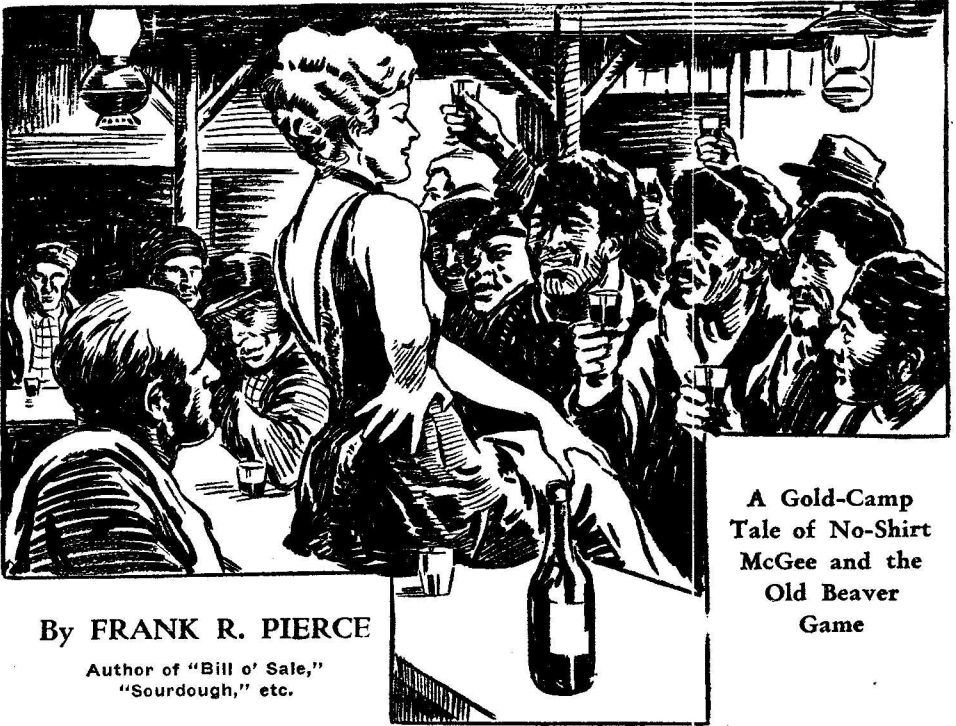
This word was coined in Rome. When groups of army deserters were caught, one in ten (decima) was executed, as a punitive discipline. Today the word means "Reduced in numbers".



• 'BLACK JACK' PERSHING •

General Pershing received his nickname from his brother officers because on leaving West Point, his first command was with a colored cavalry regiment.





By FRANK R. PIERCE

Author of "Bill o' Sale,"
"Sourdough," etc.

A Gold-Camp
Tale of No-Shirt
McGee and the
Old Beaver
Game

Diamond Daisy's Fur Coat

BEDROCK JOHNSON came sneakin' across the dance floor to where me and Diamond Daisy was enjoyin' a snort of square-face, which is another name for a certain kind of rum in the North. I could see he held a glass of whisky in his right hand and a gun in the left. And there was blood in his eye. I knew he weren't in no killin' mood because when he was out to kill he packed his whisky in his left hand, bein' a right-handed shooter. He stopped about ten feet away and his Adam's apple worked up and down his throat for several seconds. "No-Shirt McGee," he says, "don't perfane one o' heaven's noblewomen with the touch o' yore arm."

"Do you mean I should unhand this woman?" I asks. "And why should I? I'm buyin' her the drinks, ain't I?" And I tightens my arm around Diamond Daisy.

"Run along, Bedrock," Daisy says, "and I'll see you later. Don't you realize I'm shaking this sucker down for his poke? And that rates him a squeeze or two."

That sounded reasonable to Bedrock. He gave her a knowin' wink, holstered his gun, tossed the whisky down his throat without hittin' a tooth and ambled away. I looked around the Aurora saloon with its miners, gals, smells, smokes and hell-raisin' and then I looked into Daisy's eyes. Brother, I tell you I was stirred to the depths of my bein'! Her eyes are deep blue and trustful. One look and a miner wants to bust right out into poetry. I swallowed a lump of emotion in my throat and says, "Little girl, marry me and let me take you out of this sink of iniquity?"

"Why, No-Shirt!" she answered. "You leave me breathless. I never thought you cared. I never dreamed—"

She stopped and mechanically picked up the ten-dollar gold-piece the bartender gave me in change, and dropped it into her stocking. "I never thought you cared for me in *that* way," she said softly. "Really, No-Shirt, you must give me time to think it over."

"Don't think too long or you'll say no," I argued. "I've learned my type of man has to rush a girl off'n her feet, or—no dice. I'm six feet six inches tall. Lots of work on a windlass has given me wide shoulders and plenty of chest, my hair is blacker'n sin and five minutes after I shave I look as if I needed another. A bullet once parted my hair on the left side—a part that ain't exactly straight; and a miner's fist left a dent on the bridge of my nose. I've got a hand as big as a T-bone steak and I wear number thirteen shoes. Now maybe you see why it is I have to rush my women off'n their feet. I simply ain't the sort of a man whose features can be took apart and considered separately.

Well, Diamond Daisy slips her arm through mine and we walk away from the bar. She's got slim legs and little feet and each time she steps forward I can get a flash of trim ankles. And even the bumps on her shinbone where my ten-dollar gold-piece and a couple of nuggets have stopped, don't spoil the effect none. That is, not much.

SHE leads me into a booth where girls not in love with miners roll 'em for their pokes. I have presence of mind enough to set down quick and kinda draw her to my knees. She slips her arm around my neck and her cheek touches mine. "Are you sure you want to marry a little nobody like me?" she asks softly.

"I'll marry you right now. Get one of the swampers to go for Holy Joe over at the church and we'll be made one," I says.

At that moment the curtains part and Bedrock Johnson is standin' there. This time his gun's in the right hand and the whisky's in his left. He means business. "Daisy," he snarls, "you're nursin' a adder at your breast, as the poet says."

She leans over and sticks her finger into the gun barrel. "Bedrock," she says sharply, "none of your pranks. I told you once I'm trimming this sucker."

"Well how do you suppose it makes me feel—*ulp*?" His whisky backed up on him at that moment and he burped. "Lovin' you as I do. Can't you do your trimmin' in public."

"Now run along and let a girl earn her living," she said, pushing the gun aside and brushing his cheek with her lips.

He went away, pattin' the spot where she kissed him, then Daisy comes back and sets on my lap again. "That cuss is in an ugly mood," I says, "don't think you can handle him that way when he's cold sober. He's liable to smoke you up."

"What do we care about him?" she answers. "Let's talk about us. Listen, No-Shirt, honey . . ." I liked the feelin' she put into the *honey*. Though I'll admit I hoped none of the boys dancin' the other side of the curtain heard her call me No-Shirt, honey. "Listen, No-Shirt, honey, your little girl is always cold up here in the North."

"Why don't you buy yourself a fur coat?" I asks. "Or better still, I'll buy you one for a weddin' present."

"No-Shirt doesn't understand," she purrs. "There isn't a fur coat to be had in camp. Some day, when we are both older and Alaska has railroads and faster steamships, the stores won't always be running out of things, but this is nineteen five and—"

"Is it? I thought it was nineteen four," I answers. "I must've lost a year."

"I was wonderin' if you wouldn't go out and trap your little girl, your cold little girl, a fur coat to keep her warm."

"I know where a brown bear is hangin' out," I says, "I'll go out tomorrow and knock him over. We'll get some squaws to fix up the pelt and—"

She pressed the point of her finger gently against the tip of my nose and pouted. Little moments like that stay in a man's memory. It was the way she snuggled up, as if she belonged to me forever.

"Does No-Shirt think his little Daisy will look well in a bear skin?"

I could tell by her voice she didn't think so. "The woods, mountains, rivers and lakes are full of fur," I answers. "What do you want?"

"I was thinking I could be comfy in beaver," she answers. "Skunk Holman was in camp last week and bought me a couple of drinks," she explains, "and he says there's a beaver colony on Money Creek where a good man could easily get a girl a fur coat."

"I know all about the beaver dam on Money Creek," I tells her. "There's a big old beaver called Bloody Pete that's been matchin' wits with trappers for several years. He springs their traps and won't even touch the poison they puts out."

"Will No-Shirt get Bloody Pete's pelt to keep his little girl's shoulders warm this Winter?" she asks.

"You're darned tootin' he will," I answers. "Then we're engaged and we'll be married as soon as I trap you a fur coat so you can keep warm when we're mushin' over the trail?"

"Yes, No-Shirt, honey," she says, and taps me on the point of the nose with the tip of her finger.

The only thing I had in the way of a ring was a horseshoe nail a blacksmith had fixed up for me. I pulls it off and puts it on her finger. "You're so sweet to me, No-Shirt, honey," she says, kissing me smack on the lips. Then she slips away to dance with a miner.

I came out and there was Bedrock Johnson scowlin' at her as she trips lightly across the floor. He turns and glares at me and never says a word. He ain't got neither a glass of whisky nor a six-gun in his hands and it looks bad.

I spent the next forty-eight hours out-fittin' for this fur-coat trappin' expedition, buyin' drinks and passin' out the cigars because me and Diamond Daisy were goin' to get spliced. Most of the miners drank my whisky, smoked my cigars, then went away, shakin' their heads, wonderin' what she could see in me. It didn't make me

sore. I wondered myself and finally figured it was my heart of gold.

I had a month's grub and some traps on my back when I pulled my freight for Money Creek. Some sarcastic cuss must've named the creek. Nobody ever took any money out of it. You could get color and now and again a ten-cent nugget, but even a Chinese couldn't make wages.

IT TOOK me ten days to get there and I sure found myself in wild country. The brush had grown up plenty since I was there five years before. You could find a trapper's brush-camp now and again, but that was all.

I cached my pack on the bank above the stream, and clumb down for a look at the big pond. The beavers has built a swell dam, with the curve upstream so the pressure again it would sorta push the ends of the dam into the bank. Human engineers do the same thing. I could see the top of a beaver house fifty yards off'n shore. A game trail ran along the water's edge and I started along it, kinda duckin' my head under a mossy log that crossed the trail slantwise.

The next thing I knowed, I knowed nothin' at all. I was on the ground, pinned down by the mossy log and there was a pain in my head. I tried to heave up and shift the log. It weren't no go. "Deadfall!" I says to myself. "This didn't just happen. I was trapped by a deadfall, and I know the name of the cuss that done it—Bedrock Johnson."

Thinkin' back I remembered I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Bedrock while I was gettin' my outfit together and celebratin' my betrothal to Daisy. The cuss must've heard her ask me to get Bloody Pete's pelt and acted accordin'.

I settles down and thinks of the future. It looks as if Diamond Daisy is goin' to be a widder woman before she's even a wife. My legs lkes their feelin' and I'm gettin' thirstier n Old Nick hisself. The air's spittin' snow and there's signs it's goin' to get colder. Maybe blow up a blizzard. I reaches as far as I can and dips

up a handful of pond water. I sees a trout, too, but there ain't no way of catchin' the cuss.

The water near the beaver dam suddenly breaks and I sees the biggest beaver head I ever did see. It's Bloody Pete. He's got a big gob of mud held again his chest and he's swimmin' with his tail. He plugs up a leak in the dam and vanishes. "You're goin' to look fine keepin' my girl's back warm," I says, then hunts for a stick to dig a hole under myself and maybe squirm free.

I can't find a stick. And while I'm still tryin' I hears a sound that turns my blood to ice. A wolf has let out a yelp and an answer comes from across the canyon. I don't hear a thing for five minutes, then suddenly there's a big tiraber-wolf lookin' me over. He's a good six feet from tip to tip and weighs around a hundred and eighty pounds. And that's a lot of wolf to come in one package.

It's plain he's seen trapped critters before and his special business is to help hisself, but I'm the first man he's ever seen caught in a deadfall and it puzzles him. He squats down on his haunches and I can see his red tongue, and the gleam of his white, drippin' fangs. He comes closer and sniffs. I lets out a yell and he tumbles over backward, he's that scared. It would've been funny, only he comes back, and there's a couple more with him.

I yells again and this time they just kinda jerk like their nerves is jumpy, but they don't back up none. A couple more shows up, makin' about as much noise as smoke driftin' through the brush.

They forms a ring, licks their chops and looks at the leader. This old dog wolf has plenty of scars made from fangs and bullets. There's a toe missin' provin' he's been trapped sometime and got away. It's easy to see he's wise and hates everything in human form. He bares his fangs, vapor billows from his throat and it looks like he's laughin' at me.

I waves my arm and yells and I thinks if I get out of this alive I'll be plenty chawed up. Prob'ly I won't get out alive.

In which case I promises myself to haunt Bedrock Johnson as long as he lives, and then get even when his ghost shows up on my side of the great divide. The leader just laughs again and three of 'em disappears into the brush. "Comin' at me from behind," I says. It weren't very pleasant to think about. They'd just start chewin' on my legs.

I RAKES up all the dry leaves I can reach, puts them into my hat and gets out my match box. I hears a snarl behind me and goes through the motion of liftin' up my left foot. It don't feel so numb as the right. I can tell by the thud it kicked back and dropped. I lights the leaves in my hat and waits a minute. Suddenly some 'un' grabs my left boot and shakes it—shakes it like a dog worryin' meat. Them wolves have jumped me from behind. I slips my right hand under the hatful of blazin' leaves, steadies myself on my left elbow and throws that hat back over the deadfall.

There's a howl and the smell of burnin' hair and the blamedest scatterin' of wolves you ever heard tell of. I waited several long minutes, wonderin' if the burnin' leaves has set fire to my pants-legs. Nothin' happens except a nervous wolf shows up with a singed back and joins the leader. I gathers more leaves and starts a little fire in front of me. These are damp and I have to blow my breath on 'em to make 'em burn. It's a good thing—they burns slower, and makes more smudge. The wolves back away—they don't like smoke.

After awhile out they comes, near the beaver dam, then I see something I hadn't noticed before—paw marks on the muck near where Bloody Pete has fixed a leak. The leader starts diggin' away and water pours through the break.

It becomes a regular torrent, with big chunks of dam goin' out. Bloody Pete comes out for a look and gets almost to the break before he spots the wolves. He flips his tail and starts back and the wolf leader takes a run and jump and lands almost belly deep in the pond. The others

swim to the beaver house and commence pawin' away. It's made of poles about six feet long and the spaces between are filled with sticks and mud—as neat a piece of masonry as you'll find in a lot of cities.

Finally one of the wolves breaks through and there's beavers going' in every direction. One wolf grabs a young beaver and two of the others commence tryin' to tear it from his fangs. My blood runs cold hearin' their snarls. And all the while the lead wolf's watchin' Bloody Pete. Suddenly he gets his chance. He bounds a good six feet and sinks his fangs into the back of the beaver's neck, and it looks as if it's all up with Pete.

Bloody Pete is, roughly, thirty-three inches long and he's got thirteen inches of tail besides that. It's flat and around four inches wide. The wolf tries to push him hard against the ground, the way he does anything he kills on land when he wants to bury his fangs deeper and really get down to business.

His head goes under, and stays there a few seconds, then comes up. I see Bloody Pete kinda twist in the water and his front teeth gleam, his tail slaps hard and them teeth go into the wolf's throat quick as a flash.

Them teeth could cut chips out of a tree and you can figger what happened when they hits wolf meat—they meets. And that ain't no pun, either. The wolf sets his feet and tries to rare back and shake the beaver loose. But there's nearly sixty pounds of beaver hangin' on his throat. He loses his balance and goes under and that spade-like tail fans the water to beat all git-out. The wolf goes almost out of sight, then he comes to the surface again and he ain't hangin' on to any beaver. His fangs is drippin' water and his head's pointed straight up gaspin' for air.

It only stays there a second then beaver paws come out of the water and catch. Down goes the head and the wolf's hind-quarters kinda lift a little bit and begin to go round and round in a circle. I can see the muscles twitchin' and pretty soon they don't twitch, and the wolf floats away.

BLOODY PETE'S head comes to the surface, wet and gleaming, leavin' a crimson streak behind it, then he goes straight for a wolf that's got a female beaver by the neck. I can't see what happens, but I hear the wolf howl and the female swims away, then suddenly the wolf goes under. A third wolf piles into the fight and it looks bad for Pete until he gets 'em into deep water. He's on his own home-ground there.

One of the wolves breaks free and swims toward me. His head's held high and he's leavin' a trail of red water behind him. I watch that head. It gets lower and lower, goes under, lifts, goes under again and stays there. All I can see of the third wolf is his hind-quarters goin' round and round and pretty soon he drifts away.

There's two wolves left—the ones that got singed when I threw my hatful of burnin' leaves over the log. One of 'em's bleedin' from a gash in the shoulder and the other keeps circlin' him and sniffin' at the fresh blood. The bleedin' wolf stands it about so long, then he turns and disappears on the dead run with the other slashin' at his heels.

I relax and try to catch my breath. The pond's drained low and I can see enough beavers to furnish fur coats for all the girls in the Aurora. This pond's a trapper's paradise if ever there was one. There's only one thing standin' between a trapper and several bales of pelts—Bloody Pete who springs traps and knows all the tricks.

He's pretty well used-up, but the others swim around him and there's a lot of excitement. One of the ladies remembers she's got a family in the beaver house and swims over. I can see the entrance now. By rights it should be well under water.

After awhile they disappear and I begin to think about No-Shirt McGee once more. I know danged well Bedrock Johnson learned they was wolves workin' on that beaver dam. He figgered the deadfall would put me out of business and the wolves would finish the job. My only hope was he might have conscience enough to come back and get me out of the mess.

Night comes and I begins to stiffen up with the cold. It's pretty dark and I can hear things movin' in the brush—small things like porcupines and such. An owl swoops over the pond, drops down on somethin' on the other side—somethin' that screams just once; then the owl moves on and there's a squirmir' shadow in its claws.

A full moon rolls over the mountain peaks and turns the pond to silver. I can see ripples on the water and pretty soon out comes a beaver. He looks at me a long time. It ain't Bloody Pete. I can see that. He smells human scent and don't like it, but on the other hand the human ain't movin' and he knows somethin's got to be done about the pond. The water's got to be raised for protection. He passes within three feet of me, turns towards the log and begins gnawin'. A couple more come and somethin' is goin' on at the bank where I can't see.

I get to thinkin' about my pack up on the high part of the bank. Did the wolves get it and tear everything apart? Or is it hunky-dory with plenty of grub, six-gun, rifle, ammunition and traps?

SUDDENLY the beavers stop workin' and the smaller animals quiet down. I haven't heard a thing, but they have. I can see two beavers and a pile of chips they've cut from the log. Neither of 'em's movin'. They've froze.

Then all at once I hear what they've heard—wolves. The cry floats eerily down the canyon, grows louder, then weaker and finally dies. Still they don't move. Fin'ly I hear sounds in the pond. The beavers down there are workin' again. Then the beavers on the log start gnawin'. I can hear each bite. It makes log vibrate.

My mind's on them wolves. I know there ain't any caribou or moose in the country—only beaver. I know they'll quarter the whole region like setter dogs in an alfalfa patch durin' bird season. It's only time until they're here, and there ain't no deep water for Bloody Pete to fight in. I've run out of dry leaves, too.

The moon goes down and still them beavers don't let up. You'd think they was Cheechako prospectors shovelin' their first gold-bearin' dirt into a sluice box the way they kept at it.

Sun comes up fin'ly and I takes a look-see. Beavers have fixed up the hole in the house. They's new sticks and new mud. A whole flock of 'em are doing somethin' to the bank I can't see. I can only see 'em comin' away from it, with gobs of mud held against their bosoms. Trout, caught in the shallows when the wolves tore out the dam, are floppin' round, their sides flashin' like silver in the sunlight. The snow-capped mountains are clear and sharp again' the blue sky. It's a pretty fine world to live in. But no insurance company would write a life policy on No-Shirt McGee I thinks.

It's nearly noon and still them beavers are at it. The two that have been workin' on my log, knock off and commence to drag brush down to the pond. Beavers and brush tumbles over the bank regular and at any other time I'd've split my sides laughin'.

Suddenly I hears the brush crackle and the end of the log farthest from the bank slowly tilts up. I digs in my hands and pushes hard, like a walrus haulin' itself onto the ice. My legs drag and in a few seconds I'm clear of the deadfall. I roll over on my side, wonderin' if it's really true I'm free. And wonderin' too, how it happened.

It's all clear enough. The log used in the deadfall was just what them beavers needed for their dam. They'd learned if they dig the dirt from under a log it's bound to slide into the water, so they dug. It was a channel eighteen inches wide and extendin' under the surface. By kinda underminin' the dirt supportin' the log it caved in and could be swum away with. When they'd gone more'n half way up the log, the stream-end tilted down and the whole thing slid.

I set up and begins rubbin' the circulation into my legs and all the while them beavers are workin' the dirt from the lower

end of the log and it keeps slippin' deeper and deeper until it slides in like a ship that's launched.

BLOODY PETE comes to the surface and begins to swim it into place. Slowly it hits the bank and dam and the water commences to back up. Then it was that them beavers really speeded up. They was a steady stream of 'em swimmin' with sticks and mud. When the water covered the door in the beaver house all hands knocked off. The trout flips from the shallows into deeper water and the pond grows quiet.

I've got the circulation goin' in my right leg, but the left is dead-like and hasn't much feelin'. It acts wooden and almost lets me down when I put my weight on it. I grabs a stick for a cane and climbs back to my pack. First off I gets my rifle and six-gun handy. Next I gets a fire goin'. I thaws myself out and eats a big feed, after which my thoughts turn to Diamond Daisy's fur coat. Any way I figger my job's cut out.

EARLY the next morning I builds me a brush camp and sets up house-keepin' and overhauls my traps. When a man's in love with a girl like Diamond Daisy, he hates to be away from her too long. And it seemed like fate was again' me from the start. Fate, as you might say, kept steppin' in and tryin' to play out my hand.

Only the finest fur would do for Daisy's coat and it takes me longer than I figgers to get it. The limp and the headache I picks up when the deadfall lays me low disappears and I'm myself again when I heads for home.

It takes a day longer because I'm packin' in a heavier load of fur than I figgered. I'm danged near bow-legged when I hits the main street early one morning. And the first cuss I lay eyes on is Bedrock Johnson.

You'd have thought I was a ghost the way he looks at me. I'm reachin' for my gun when he lifts his hands high and comes towards me.

"Listen, No-Shirt," he says, "I done it all right. When a man loves a girl as I loved Daisy he'll stop at nothin' to put a rival out of business. But she was only triffin' with our hearts, No-Shirt. While I was comin' back thinkin' I'd left your dead body under a deadfall she ups and runs off with a whisky-drummer."

I leans weakly again' the nearest buildin' refusin' to believe my own ears. "How'd you escape?" he asks me.

I spills the whole business from start to finish, and he shakes his head from time to time. He ain't a bad sort, Bedrock ain't, when you come to know him. "Golly," he says when I'd finished, "it musta hurt your conscience to have to trap them beavers for Daisy's back after them savin' your life. It was just like doublecrossin' a friend."

"Yeah, I thought of that," I confesses.

"And you what have always been square with your friends," he says, shakin' his head sadly. "Then to have it turn out this way. The whole camp's goin' to give you a horse laugh, No-Shirt. The boys have been tryin' to get somethin' on you for years. And now they've got it. Well, you might as well show your face and get it over."

I shoulders the pack and plods down the main street. Man-and-a-Half Stewart was the first cuss to show up. "Well, I see you got Daisy's fur coat," he says. "Haw! Haw! Haaaaw! I never thought a girl would put anything over on a curly wolf like you."

I scorns his jeerin' and walks on ten feet and when another cuss drops a few words he figgers will bring blushes to my cheeks. Well, sir, the crowd grows, with all kinds of digs at my love affair with Daisy. Finally we're opposite the Aurora and somebody yells. "Here comes the groom, marchin' to his doom!"

"Hey," says another, "are you goin' to send the beaver coat to Daisy as a weddin' present?"

I says nothin' and danged little of that. "The drinks are on you, No-Shirt," another cuss chirps and with that the crowd

roars, and another would-be wit starts singin', "And there was No-Shirt, waitin' at the church. Waitin' at the church."

"Just what are you wolves howlin' about?" I asks. "Who said I ever was engaged to marry Daisy? Listen, gents, I might have made a crack or two when I was likkered up, but it didn't mean nothin'!"

You should've heard the laughter. "You was sober enough when you bought an outfit and went after them beavers," one of them jeered. "Open up your pack, No-Shirt, and let's see Daisy's beaver coat."

"Sure," I says, and then I spills the pelts

on the barroom floor. They was wolf pelts. Some of 'em had teeth marks on the throat where Bloody Pete had done his work, but most of 'em had trap marks on the legs. There wasn't a beaver in the lot.

And right then and there it proved we do a lot of worryin' for nothin'. I'd spent every day on the trail wonderin' how I was goin' to talk Daisy into wearin' wolf instead of beaver. And right then and there, too, No-Shirt McGee's lifelong slogan was borned. It's this: "When it looks like Dame Fortune was stackin' the cards again' you, maybe she's only helpin' you play out a bad hand."

Too Many Chinese

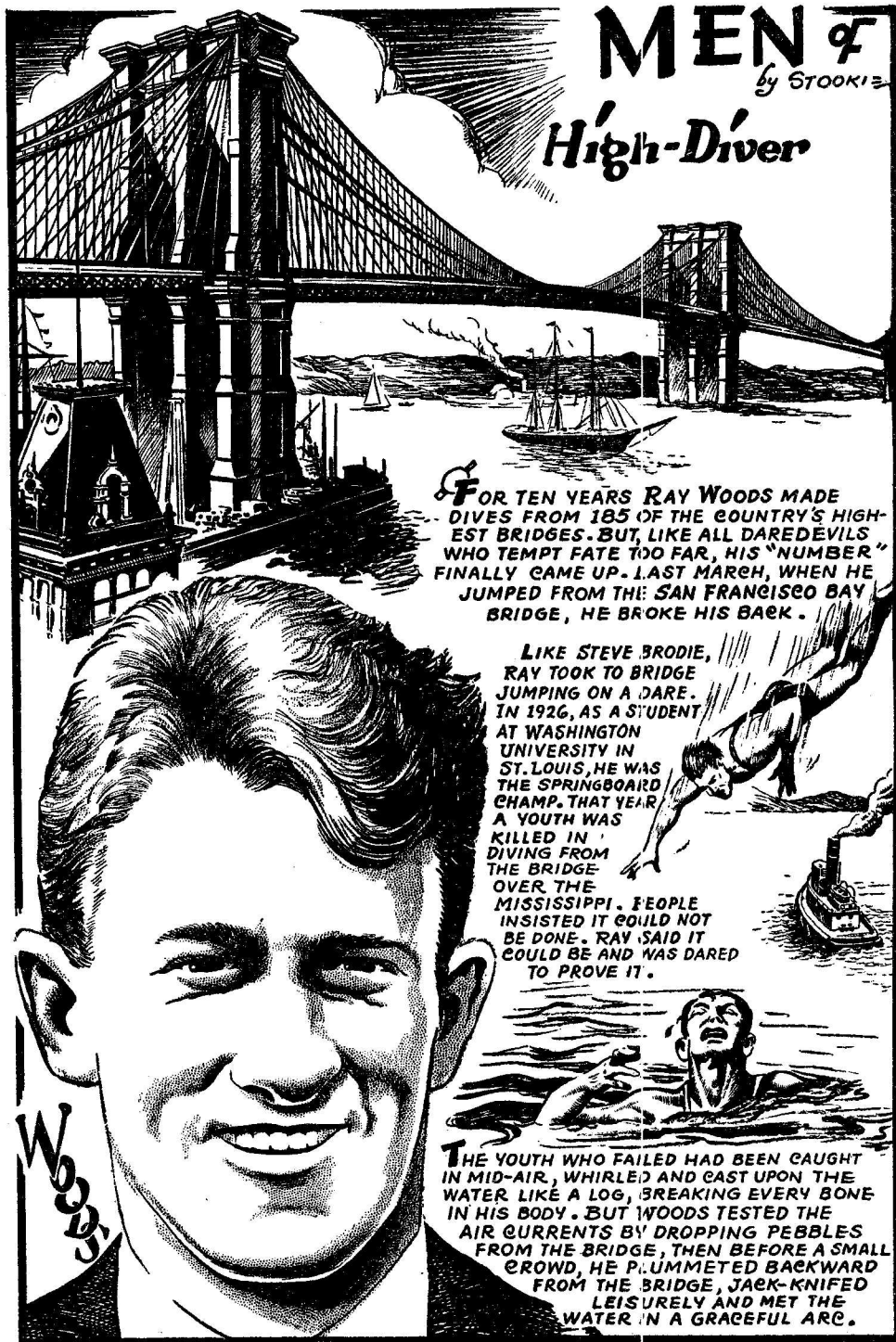
WHEN the Reverend T. R. Malthus died in 1834, Japan was still a dark, feudal empire, as yet unexplored by Lafcadio Hearn, and not yet set to music by Gilbert and Sullivan. It was the Reverend Malthus who, brooding over the turgid humanity of China, postulated that a population multiplies faster than its means of subsistence can be made to; and that when this occurs, the weaker classes must suffer from famine. Unless an increase of population can be checked by "prudential restraint," poverty is inevitable, and the increase will be automatically counterbalanced by deaths from starvation and disease.

For three quarters of a century Malthusianism worked very nicely in China; Chinese were born; Chinese starved. But there came a time when the pat Malthus theory broke down beneath the sheer volume of Chinese breeding. The Chinese just didn't die fast enough. Starvation and famine were softies, and the Chinese were both tough and prolific.

Then the trend of events stepped in. China became a republic, and there began a period of internecine slaughter that proved a lively substitute for starvation in helping to balance birth- and death-rates. But civil war finally ceased—or almost ceased—in the face of China's new determination for unity.

Now, according to Dr. Frank W. Notestein in an address before the International Congress on Population, in Paris, Japan has stepped into the breach. Millions of Chinese may now fall victims to the bullets of war, instead of dying under the auspices of the Reverend Malthus. Is it, perhaps, that there are too many Spaniards, too?

—Eric Sharpe



MEN & by STOOKIE High-Diver

FOR TEN YEARS RAY WOODS MADE DIVES FROM 185 OF THE COUNTRY'S HIGHEST BRIDGES. BUT, LIKE ALL DAREDEVILS WHO TEMPT FATE TOO FAR, HIS "NUMBER" FINALLY CAME UP. LAST MARCH, WHEN HE JUMPED FROM THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY BRIDGE, HE BROKE HIS BACK.

LIKE STEVE BRODIE, RAY TOOK TO BRIDGE JUMPING ON A DARE. IN 1926, AS A STUDENT AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS, HE WAS THE SPRINGBOARD CHAMP. THAT YEAR A YOUTH WAS KILLED IN DIVING FROM THE BRIDGE OVER THE MISSISSIPPI. PEOPLE INSISTED IT COULD NOT BE DONE. RAY SAID IT COULD BE AND WAS DARED TO PROVE IT.

THE YOUTH WHO FAILED HAD BEEN CAUGHT IN MID-AIR, WHIRLED AND CAST UPON THE WATER LIKE A LOG, BREAKING EVERY BONE IN HIS BODY. BUT WOODS TESTED THE AIR CURRENTS BY DROPPING PEBBLES FROM THE BRIDGE, THEN BEFORE A SMALL CROWD, HE PLUMMETED BACKWARD FROM THE BRIDGE, JACK-KNIFED LEISURELY AND MET THE WATER IN A GRACEFUL ARC.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

DARING

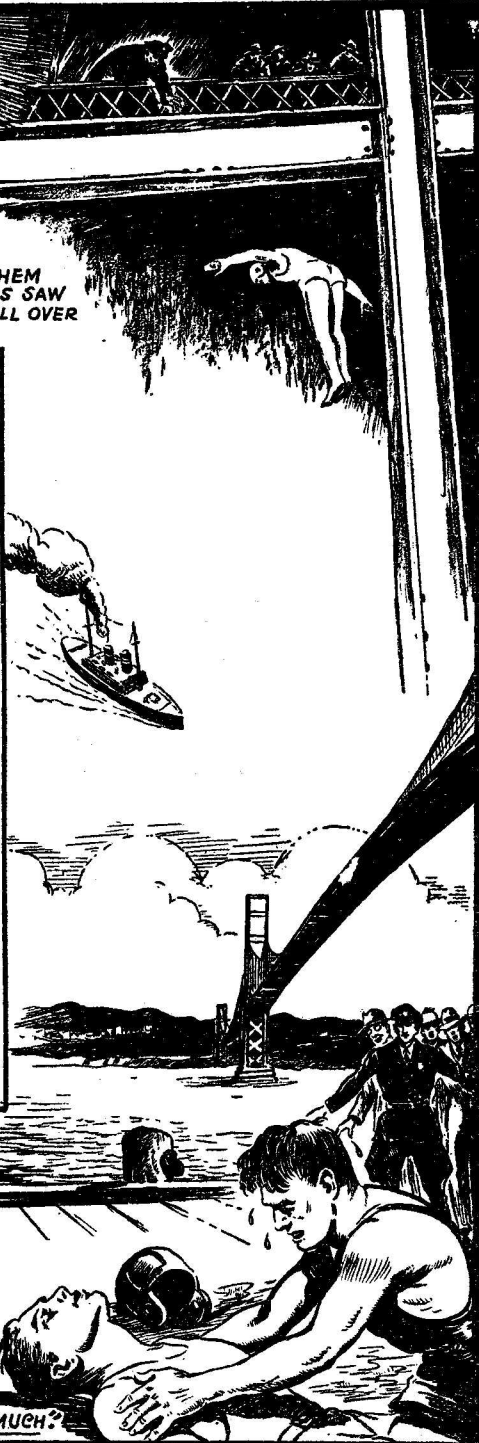
ALLEN

THIS FEAT MADE RAY A HOME-TOWN BRODIE. THEN HE WENT EAST TO DUPLICATE BRODIE AND DIVE FROM BROOKLYN BRIDGE. THE POLICE HOWEVER FORBADE HIM TO RISK HIS NECK AND PUT GUARDS ON THE BRIDGE. RAY ELUDED THEM AND MADE HIS DIVE, BUT ONLY A FEW IDLERS SAW HIM. SO, A FEW DAYS LATER, HE DID IT ALL OVER AGAIN FOR THE REPORTERS!



A FEW MONTHS LATER, WHILE REPAIRING A DIVING TOWER IN KANSAS CITY, WOODS FELL 80 FEET AND BROKE BOTH LEGS. FATE HAD GIVEN HIM A WARNING BUT HE WAS SOON DIVING OFF BRIDGES AGAIN. FATE'S SECOND WARNING CAME WHEN HE LEAPED FROM THE AURORA BRIDGE AT SEATTLE. A TRICKY WIND GUST WHIRLED HIM SO THAT HE HIT FLAT. DOCTORS WERE AMAZED THAT HE LIVED.

EARLY THIS YEAR HE STOOD ON THE TOWERING NEW BRIDGE THAT OVERLOOKS SAN FRANCISCO BAY. WAVING HIS HAND, HE LEAPED. BUT NOW FATE WAS IN EARNEST. WOODS FAILED TO COME OUT OF A JACK-KNIFE. WHEN HE CAME TO, PARALYZED FROM THE WAIST DOWN, WITH A BROKEN BACK, WOODS SAID REFLECTIVELY: "I ARCHED TOO MUCH."



Coming: Dr. George Washington Crile—Adventurous Savant



Blue-White and Perfect

By BORDEN CHASE

BBROADWAY-BRED and wise in the ways of men, especially of those who people that shady mid-town Manhattan half-world and wrest a living by their wits, Smooth Kyle is the ace agent for the Treasury Department. It is his job to run down smugglers and he has done so with amazing success, earning himself a reputation for being fast on the trigger. Smooth is in love with a girl who speaks his own language—tall, blonde, clever Gilda Garland, who once worked for Rod Martell, international crook. Martell, returned from Europe, tells Gilda to get Smooth out of the Federal racket. If she will, Rod Martell will give Smooth a job at five-hundred a week. Martell, it seems, is heading a huge combine that is flooding the country with smuggled diamonds; he is afraid of Smooth and wants him out of the way. He tells Gilda that if Smooth continues as a federal agent it will, sooner or later, mean curtains for him. Gilda, fearing for Smooth's safety, tries to persuade him to leave the service, but Smooth refuses.

FOLLOWING Rod Martell to a Cuba-bound liner, Smooth overhears him talking to a lovely girl named Sonia Clonet.

Martell leaves the boat, but Smooth, convinced that Miss Clonet is a member of the smuggling group, sails for Cuba. Aboard the *Princess Nola* several attempts are made on his life. When they dock in Cuba Sonia Clonet promises Smooth that she is going to get out of the racket she is in. Smooth does not believe her. He promises his steward, Tibbs, that he will go with him a day or two later to see the sights of the island and then he takes a cab for his hotel.

LATER, with the wise Latin who drives his cab, he visits the Havana headquarters of the gang. Posing as a friend of Martell's he talks with Emilio Falero who at first welcomes him as an accomplice and then grows suspicious of him. Smooth leaves to go to the establishment of Gonzales and Company, a store where Sonia Clonet has been employed.

He approaches a taxi and shouts to the driver: "Gonzales and Company. And don't spare the horses!"

This story began in the *Argosy* for September 18

CHAPTER IX

SURPRISE

THEY walked to the car and Gerry sent it spinning through the crowded streets. He turned onto the Prado and stopped near a fair-sized shop where summer dresses were displayed in the window. He pointed and Smooth got out. It was evening and the lights of the Prado were on but the store was still open. A narrow doorway led into the shop and Smooth stood there for a moment before entering. Apparently Gonzales and Company were not doing a very large business. There were no customers in the store and only two saleswomen. One of them came toward Smooth and smiled questioningly.

"Can I help you, *señor*?"

"Sure you can," said Smooth. "Tell Mr. Gonzales a friend of his would like to talk with him."

The girl nodded and hurried toward the rear of the shop. A moment later an elderly gentleman came toward Smooth. He was short and inclined to stoutness. His white linen suit was neatly laundered and pressed. His shirt was fresh and stiff in spite of the warmth of the day. He smiled and bowed to Smooth.

"I am Mr. Gonzales," he said. "You asked for me?"

"I said I was a friend of yours," corrected Smooth. "Where can we talk?"

"Talk? What is it about, if you please?"

"Diamonds," said Smooth quietly.

Juan Gonzales drew a deep breath and a troubled look came to his eyes. He motioned toward a small room at the rear of the store where Smooth could see a wide desk and swivel chair. They walked silently past the racks of dresses and Gonzales closed the door behind them. He pointed to a chair and seated himself at the desk.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it?"

"Have you seen Sonia Clonet today?" asked Smooth.

"No. Not today."

"Does the name Kyle mean anything to

you?" He watched her carefully.

Smooth thought he had never seen a man grow old so quickly. Gonzales' shoulders drooped. The lids of his eyes lowered and he leaned weakly against the back of his chair.

"Then you've spoken with Sonia on the phone?" asked Smooth.

Gonzales nodded. "Yes. A few minutes ago."

"She told you about me?"

"Yes. And now I suppose you have come to take me to jail."

Smooth was amused at the old gentleman's trend of reasoning. It proved more surely than any words that Juan Gonzales was in a business of which he wanted no part. Smooth knew now that he was no more than a pawn. Gonzales and his store were being used as a front for the diamond smugglers. Sonia, of course, was a different matter. She was an important member of the mob.

"Why should I take you to jail?" asked Smooth.

"I don't know," said Gonzales. "I don't know anything. I can't tell you anything. No matter what you do to me—I—I won't say anything."

"You've had your orders," laughed Smooth. "I understand."

"There is nothing I will say—nothing."

"Even if I take you to jail?"

"Nothing!"

Smooth wondered what hold the mob had on Gonzales. The man was frightened—terrified. His hands shook and he stared at Smooth as though expecting him to take a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and lead him away. Smooth suddenly felt a great pity for the old Cuban.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mr. Gonzales," he said. "I know you're mixed up with a bad crowd and I'm afraid you deserve to go to prison. But I don't intend to send you there—if I can possibly avoid it."

"No?"

"All you have to do is answer a few questions. What is the name of—"

The question was never finished. Smooth

heard the latch snap in the door. He stepped aside and his hand lifted to the gun beneath his armpit. None of the salesgirls would venture to come into the storeowner's office without knocking. Smooth knew that. And whoever was opening the door was trying to do it quietly. It swung forward and a man stepped into the room. It was Smooth's acquaintance of a few moments past—Emilio Falero. He looked first from Gonzales to Smooth, then smiled and drew a small tissue-paper package from his pocket.

I SHOULD have known you would come here, Mr. Cameron," Falero said to Smooth. "You seem to be acquainted with all of our centers."

"Why not?" said Smooth.

"Quite true. And perhaps you would like to see some of the stones that are going through in the next shipment?"

"Very much."

Falero put the package on the desk and opened it. He pointed to the stones.

"Nice, aren't they?"

Smooth crossed to the desk and leaned forward to look at the diamonds. His hand was still on the butt of his gun beneath his coat. Something was coming. He didn't know just what it would be. But Falero was going to make the first move. Smooth knew he could beat the dapper Cuban to the draw, and he waited. Meanwhile he pretended to examine the stones.

Gonzales' face was white. The old gentleman opened his mouth as though about to say something but Smooth noticed Falero motion to him to be quiet. A stillness held the room. And suddenly Smooth remembered that Falero had not been alone when he had last seen him. Gerry had said Falero's companion was a knife thrower. The thought turned Smooth's eyes to the door. A man was there—a man who held the tip of a heavy knife loosely between thumb and forefinger. The knife went up and back as Smooth's gun came clear of the leather.

Falero's hand moved out and caught Smooth's elbow blocking the draw. In an

instant Smooth had knocked the hand clear and was bringing the gun into line. But that instant would have been enough for the man with the knife. It was being whipped across his shoulder when a blow from behind knocked him sprawling into the room. And at that moment Smooth fired. The slug spun the knife-thrower and dropped him face downward on the floor.

"Gerry!" cried Smooth. "Nice work, pal!"

The hackman was standing in the doorway looking at the man on the floor. It had been his fist that spoiled the knife work. And now he watched as Smooth swung the gun toward Falero and backed him against the desk. There was a sharpness in Smooth's words that matched the crack of the shot that had dropped the knife man.

"I ought to give it to you, Falero," he said. "But this time you get away with it." He turned to Gonzales and his voice was still hard. "Remember what you've seen, Pop. And take my advice—get out of Cuba."

He slipped the gun into its leather and walked out of the room. Gerry followed him past the staring salesgirls and into the street. He headed for his taxi but Smooth shook his head.

"Leave it there," he said. "Take a walk around the block and pick it up later. Don't get mixed up in this."

"Mixed up in it?" said Gerry. "I'm in up to my neck. The best thing I can do is make a report to the police."

"String along with me," said Smooth. "The police don't have to know everything—yet."

"I'm not looking for twenty years in a cell."

"You won't get it," said Smooth. "Take my word for it until I can prove I'm right."

"But what about that guy in there with a bullet in his chest? Won't the police ask questions?"

"I'll bet you a hundred to a dime Gonzales reports this as an attempted robbery. Falero will back him up and say he killed the mar. The police won't even

know I've been in the store—or you either.”

“Personally, I think I'm crazy,” laughed Gerry. “But I'll play it through.”

“That's great!” said Smooth and handed him a few bills. “Call me in the morning and we'll go places.”

“What places?”

“How do I know?” said Smooth. “I'll have to think them up tonight.”

AFTER a late dinner in the hotel restaurant Smooth walked about the narrow streets wondering what his next move would be. He had mailed a detailed report of his activities to his District Supervisor and in it he had included a request for more funds. If Gerry Portela was going to work with him here in Cuba, it would be well to have enough money to pay him for his time. And Smooth knew the best friend he could possibly have would be a close-mouthed hackman.

As he walked, Smooth smiled, remembering the letter he had just written to Gilda. In it he had attempted to justify his actions. And he had asked her to be a good girl until he returned to New York. He could picture Gilda's face when she read the note and he was just as well satisfied he would not be within sound of her voice at the time.

There was a movie on one of the side streets and Smooth decided it might be a good place to reflect on the next move against Rod Martell and his crowd. He tossed a coin to the cashier and went inside. For the next two hours he watched a succession of pictures in which suave villains vied in Spanish with bold heroes for the love of a dark-haired senorita, and when he came out of the theatre he was still in doubt about his next step.

He stopped at the hotel desk and asked if there were any messages. The clerk handed him a sealed envelope and Smooth stuffed it into his pocket. He took the elevator to his room and stretched out on the bed. Then he opened the envelope and a low whistle came from his lips. It was a note from Sonia.

“Please come to my room”—the note read—“when you get back to the hotel. The number is 724, just down the hall from you. I'm sure you will be interested in what I have to tell you.”

Smooth reached for the telephone and asked for Sonia's room. There was a short wait and a woman's voice answered.

“This you, Sonia?” asked Smooth.

“Yes. Please hurry.”

There was the click of a receiver being replaced on the hook and Smooth stared at the phone while a puzzled frown touched the corners of his eyes. The voice might have been Sonia's—but it had sounded slightly lower. He wasn't sure. However, there had been an urgency in the voice that lifted him from the bed and started him toward the door. As he passed the mirror of the dresser he stopped.

His coat was rumpled and his shirt was slightly the worse for wear. He walked to the dresser and selected another. Then he combed his hair carefully and changed into a light suit that had been returned by the valet.

Even as he dressed Smooth smiled at himself in the mirror. Sonia Clonet was a beautiful woman—no argument about that. She was also a woman who had tried to kill him. But Smooth was a man. And because of this he wanted to look his best when he saw her.

“Just a sucker for a big pair of eyes,” he said aloud. “If Gilda knew I was dropping in to see that dame tonight there would be fireworks. Case, or no case, Gilda would raise Cain.”

HE walked quickly along the hall and wondered just what Sonia would have to say this evening. It was late—hardly the hour for a social call—but she had insisted he hurry. Perhaps, thought Smooth, she had added the whole thing up and decided to play ball. There would be a nice amount of money awarded to the person who turned these smugglers in. That is, if the person were a civilian. Treasury Agents shared no part of these awards. And in addition, Sonia had been

badly frightened aboard the *Princess Nola*. Smooth knew she had not expected murder to be a part of her work. And when Captain Sutherland had been swept over the side the shock had been a great one.

Yes, there was a good chance Sonia had decided to cross the mob and get out from under while she could. And it would wind the case up in a hurry for Smooth. She could tell him the names of every man in on the deal—how they operated—where the stones came from—how they were brought into the country. As he thought of these things Smooth hurried his steps. At the end of the hall he found number 724 and knocked gently.

"Come in," said a quiet voice.

Smooth swung back the door. The room was larger than his, but it was of the same general plan. The ceiling was high. At the far side of the room was a tall window that looked out on a star-filled sky. The lamps had not been lit and the only light in the room came from the bright Havana moon that rode lazily over the sleeping city. Smooth caught the heady odor of perfume. And something registered in his mind. Something—he could not tell what it was—but *something* was different. Something was changed. He closed the door behind him and walked a few paces into the room.

A woman was standing at the window looking out into the night and her negligee revealed a figure that raised Smooth's eyebrows. In her right hand she held a Spanish fan that was opened, blocking any view Smooth might have had of her face and neck, and it moved slowly as though beckoning him closer.

"I've seen pretty pictures," said Smooth, "but this wins the prize."

There was no answer and he started across the room. A light breeze drifted in through the window and touched the lace of the negligee. Smooth wondered if he had ever before seen anything quite so beautiful as this figure that was silhouetted against the stars. He lifted his hands and put them on her shoulders. He laughed lightly.

"Is this all for me?" he asked. And there was a touch of mockery in his tone.

"All for you, Handsome!"

Smooth stepped back at the sound of the voice. But quick as he was it was not fast enough to avoid a hand that swung toward his chin as the girl turned.

"Gilda!" he cried.

"Surprised, darling?" said Gilda and stepped closer.

The fan was tossed to the floor and her hand flattened against Smooth's cheek. He ducked and grabbed at her wrists.

"Take it easy, Beautiful!" he cried. "Give a guy a chance to explain!"

GILDA reached for a robe that was draped across the back of a nearby chair. She slipped her arms into the sleeves and drew the folds of it about her. Then she seated herself and crossed her legs. One toe tapped impatiently on the tiled floor as she stared at Smooth.

"Think fast, Smooth," she said. "If you can talk your way out of this, you're a magician."

"But what are you doing in Havana?" asked Smooth. "I only arrived today and—"

"You thought little Gilda was walking tearfully along Broadway looking for her missing Smoothie," finished Gilda. "Well, always remember—Handsomeness—where you go, Gilda follows."

"It doesn't make sense," protested Smooth. "What are you doing here in Cuba?"

"Playing Juliet on the balcony for a chump who ought to have a nurse."

"Where's Sonia?"

"We'll take that up later. Just now, it's your turn to answer questions."

"But—"

"Just what did you expect to happen here in Sonia's room?"

"Not this," said Smooth ruefully.

"I'll agree on that. But keep talking."

"Well, I thought perhaps Sonia had decided to tell me something about the mob. You know—play ball and—"

"Is that what they call it in Havana?"

"Ah, be nice," said Smooth. "Sonia is an important part of this case. The mob trusts her. I'm sure they do."

"So do I," said Gilda. "About as far as I could throw a steamshovel."

"I know how you feel, Gilda. But on the level I was only working at my trade. That dame doesn't mean a thing to me. Not a thing."

"No—not a thing," said Gilda. Her toe tapped faster on the floor. "You're just a Boy Scout doing your good turn for the day."

"You win," said Smooth and lifted his hands as though in surrender. "But would you mind telling me how you happen to be in Sonia Clonet's room? And will you tell me how you got her to write that note?"

"That was her idea," said Gilda shortly.

"I give up. The more you talk the less I learn."

"That goes double," snapped Gilda. "I'm still waiting to hear why you decided to play Romeo at this hour of the night."

Smooth looked out of the window. "I wasn't playing Romeo. It was a business call."

"Business, eh? With your hair all combed, your pants pressed, a clean shirt—"

"Do you expect me to walk around looking like a tramp?"

"I expect an explanation."

"So do I," said Smooth. "I want to know why you're in Havana."

Gilda looked at Smooth and a sudden moisture touched her eyes. She lifted her hand and beckoned him. He crossed the room and sat on the floor beside her chair. When she moved her hand toward him he ducked and grinned. Her fingers rested on his shoulder and Gilda looked down into his eyes. For a moment she did not speak.

"Why are you here?" Smooth repeated.

"Because I love you, Smooth," she said.

"Because I'd die if—if you were killed."

"What makes you think I'm going to be killed?"

"What makes me think there's a moon in the sky?"

"It's a swell moon, Gilda," said Smooth. "But that doesn't answer my question."

GILDA'S fingers played with the tip of Smooth's ear. She pinched it lightly. For a time her eyes held steadily to his. Then they moved slowly, taking in one feature after another and there was no hardness in them. They weren't the cold, wise eyes that Broadway knew so well. Gilda had taken off her armor, now.

"Do you think she is very beautiful?" she asked. "Do you, Smooth?"

"Beautiful?" said Smooth. "Who's beautiful?"

"Sonia Clonet."

"Oh—her! She's not a bad-looking dame but I can't get excited about her."

"Faker!" said Gilda. "She was twisting you around her little finger."

"Don't be a kid. That gal thought she had a sucker and tried to kick me around. A few days ago she put me on a spot—and you think I fell for her?"

"On a spot? What happened?"

Smooth told about the sailor who had tried to kill him with the falling boom. Then he told of the night when Sonia had left him at the rail of the ship where Pedro Blanco could stun him and toss him over the side. Gilda sat quietly through the story but as Smooth told of his trip to Sonia's home and the affair with the knife-thrower, her eyes lost their softness. And slowly that all-wise expression came to her face. When Smooth looked up to her he saw the Gilda Garland who had matched wits with the fastest thinkers of Broadway the wise-money crowd. And he knew behind that white forehead a lightning mind was matching the pieces of his story with what Gilda already knew.

"Why don't you open up, Gilda?" he asked. "You know the answers. Ever since I started on this case you've known more about it than I do. Why don't you help me?"

"I told you not to take the case," she said. "When we were in New York I

warned you it would be a tough one. But you didn't take my advice."

"I can't pick my cases. Whatever the Department hands out—that's what I take. But I did think the girl I intend to marry would give me a hand instead of working on the other side."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why shouldn't I? You tried to hook me up with Rod Martell. And now you're here in Cuba—in Sonia's room. And I know she's one of the mob. Don't you think that needs a little explaining?"

Gilda smiled and looked through the open window to the moon that was big and round and heavy with gold. Sometimes when Smooth talked to her it was difficult to remember he was a Treasury Agent with a dangerous reputation. He didn't seem like a man acknowledged by every smart crook in the country as the fastest-thinking Federal in the business—a man who looked for and enjoyed a gun fight. Instead, he seemed a whimsical youngster with a smile that instilled confidence and affection—someone to protect and shelter from any harm that might come to him.

CHAPTER X

GILDA TAKES A HAND

GILDA had known many men before she met Smooth. But she had never been in love. When it came, it tossed all her hard-learned rules into the discard. She forgot that men—all men—were enemies. She forgot she had promised herself that she would use them, hurt them, laugh at them and forget them. All that was gone and one thought was uppermost in her mind. Regardless of what might happen to her, she must take care of Smooth. Nothing must hurt him.

When Rod Martell had warned her the mob would kill Smooth if necessary, her one idea had been to prevent this. She had tried to keep Smooth from taking the case—and she had failed. When Rod told her Smooth was on the *Princess Nola* bound for Havana, she had asked Martell for another chance. The gambler had been

noncommittal. He told Gilda there was someone running the mob who gave the orders. What would happen on the ship was out of his control. But he agreed to speak with the boss and stall for time if Smooth should reach Cuba alive.

Gilda had been forced to play along. She promised Martell she would meet Smooth in Cuba and lead him off on a dozen wrong chases. In effect, she had become part of Martell's crowd. Her job was to keep Smooth from learning too much. In return Martell promised that Smooth would not be killed. It was a peculiar arrangement made possible only by Gilda's reputation. Martell knew Gilda would even the score if Smooth were hurt. He also knew the Treasury Department would tear things wide open to find the ones responsible if Smooth Kyle were killed. For these reasons Martell was glad to have Gilda help in any way possible. But he had admitted that someone bigger than he gave the final orders.

As for Gilda—years of association with the fast-moving crowd that made a living over gambling tables had taught her to respect them as dangerous enemies. Her confidence in Smooth's ability to take care of himself was lessened when she thought of his willingness to take chances. And it wasn't wise to take chances with Rod Martell. If it were possible, Gilda would gladly tell Smooth and the other agents of the Department all she knew. She would like nothing better than to see Martell and his mob dropped quickly into a Federal jail. But Gilda realized she did not have enough information to secure a conviction. She had no idea who this "boss" might be—the man from whom Martell took orders. By telling Smooth what little she knew she would be simply sending him into trouble. By stringing along with Martell she might stall things until another agent was assigned to the job. Anything was better than nothing. And Gilda took what the gods offered.

"Do you want me to help you, Smooth?" she asked at length.

"You know I do."

"If we break this case will you quit the Department?"

"Perhaps. But why bring that up now?"

"Oh—just thinking. If I'm ever going to be Mrs. Kyle I'd like it to happen before my ninety-first birthday."

"They marry people in Cuba," Smooth laughed. "How's about it?"

"Act your age. I want a Broadway wedding."

"Then you'll get one just as soon as I catch up with Martell and his heels. And that shouldn't take long."

"How much have you learned in Havana?"

"Very little," Smooth admitted. "But if you'll open up and tell me what you know, I *might* get to first base."

"There isn't much I can tell you," said Gilda. "Martell knows you're on this case and he was willing to do business with you."

"And you told him—?"

"That I didn't think you would," said Gilda. "I'll admit I tried to make you act sensible and take his offer. But—"

"What else do you know?"

"That's about all," said Gilda. "Martell told me you had come to Havana and I followed along."

SMOOTH lifted Gilda's hands and studied the long slender fingers. Her story was direct but it didn't make sense. He knew Gilda was telling him only part of the truth. But he could not understand why she hid things from him.

"How did you happen to find Sonia?" he asked cautiously.

"Through Martell. He told me you'd probably be with her."

"Nice guy!" snapped Smooth.

"He was almost right, wasn't he?"

"Now don't start that again," said Smooth. "We're talking business."

"All right. What's next?"

"I don't know," said Smooth. "Any ideas?"

"A few. But first, suppose you tell me just how much you've learned."

"I've told you."

Smooth looked closely at Gilda as he spoke. He sensed the evasion in her answers—knew she was stalling. He'd seen Gilda in this role before when she was matching wits with a man. The more he realized she was on guard, the more he was determined to be cautious. Gilda had always liked money. She made no pretense to the contrary. Perhaps her desire for big money had caused her to throw in with Martell and his mob. Perhaps she expected to make a quick take and claim the money as some she had always had in the bank. Smooth didn't know. And he was worried. As a result he decided to tell Gilda nothing.

"I've told you all I know," he repeated. "But I still don't know what happened to Sonia."

"It's a long story," laughed Gilda.

"Let's hear it. I've got lots of time."

"Well—after you left I flew to Miami and then took another plane across to Havana. I knew Sonia Clonet was stopping at the Sevilla—so here I am."

Smooth said nothing. There was something wrong with Gilda's story. It didn't quite add up. And when he started checking the timing, he realized what was wrong. Smooth had not decided to live at the Sevilla until the *Princess Nola* was ready to dock. He remembered Tibbs had made the suggestion while the bags were being packed. That was early this morning. And he was sure Sonia had come to the Sevilla to be close to him. How then could Martell have told Gilda where he was? How could Martell have known about it two days previous? It didn't make sense.

"Martell told you where to find Sonia?"

"Yes," said Gilda. "Don't you believe me?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"None at all."

"Then suppose you tell me what happened to Sonia?"

Gilda laughed. "She invited me to her room. When I arrived she was writing that cute little note to you. I happened to see it—and see the envelope, too. So—"

"So what?"

"I socked her."

"What?"

"Yes. And I hurt the back of my hand," said Gilda. She pointed to a bruise on her knuckles, then held the hand close to Smooth's lips. "Kiss it, and make it all better."

"Of all the wacky dames in the world, you take the prize!" cried Smooth. "What made you sock her?"

"What's your guess?"

"I haven't got one!" he snapped. "But it's dollars to dimes Sonia was going to tell me all she knew—and you spoiled it."

"Tell you—or show you?"

"Don't be a chump!"

"Well, it's not too late. Maybe she'll still tell you."

"Yeah—by carrier pigeon. That dame is probably on her way to China. I'll never see her again."

"Oh, go powder your nose," said Gilda.

"You look silly when you're excited."

"A great help you turned out to be," he said. "I spend time and trouble working on a dame that can tell me all the things I want to know, and you sock her in the nose and chase her."

"Who chased her?"

"You did!"

"Don't be a baby," laughed Gilda. "I told you to powder your nose. Maybe she'll help you."

A SUDDEN thought came to Smooth. He jumped to his feet and hurried to the door leading to the bath. He opened it and snapped on the light. Sonia was there—seated on a bath stool. Her position was not at all dignified and the eyes that met Smooth's were harder than glass. A towel was wrapped about her mouth and knotted tightly behind her head. Another, torn into strips and fashioned into a rude binding was circled about her waist, pinning her arms to her sides. Her ankles were tied and there was a binding about her knees. The whole affair had been done with thoroughness and the knots were tied efficiently although

they were hardly models of neatness. The final touch, and one that would have told Smooth the job was done by a woman if he had not already known, was the manner in which Sonia was held in place. Her head had been forced through the shoulder straps of a silk slip and this strong but lace-trimmed garment was knotted to a hook in the wall. Sonia Clonet would have hanged herself if she tried to wriggle toward the door.

"Well, I'll be darned!" cried Smooth, trying not to laugh.

He fumbled at the knots. Seconds passed, then minutes. Gilda had dampened the knotted towels and Smooth could make little headway. While he worked Gilda stood in the doorway and watched. At length he decided to use his knife and slipped the blade under the lashings.

"Her eyes *are* beautiful," said Gilda when Smooth took the towel from Sonia's face. "Too bad one of them is closed."

"Is that nice?" asked Smooth. "Gilda—why don't you learn to act like a lady?"

"Nuts, darling," said Gilda quietly. "Rub Sonia's wrists. She's been here for a few hours and I'm afraid she hasn't been very comfortable."

"Comfortable?" said Smooth. "She's ready to faint."

"There's water handy. Sprinkle some on her face. In fact, it might be better if you filled the tub and dropped her into it."

"Never—mind—the tub," stammered Sonia.

"She says never mind the tub," repeated Gilda sweetly.

"I heard her," said Smooth.

He helped Sonia to her feet and walked with her to the other room. Here he arranged some cushions in an easy chair and Sonia seated herself. She was dressed in a white flannel sport suit that had been very smart before the towels had creased it and crushed the material out of shape. There was a run in one stocking that started at the ankle and her white shoes were scuffed. Her hair was in disarray and she brushed it from her forehead with the back of a hand that trembled.

"Shall I get you a brandy?" asked Smooth anxiously.

"Always the gentleman," snapped Gilda. "Get two, while you're at it."

"I don't want anything," said Sonia. "And the sooner both of you get out of this room the better I'll like it."

"Now fancy that," said Gilda. "I come all the way from New York to pay the girl a friendly visit, and she orders me out of the room."

"Lay off, Gilda!" said Smooth. "You've caused enough trouble for one evening."

"In that case I'll look at the moon while you children talk," said Gilda. "The room is so large it won't seem crowded with three of us here."

"Havana isn't large enough to suit me, with you in town," said Sonia.

"Hold everything!" said Smooth. "There are a few questions I'd like to ask you, Sonia. And the first one is about your note to me. Why did you write it?"

"She was waiting for a street car," said Gilda, "and she thought you might like to wait with her."

"I'm talking to Sonia," said Smooth. "She'll give the answers."

"That's what you think!" snapped Sonia.

"Now don't let this get you off on the wrong track," said Smooth. "Gilda is a swell gal but sometimes she goes a bit nutty. I think she was cropped on her head when she was young."

"But not hard enough," said Sonia.

Gilda smiled. "You say the sweetest things."

"Be quiet!" yelled Smooth. "I'm talking to Sonia."

"I wouldn't think of interrupting."

"Then please stop talking."

"I haven't said a word, darling," said Gilda. She turned to Sonia and smiled. "You don't mind if I call him darling?"

"Call him anything you want. But get it over and get out."

"Quaint, isn't she?" said Gilda lightly. "You meet the strangest people in your line, Smooth. So very, very interesting."

"Now listen, Gilda," said Smooth. "Fun

is fun—but this happens to be business."

"Of course, dear. Go right ahead."

"Save yourself a lot of trouble and forget it," said Sonia. "I've got nothing to say to you, Smooth."

"I think you're making a mistake, Sonia," said Smooth.

"So do I," agreed Gilda. "Smooth is a delightful boy to talk with. So sympathetic—so understanding."

"I give up!" cried Smooth. "For two cents I'd toss you into the hall, Gilda."

"See?" said Gilda. She smiled at Sonia. "He loves me."

"This may all be very funny to you," said Sonia. "But I'm not enjoying it. Suppose you both clear out of here."

"We might just as well," said Smooth disgustedly. "Little Gilda has certainly jammed the works tonight." He crossed to the door and motioned to Gilda. "Come on—let's go!"

"But I'm not going anywhere," said Gilda. "I'm hardly dressed for the street. Besides—this negligee belongs to Sonia."

"Keep it," said Sonia. "It's worth it to get rid of you."

"Aren't you the darling," said Gilda sweetly. "But I wouldn't think of such a thing."

"Oh, go take a jump in the lake—both of you," said Smooth. "Give me a ring in the morning, Gilda. We'll have breakfast in the hotel."

He slammed the door as Gilda threw him a kiss. Sonia said nothing but looked inquiringly at Gilda. The tall blonde walked to a mirror and stared at her reflection thoughtfully. Sonia laughed shortly.

"If you're trying to think of a few cute remarks," she said, "don't bother on my account. I've heard all I want tonight."

GILDA swung to face her. There was no lightness nor laughter in her eyes now. They were cold. Hard. A masklike firmness settled about her lips. She moved closer to Sonia.

"Skip it!" she snapped. "What you want doesn't count, Bright Eyes. Now

you're going to hear a few things I didn't have time to say before."

"I don't understand."

"You will before I'm finished," said Gilda. She seated herself on the edge of the bed and tapped an insistent forefinger against Sonia's elbow. "You and I are due for a showdown. You're a nice kid but you're out of your class. When you tied up with Rod Martell you walked right in over your head. And unless you're smarter than I think you are, you're due to get drowned."

"Thanks for nothing," snapped Sonia. "I've managed to take care of my affairs very nicely without your help. I think I can still do that little thing."

"Sure you can. But you're not going to."

"Why not?"

"Because I've met sweet-faced dames like you before and most of them spelled trouble. But if you think you can put Smooth Kyle on a spot and get away with it—you're crazy."

"Just where do you fit into this deal?" asked Sonia.

"That's something for you to worry about. But I'll tell you this much—from now on you leave Smooth Kyle alone. And those orders come from Rod Martell."

"Do you work for him?"

"Send him a cable and find out," snapped Gilda.

"Maybe I will."

"Suit yourself. And as for the rest of the deal, you can keep right on with your work and smuggle diamonds until you're fifty. It doesn't mean a thing to me. But leave Smooth alone if you don't want trouble in large helpings."

"You said that before. If you've nothing else to say I wish you'd get out of my room."

"Sorry," said Gilda. "This is my room tonight. You can have it back tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I'm not going to bother climbing into my clothes. I'm going to bed. Help yourself to a comfortable chair if you like."

"You mean you're going to—"

"Good night!" said Gilda.

She threw back the covers and pounded a dent in the pillow. Next she tossed the dressing gown over a chair and kicked off the slippers. She stretched, yawned, climbed into the bed and closed her eyes.

"You've certainly got plenty of nerve," said Sonia angrily. "If this is your idea of—"

The telephone bell rang and Gilda stretched an arm toward the instrument.

"Hello," she said. "Yes, this is Miss Clonet's room. . . . No, this isn't Sonia. It's Gilda. . . . Oh, hello, Rod. I thought I recognized your voice. . . . Yes, she's here. . . . Well, I suppose I can. . . . All right. Goodbye."

She hung up and swung her feet to the floor. Again she stretched and rubbed at her eyes.

"No rest for the wicked," she said. "That was Rod Martell. He wants to see me, so I guess you get your bed after all."

"Where is he?" asked Sonia.

"Downstairs in the lobby. He'll see you in the morning."

"But I thought he was in New York."

"So did I. But I suppose he followed me here."

Gilda dressed as quickly as possible and Sonia watched her in silence. She was wearing a white sharkskin outfit that suited her blonde beauty perfectly. The dress was well cut with a sun-back and narrow shoulder straps. Over it Gilda slipped a short Eton jacket of the same material. The sandals were of white linen and her initials were embroidered in the corner of her linen handbag. A few dabs with her powder puff and a last glance in the mirror sent her to the door. She turned and looked at Sonia.

"Thanks for the use of your room, Honey," she said. "And I'd advise you to put a cold compress on that eye."

MARTELL was waiting in the lobby and he got up from his chair as Gilda approached. His cheeks were drawn and he looked tired but there was a neat-

ness about the man that was characteristic of Rod Martell, the gambler. He lifted Gilda's hand to his lips and nodded approval of her dress.

"Sorry to bother you at this late hour," he said. "But I thought you might be glad to see me."

"I am," said Gilda quickly. "Where can we talk?"

"There's a café just a few blocks away," said Martell. "A nice little place on Calle Villegas. Shall we go there?"

"That suits me," said Gilda and followed Martell to the street.

A car was waiting and Martell spoke quietly to the driver. They rolled east and Martell turned to smile at Gilda.

"I notice you located Sonia," he said. "Was she surprised to see you?"

"Very," said Gilda. "But I can't understand how you arrived in Cuba so quickly. I received a cable from you this morning telling me to get in touch with Sonia Clonet at the Sevilla. It's only a few hours after midnight and—here you are. How did you do it?"

"I used one of the regular passenger planes to Miami and then hired an independent to bring me across. The whole trip took less than ten hours."

"Any special reason for the speed?"

"A very good one," said Martell. "I had to see someone to keep Smooth from being killed."

"And did you?"

"We'll talk about that later."

The car stopped near a small café and Martell helped Gilda to the sidewalk. He found a table in a corner and gave an order to a deferential waiter. When glasses had been put on the table he lifted his in salute to Gilda and touched it to his lips. Then he leaned forward.

"How did you get along with Sonia?" he asked.

"Great," said Gilda. "I blacked her eye."

Martell laughed. "I thought something like that might happen. But I'd advise you to be careful, Gilda. Sonia isn't a fool."

"The devil with Sonia," said Gilda. "I want to know why your rascals tried to kill

Smooth Kyle aboard the *Princess Nola*."

Martell shrugged. "I couldn't help that. I asked the boss to lay off but evidently Smooth was learning too much. There was a chance to make it look like an accident so—"

"The boss?" said Gilda sharply. "Who is he?"

"As I told you before—that's *my* business."

"But I thought you agreed to give me a chance? You told me Smooth wouldn't be hurt if I kept him from learning too much. And today he walked into a knife man here in Cuba. Is that the way you're going to run this deal?"

"That's why I'm here, Gilda. The boss told me Smooth walked into Sonia's house and learned more than was healthy. He made a fool of a fellow named Falero—kidded him into thinking Smooth was one of the boys. Then he backed old Gonzales into a corner."

"Gonzales?"

"The fellow who owns the shop where Sonia works. He's a nice old chap but stupid. I'm afraid he won't be with us long."

"Nice people!" said Gilda. "And what about Falero?"

"He may be missing, too. The boss doesn't like fools."

"Maybe not. But he's acting like one."

"Yes?"

"You know he is," said Gilda evenly. "I've got a few friends, Rod. And so has Smooth. If he gets hurt they won't stop until you and the rest of the boys are sitting in a sack in the river."

"I believe you, Gilda."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"I'm trying to. Please believe me."

"How about Sonia Clonet? Is she going to be among the missing, too?"

"I'm not sure. The boss may decide to make a change and put in a new girl." Martell grinned. "Would you like the job?"

"I might surprise you and take it," said Gilda.

"And the boss might surprise you—and accept."

"In the meanwhile, what happens here in Cuba?"

"That depends upon Smooth," said Martell. "If he learns too much—"

"Suppose I show you a way to take him off the case?"

"Great! That's all we want. And we'll pay to get it."

"You're darn right you will," said Gilda. She leaned closer to Martell. "Here's an idea that may work. Smooth knows that Sonia, Gonzales, Falero and a sailor named Blanco are part of your crowd. I think he imagines you are the boss. Now if you can spare one or two more men and a few diamonds, I think I can wind things up in a hurry."

"We can spare those things very nicely," said Martell. "But keep talking."

"Suppose Sonia were caught smuggling diamonds into the States. And suppose she confessed that Blanco was helping her. Then in her confession she could implicate Gonzales and Falero. If one or two more men were implicated, it would appear as though the whole ring had been caught. You could disappear for a while and the case would be marked closed."

"You mean let Sonia and the others go to jail?"

"Why not? It's better than getting killed. And that's what you intend to do with them."

Martell smiled thoughtfully. "You're clever, Gilda. I'm glad you're working with me instead of against me."

"Don't kid yourself that I like it," snapped Gilda. "I'm doing it for just one reason—and you know his name."

"I like that idea," said Martell. "I think I can improve upon it, though. If Smooth thought I were dead—"

"You will be if you try to cross me."

"As I said—if Smooth thought I were dead he might be convinced the ring was broken. He'd have six or seven convictions, a few stones, and that would be the end of it."

"Well—"

"I'm going to submit that idea to the boss. If he likes it, I'll get in touch with you and we can work out the details. In the meanwhile, try to keep Smooth busy. Keep him out of trouble."

"That's like trying to keep a duck out of water," said Gilda. "Sometimes I can't understand why I love that guy."

"I can," said Martell. "It would be one of the greatest pleasures of my life to toss him over the walls of Morro Castle. I'd enjoy watching the sharks make a breakfast of him. But—I can't help respecting the fool."

CHAPTER XI

THE TOUR

SMOOTH was digging heartily into a grapefruit when Gilda joined him in the patio of the hotel. He waved his spoon at her and pointed to the opposite chair which was vacant. She seated herself and looked with interest at the appointments of this breakfast nook. A fountain splashed over a nearby rock garden and two huge green pottery frogs stared at it in glazed-eyed wonder. A wide, striped awning was hung from Moorish lances and at times birds swooped beneath it to drink at the small pool. In reed cages that hung in profusion about the walls bright-colored songsters vied with their wild mates and put them to shame. A breeze drifted down from the tops of the adjoining walls and crackled the palm fronds. A compelling scent came from the scarlet flowers near the water and it mingled pleasingly with the aromatic tang of freshly-brewed coffee.

"Something like Agua Caliente, isn't it Smooth," said Gilda.

"Very much," he agreed.

"Remember what happened there?"

"Sure. You kissed me for the first time."

"I did not. You did the kissing."

"What's the difference?"

"Plenty. But I wasn't thinking of that."

"No? What, then?"

"I was thinking of the fellow who almost shot the top of your head off."

"Nice subject for the breakfast table," laughed Smooth. "Can't you think of anything more pleasant?"

"Not while you go chasing smugglers."

"I'm not chasing them today."

"How come?"

"I'm going sightseeing. Tibbs is going to show me the town."

"Tibbs? Who's he?" asked Gilda.

"He was my steward on the *Princess Nola*. Funny little fellow."

"But how is he going to show you Havana?"

"He lives here. This trip he got a leave of absence and is going to spend some time at home. Today he's going to show me some of the interesting spots here."

"I didn't know you went in for sightseeing."

"Oh, I like to get a general idea of the layout of the city when I expect to spend any time in a place."

"How long do you expect to be in Havana?"

"*Quien sabe?*"

"*Quien who?*"

"That's Spanish. It means, 'who knows?'"

"Cute," said Gilda. "I let you out of my sight for a week and you go Spanish on me."

"I'm just a gypsy at heart."

"Yes—with a fondness for brunettes."

"Nix! Don't start that again. And by the way—where did you sleep last night?"

"In a very pleasant room on the sixth floor. Come down and see me some time. The view from the window is lovely."

"Go jump in the fountain," said Smooth.

"When do we start this sightseeing business?"

"*We?*" said Smooth. "Did I say we were going?"

"No. It was my idea. Don't you want me?"

"Glad to have you," said Smooth. "But I thought you might be busy."

"Doing what?"

"That's just what I'd like to know."

"Listen, Handsome—my job in Cuba is to keep you out of trouble."

"Really? Does it pay well?"

"I'm satisfied."

A WAITER came to take Gilda's order. She asked for fruit juice, rolls and coffee. Smooth grinned and started on his bacon and eggs.

"On a diet?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I notice you prefer thin girls."

"Let's talk about something else," he said quickly. "Have you any ideas how I can catch up with Martell and his pals?"

"Well, you might ask Martell. He's in town this week."

"*What?*"

"Surprised?"

"Naturally. When did you see him?"

"Last night. He still wants you to work for him."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I said you would drop in to see him in a day or two," lied Gilda.

"Day or two?" What's the matter with today?"

"He'll be busy until Monday."

"What's his address?"

"I'll tell you Monday."

"Be nice, Gilda," said Smooth. "We aren't going to break this case if you clown around. Just give me a lead and I know something will happen."

"So do I," laughed Gilda. "And you'll be on the receiving end."

When the meal was over Smooth walked with Gilda to the lobby. Here he found Tibbs waiting near the desk. The usual aroma of good tobacco hung like a mantle about the steward. The little Englishman was carefully dressed in whites and he bowed deferentially when Smooth introduced him to Gilda. They talked casually for a few moments and then Tibbs suggested they get started. He wanted to show them the more beautiful spots of the city proper and then drive out of town. He suggested a taxi that could be hired for the day and Smooth agreed.

In front of the hotel Tibbs motioned to a driver who stood near a fairly-modern car. There was a short conversation and

Tibbs announced the car could be hired for six pesos for the day. This was a bargain and Gilda complimented Tibbs for his shrewdness. But Smooth objected. He claimed he could hire a car for five pesos.

He motioned to Gerry Portela who was parked near the entrance. When the taxi driver crossed toward Smooth the other driver objected violently. He shouted at Gerry and waved his arms. Gerry did not answer but looked inquiringly at Smooth.

"Say, driver," said Smooth quickly, "would you drive us around Havana today for about five pesos?"

"*Si, señor,*" said Gerry with a perfectly serious nod. "*Con mucho gusto. Cinco pesos es bueno!*"

"Oh, I say—his car is much too old," said Tibbs. "The other is really worth an additional dollar."

"I think so, too," said Gilda. "Let's use the big car, Smooth."

"Nothing doing," said Smooth. "These hack drivers can't clip an old-timer like me. The job is only worth five pesos and that's what I'm paying. Get in, Gilda."

Gilda looked sharply at Smooth. He had never been the type who argues to save a dollar. In fact, Gilda had often wondered how much of his pay was left when he finished handing out tips. And this sudden display of shrewdness puzzled her. But Smooth was already helping her into Gerry's car and waving away the other driver. Tibbs looked helplessly at Gilda and was boosted into the back seat by Smooth. Gerry stepped on the starter, cut the wheels sharply and drove off to the tune of the other driver's curses.

"To the Malecon," said Tibbs. "Then out toward the Miramar district."

Gerry nodded and stepped on the gas. Gilda looked questioningly at Tibbs.

"Don't you speak Spanish?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, madam. Quite fluently. But all of these drivers understand a little English."

"Sure," said Smooth. "I'll bet this guy is a Harvard graduate. That right, driver?"

"Me spik good Anglais," said Gerry as he all but killed a hurrying pedestrian.

SMOOTH smothered a laugh. Gerry was quick enough on the uptake, but his attempt at dialect almost threw Smooth. He remembered the fast-thinking, quick-talking companion of the night previous and the contrast was great. Gerry had realized Smooth did not want to make their acquaintance known. Taking his cue from Smooth's first remarks he had played dumb.

And this was as Smooth wanted it. If Gilda intended to play her cards from the bottom of the deck, Smooth decided it might be well to hold an ace or two of his own in reserve. He had liked Gerry at their first meeting. To a degree he trusted him. And that affair in Gonzales' shop had made this trust stronger. It might possibly be that Gerry could help Smooth again. He might even learn some of the things Gilda was keeping hidden. For that reason Smooth continued to treat him as a stranger as they rolled along the beautiful Havana waterfront.

Gilda leaned back comfortably in the tonneau as if she hadn't a care in the whole wide world.

Tibbs pointed left and right, describing the points of interest. Across the harbor was Morro Castle, built in the year 1597 to protect Cuba from the pirates. Near it the Cabanas Fortress where political prisoners were lodged with their retinues of servants. They passed the huge Hotel Nacional, the Baños Publicos and stopped for a moment near Castillo de la Chorrera—an old fort that was now used as a nautical club. They crossed the Rio Almendares and rode out toward the Casino. When they came to an open stretch of country where a fine building looked out over wide fields, Tibbs lowered his voice and leaned closer to Smooth.

"There is quite a joke about this place," he said cautiously. "A very fine joke."

"Why whisper?" said Smooth.

"The driver," said Tibbs wisely. "During the present regime it isn't well to express opinions."

"You mean the taxi drivers like this fellow Batista?"

"They think he is a god."

"Then he must be a regular guy," said Smooth. "Hackmen don't usually guess wrong."

"But he has done some terrible things," said Tibbs quietly.

"What, for instance?"

"That building over there," said Tibbs. "It used to be a very fashionable hotel. Oh, very fashionable."

"Yes," said Gilda. "It looks very nice."

"It was perfection," breathed Tibbs. "But when Batista came into power he decided to use this section for a training ground for the army officers. Every morning there were cavalry exercises—trumpets sounded—men shouted as they charged across the fields. Then there would be target practice—guns going off—hour after hour. Oh, it was quite terrible."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Smooth. "Isn't the army expected to drill?"

"Oh, yes. But not in a fashionable neighborhood. It drove all the customers away. The hotel was emptied in no time at all."

"Then what happened?" asked Gilda.

"When the paying guests moved out—the officers moved in," said Tibbs. "It's really quite terrible."

Smooth laughed loud and long. Gilda joined him and Tibbs looked at them both in astonishment. Gerry drove steadily on without comment. When he came to a side road leading off to the left Tibbs told him to stop. The little steward pointed to a group of officers riding across the fields.

"There they are," he said, "—the new soldiers of Cuba."

"Can we drive in there?" asked Smooth. "I'd like to watch those fellows drill."

"Well—I wouldn't advise that," said Tibbs. "Of course, if you would like to watch them I know of a side road that leads closer to the grounds."

"Let's go," said Smooth. "This looks interesting."

"Oh, why look for trouble?" said Gilda. "If we're not supposed to go in, let's keep driving."

"It's quite interesting," said Tibbs.

"Come on, Gilda. Be a sport," said Smooth.

Gilda shrugged a shoulder and grinned. Smooth nudged Tibbs in the ribs and the steward gave some rapid directions to Gerry in Spanish.

THE car followed the main road for a short distance and then swung off on a little-used side road. Ten minutes of driving took them to the crest of a hill where it was possible to watch the maneuvers of the government troops. It was an exciting spectacle and Smooth stood up in the car to see it. He was pointing out a particularly intricate cavalry movement to Gilda when a car drew up directly behind them.

Two men leaped out and hurried forward. Each wore a blue uniform crossed with heavy leather belts from which hung a gun and club. Smooth recognized them as members of the Policia Nacional—an efficient and well-trained organization of police that kept order in Havana. He looked questioningly at Tibbs and found the little steward crouching low in the car. His face was drawn into an expression of fear and his hands twitched nervously.

"What's wrong?" asked Smooth.

"The police," said Tibbs. "They've found us."

"So what?"

"This is very serious. We shouldn't be here."

"Such fun!" snapped Gilda. "Now I suppose we spend the night in jail."

She laughed—but she didn't sound at all amused.

The officers had reached the car and were looking severely at the occupants. Tibbs answered a sharp question in Spanish and one of the officers reached into the car and grabbed him roughly by the collar.

"Hey! There's no need to get rough," cried Smooth. "We're just looking around. We're tourists—get it?"

"You are arrest!" said the officer shortly. "We go to *Juzgado de Guardia!*"

"Did he say something about the hoose-gow?" asked Gilda.

"Yes, Beautiful," said Smooth. "That's exactly what the gentleman said. We are now about to be tossed into the can."

"Isn't that nice," said Gilda.

"It's nothing serious. We'll be able to explain."

There was a lengthy discussion between one of the officers and the steward. Tibbs waved his thin arms, pointed to Smooth, pointed to Gilda, jabbered in Spanish and finally turned to Smooth.

"I'm afraid we're in for it," he said. "I've told the officers we meant no harm. But they insist upon taking us to a police station."

"Why not take us to the American Consul?" asked Smooth. "I can get things straightened out there."

Tibbs turned to speak with the officers and Smooth saw Gerry looking at him meaningly. It was evident the hackman wanted to say something but for some reason had decided not to talk. When one of the officers questioned him, Gerry showed his credentials and said nothing. Again he turned to Smooth and there was warning in his direct stare. Smooth nodded slightly.

Tibbs had finished his conversation and now looked helplessly at Smooth.

"He says the American Consul's office is too far away. It is in the *Plaza des Armas*—at the other end of town. He insists we go to the nearest police station."

Kyle glanced at the officer's face and saw that he wasn't fooling—any. Gilda noticed that, too.

"Well, that seems to settle the argument," said Smooth. "Tell him to lead the way and we'll follow."

"But he says we are under arrest," said Tibbs anxiously. "We must go in their car with them."

"I don't get that," said Gilda shortly.

"Neither do I," added Smooth.

"Oh, it's quite regular," said Tibbs. "Our driver can pick us up when we are released—that is, if we are released."

He frowned and looked upset.

"Is that the way these things are done, driver?" said Smooth.

Gerry's shoulders moved slightly. "*Quien sabe?*"

AN officer had opened the car door and now directed Gilda and Smooth to get out. He walked with them to the police car and motioned them into the rear. Tibbs followed along and squeezed in with them. The other officer snapped a few words at Gerry and swung his arm. Gerry turned his car and rolled off.

"Will he know where to find us?" asked Smooth.

"Oh, yes. He knows," said Tibbs.

"Why didn't he follow along?" said Gilda.

"The officers won't allow that," said Tibbs. "They are very strict."

One of the blue-uniformed men seated himself behind the wheel and drove the car out to the main road. His companion in the rear seat asked Smooth a question and tapped the gun at his side.

"What's he want, Tibbs?" asked Smooth.

"He asked if you were armed—if you carried a gun."

Smooth caught Gilda's eye. Something was not quite right about this setup. It had the feel of an affair that had been staged and rehearsed. The officers had been very anxious to get the whole thing over in a hurry. This trip to the police station could have been made in two cars. There was no necessity for Smooth, Gilda and Tibbs to crowd into the small police car. And that question about his gun—it didn't seem right. However, Smooth lifted his hand and took the gun from his shoulder holster. The officer grunted and snatched it.

Tibbs' eyes widened and he shook nervously.

"Oh, Mr. Kyle—that's bad," he said. "It's against the law to carry guns in Cuba."

"Don't let it worry you," said Smooth. His tone was brusque, assured.

"But it does worry me, sir," said Tibbs.

"It means we shall all be considered criminals."

Smooth didn't answer. He was watching the route the officer was following into town. It was a road that took them through the outlying and poorer section of Havana. The streets narrowed and the houses took on a look of drabness and decay. Smooth felt Gilda's elbow against his ribs and he turned toward her. She was glancing down at her initialed handbag that rested upon her knees. For a moment Smooth did not catch the significance of the gesture. He shook his head slowly.

"This reminds me of a road in Mexico," said Gilda casually. "A quiet little road on the way to Ensenada."

Then Smooth knew. He grinned and nodded in agreement. The road Gilda mentioned had been the scene of a shooting scrape a few years previous. Smooth had been cornered by a gunslinger. For a time it appeared his number was up. He had no gun. But Gilda had taken one from her purse—a small, ivory-handled automatic—and she had used it with good effect.

Now she was reminding Smooth the same gun was resting upon her knees. It was a pleasant thought.

"How far is this station house?" Smooth asked Tibbs.

"I really couldn't say," answered the steward.

Smooth looked at the officer beside him who sat staring straight ahead. And as he looked he realized the man's uniform needed pressing. This was a little thing but it brought to Smooth's mind a number of facts. He had noticed the *Policia Nacional* were an unusually smart body of men. They apparently took great pride in their position and were always in spotless attire. This may have been due to the fact that Batista had been a hard-boiled army sergeant before his rise to power. The Cuban army was no longer a collection of shiftless individuals who paraded about in any uniform that might suit their fancy. Now they were neat, well-

dressed, well-paid soldiers. And the police were also models of efficiency. Smooth recalled the starched and pressed blue uniforms he had seen the previous night. The men's equipment had been perfect. And there was a military snap to their carriage that spoke of hard drilling and tough officers.

But as he looked at these two he noticed they were sloven. Their caps did not fit. Their leather holsters needed attention. And Smooth noticed their brass buttons had not been polished for weeks.

Smooth was always noticing small and seemingly unimportant details that way.

THE car swung into a narrow street and stopped before a dilapidated building. The officers stepped out and motioned to Smooth.

"Is this the police station?" he asked Tibbs.

"Evidently, sir. They want us to get out here."

"Nice-looking dump," said Gilda. "It smells like a varnish factory."

Smooth motioned Tibbs toward the car door. As the steward climbed to the street Smooth realized they had been tricked. One of the improvements Gerry had pointed out the previous day was a new police station. At the time he had told Smooth there was not an old station house in Havana. New buildings had been erected and they were conspicuous by their neatness. But this place reeked of age. There was a tall but narrow door leading in from the street and now one of the officers had pushed it open. He beckoned to Smooth and pointed to the hall.

"Don't get away from my side," said Smooth quietly. "I think the boys want to play games."

"That's my guess, too," Gilda whispered. "Do you want my purse?"

"Open it and hold it in your left hand as we go into this joint. And be careful how you talk. I think these birds understand English."

"I haven't found anyone in this place who doesn't," said Gilda.

She followed Tibbs toward the doorway and turned there to wait for Smooth. One officer walked ahead and the other brought up the rear. He was close to Smooth and once put his hand on Smooth's shoulder and pushed lightly.

"All right, Professor," said Smooth. "I'm going."

Tibbs had stepped into the hall as Smooth moved up beside Gilda. The purse was opened and near to Smooth's right hand. He reached in and his fingers closed about the butt of the small gun. A warm feeling of security came to him. With a gun Smooth figured that the odds were evened.

He slipped it into his coat pocket and stepped slightly ahead of Gilda.

Apparently there was no one else in the house but the group that had left the car. Tibbs was walking toward an open door that led into a large unlighted room. Smooth noticed all the shutters were drawn. His fingers tightened around the butt of the gun.

When the first officer turned toward him, he tensed.

"Behind you, Smooth!" cried Gilda.

Smooth spun and the gun lifted. The second blue-coated figure fired and the report from the heavy gun slammed against the nearby walls. Smooth felt something tug at his side. There was no pain but that did not mean he had not been hit. He crouched and his left arm swept Gilda aside. The little automatic chattered an answer and the officer dropped to his knees. Even as Smooth turned he caught a glimpse of the Cuban's eyes. They were wide with astonishment. Then Smooth was firing at the other. The man's gun had come clear of the holster but Smooth's first slug stopped the pressure of his finger on the trigger. He, too, dropped to his knees as though in supplication. As he bowed forward a thin figure dashed wildly toward Smooth. It was Tibbs.

"Kill him!" he cried. "Shoot him again! Again!"

The steward's voice was high and hys-

terically shrill. His eyes—well, his eyes were queer. But Smooth Kyle didn't see him.

"Take it easy," said Smooth. "It's all over."

"They tried to murder us!" yelled Tibbs. "They're robbers—thieves. They aren't police—"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Gilda.

She had reached down and picked up Smooth's gun. She handed it to him and took the little automatic. Quickly, she glanced at the clip, snapped it back into place and dropped the gun into her purse. "You look silly with that popgun, Smooth. Let's check out of this place before the neighbors complain. I've had enough policemen for one day."

"These guys aren't cops," said Smooth.

"You're telling me?" Gilda said. Her voice shook just a little.

"No!" cried Tibbs. "They're thieves. They want to kill us."

"Not any more," said Smooth. "They're just two sick guys with pains in the chest." He turned to Gilda and laughed shortly. "That peashooter of yours couldn't kill a rabbit unless you hit him between the eyes."

"That's where I usually hit them," said Gilda. "Now let's get out of here."

"Are those phorries through?"

"No. But they're not exactly healthy. Now, will you get out of here?"

"Let's go," said Smooth.

Smooth stared down at them, a frown bitten into his face, his eyes hard and suspicious and brooding.

He caught Gilda's arm and started toward the door. She drew back and motioned to Tibbs who was staring open-mouthed at the two men sprawled out on the floor.

"You first, Little Man," she said. "Trot along."

Smooth laughed. "Worried about Tibbs?"

"About everyone," said Gilda. "And especially—about you."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Unsleeping Regiment

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

Author of "Doomed Liner,"
"Without Rules," etc.

CONTRARY to the general notion it is cold rather than heat that makes a sentry drowsy. Anyone who has soldiered in India, the place *par excellence* to encounter extremes of climate, can testify to that. Visit your sentries on a July night at Kohat when the mercury stands at over a hundred, the world is a dusty crucible throwing back the heat absorbed during the day, and the moonlight seems to make you perspire, and you will find every man alert. Almost too alert for your personal peace of mind. Every man will be irritably wide awake and, especially if he suffers from prickly heat, eager to let off his rifle on the smallest provocation.

But visit them on a winter's night in the same station and it doesn't matter if you stutter when you give the password. They will—unless, of course, they happen to belong to the Unsleeping Regiment, with which regiment and its record this story deals—be huddled and sleepy like hibernating bears in their *poshteens*—sheepskin coats. And if there happens to be an ice-laden gale from the Pamirs,—and there often does happen to be such a gale—you can walk up to your sentry and slap his face before his blue fingers can draw the bolt.

Which facts, needless to say, are included in the book of wisdom of the rifle-thieves. What the experienced stealer of rifles likes, and what he will wait for for months if need be, is a bitter night, a hail storm and a regiment in an exposed posi-



tion. Given these conditions he can elude any save the most alert of sentries.

Raisul Makmud, Mohmand Pathan and most celebrated rifle-thief in the Gomal territory, knew practically all there was to be known about his profession, which was accounted at least as honorable as any other in those parts. But when he swore in open *darbar* gathering that he would break the record of the Fifty-second Kuttuck Rifles—better known as the Unsleeping Regiment—by taking one of their rifles he did not stipulate a suitable night. For, he said, throwing out his chest and swaggering as only a Mohmand Pathan can, he could get past their sentries any night he chose.

It would be child's play for him, Raisul Makmud the Fox.

It was in open *darbar* in his own village, a village that was about as accessible to the forces of the British Raj as a vulture's nest to a herd of elephants, that he made that boast. All the village elders and many others were present, and heard. And that his words were not greeted with open shouts of derision was purely due to the fact that the rifle-thief was a hot-tempered person and almost as good with a knife as he was at creeping through barbed wire.

For there was a proverb in that village to the effect that when Raisul Makmud secured one of the Unsleping Regiment's rifles the sky would rain gold. That regiment was the one blot on his reputation; the solitary peak he had failed to climb. He had tried three times and had failed, on the last occasion sustaining a wound that would have incapacitated anyone save a wiry Mohmand. And on that occasion, more than a year previous, he had saved his face by proclaiming that the Fifty-second Kuttuck Rifles were in league with the devil and therefore to be shunned by every honest Mohmand rifle-thief.

AND now this sudden *volte face*! Not in his cups and bragging to confidants, but in public *darbar* where men talk seriously! It seemed to his hearers he must suddenly have gone mad. They glanced at one another across the fire and hid their smiles in their beards.

Raisul Makmud was smiling for a different reason. His nickname for obvious reasons was the Fox, and he looked like a fox that night. Picking up a handful of sand he tossed it in the air.

"So much for the Unsleping Regiment! They're only water-carriers dressed to look like soldiers. The legend of their cunning and vigilance has existed too long. If they've never lost a rifle, as the legend runs, they're going to lose one shortly. I, Raisul Makmud, can stroll past their so-called sentries as if they were so many piles of *bhoosa* (hay) and take one any time I like."

It was the village headman who answered. He was an old man now, but in his youth had been almost as noted a rifle-thief as Raisul. And he too had met his Waterloo in the Unsleping Regiment.

He spoke thoughtfully.

"In future methinks Raisul the Fox will have to be known as Raisul the Grasshopper. You remember the tale, brothers? The grasshopper going to visit his sick mother had to cross a mountain whose peak touched the sky. 'One day when I've got time,' he chirped, 'I will sweep this little heap of dust into the sea.'"

There was a roar of laughter in which Raisul Makmud joined as heartily as any.

"And a flea to whom what was really a little dust loomed like a mountain called him a boaster!" he said.

"Meaning that I am a flea?" the village headman asked sharply.

"Nay, *lambadar sahib*, for I am a man. But were I Raisul the Grasshopper I might not be able to judge so clearly."

That was too involved for the village headman and he tried another tack.

"So you are Raisul the Man! Then why does Raisul the Man wish to rob the Unsleping Regiment for a *second* time? It is but a year since he visited them—and brought back a government bullet in his chest."

The *darbar* rocked, but Raisul remained imperturbable.

"True, *lambadar sahib*. Last year I took a bullet, this year I will take a rifle. A Bruten rifle with dial sights such as have been lately issued to the Unsleping Regiment alone of all the regiments on the Frontier. It was an honor paid by the government of the British Raj to that regiment because they alone have never had a rifle stolen."

"And you will take one of *those* rifles!" the headman cried incredulously.

"Certainly," Raisul smiled. "A few weeks hence the Unsleping Regiment will be leaving Girgat, where they are now stationed, to return to their depot. They will spend one night on the camping-ground at the mouth of the Gilgat ravine.

On that night, no matter whether it be cold or warm and no matter whether there be a moon or not, I will take the rifle. Shall we have a wager on the matter? If I fail I will give you a quarter of my holding of tilled ground, and if I bring back the rifle you will give me—what?”

“The weight of every mountain you can see from here in solid gold,” the *lambadar* said promptly. “You are talking like a fool, Raisul. In my youth it was said that the Kuttucks of the Unsleping Regiment could see through rocks and hear scorpions like galloping horses, and they tell me they are now as they were then.”

“Doubly since the government has entrusted them with the Bruten rifles,” a younger man put in, speaking from sad experience.

“Then all the more reason for making the wager,” Raisul cried. “Come, *lambadar sahib*, are you so averse from gaining a piece of good ground? Or can it be that though you say I speak foolishly, you think otherwise in your heart?”

The headman stared at him. This was Raisul the Fox and he seemed utterly confident. On the other hand there was the reputation of the Unsleping Regiment. The headman thought of all the legends he had heard about the uncanny vigilance of the Kuttucks and took heart.

“All right, Raisul,” he said. “Far be it from me to stand between a fool and his folly. I will make a wager. If you return alive bringing with you a Bruten rifle stolen from the Unsleping Regiment I will give you four camels, a year’s store of feed and—and all my wife’s gold ornaments.”

“Four dying camels, the hay that poisoned them and two toe-rings!” Raisul Makmud sneered. “Am I to risk my life for those?”

“And what of your land?” the headman screamed. “There’s not space to bury a dead mule on its side even if it were possible to remove the rocks. But since I am anxious to prove you a liar and a boaster, I will also offer—”

A Mohmand enjoys bargaining as much as a Donegal peasant. To a stranger it

would have appeared that bloodshed was imminent. In reality custom was being observed. The headman, who was wealthy, increased his offer by fractions of a camel at a time; other village worthies (gambling ranks second only to rifle stealing as a Mohmand pastime) joined in with smaller offers, and after about three hours Raisul Makmud stood to win what would make him a wealthy man for life. Being too hoarse to bargain any longer he raised his hand in token of assent.

“So be it,” he said. “In return for what is offered I will secure the Bruten rifle from the Unsleping Regiment on the night I named.”

The headman had never heard of the expression “Sez you!” but his grunt was its precise equivalent in Pushtu.

THERE is a saying to the effect that no man can keep either his wife or a secret on the Northwest Frontier. Whatever truth there be in the former assertion, the latter is undeniable. And Raisul had spoken in open *darbar* before many witnesses. Within twenty-four hours of his boast it was being discussed and laughed about from Chaman to Abbotabad, and those who laughed most heartily of all were the men of the Unsleping Regiment themselves.

A political officer brought the tale in the first instance. He had had it from a traveling Baluch peddler and he recounted it to the colonel of the Unsleping Regiment as a good joke.

The colonel roared as the P.O. had known he would. He had unlimited confidence in the ability of his hawk-eyed, cat-eared Kuttucks to protect their rifles.

“Kind of him to give us notice beforehand,” he said. “How long has he been mad?”

At mess that evening the colonel repeated the story to his second-in-command as an example of the stupidity and boastfulness of Mohmand rifle-thieves. The second-in-command repeated it to the adjutant who in his turn told the company commanders. After that the story perco-

lated down through the ranks of the Unsleping Regiment like spilled water through sand. From subaltern to *subadar*, from *subadar* to *jemidar* and from the *jemidars* to the N.C.O.'s and *sepoys* it sank down, down, down until it reached rock-bottom, which was Sepoy Fazal Ali.

At Fazal Ali the story stopped, since it could sink no lower. He was the opposite pole of the Unsleping Regiment to the colonel. He was the youngest, the smallest, the rawest member of the Unsleping Regiment. Indeed, he shouldn't have been in it at all, but his prayers and lamentations had over-persuaded a recruiting officer into passing him as fit for the army.

Had the officer done his official duty and rejected him, Fazil Ali's little heart must have broken. He was the son of an *ex-havildar*; he had imbibed tales of the glorious traditions of the Unsleping Regiment with his mother's milk. He believed it to be the greatest regiment in the world and to belong to it to be the greatest honor any man could win.

The day he first donned the uniform of the Unsleping Regiment—a distinctive uniform with blue puttees and silver buttons—he had almost wept with pride. That the other *sepoys* had laughed at him, saying that his Kuttuck turban was larger than himself, had worried him not at all. And another even more splendid moment had been when the armorer-*havildar* had issued to him the brand-new Bratten rifle that was to be his comrade throughout his service.

"Here you are, hop-o'-my-thumb," said the burly armorer-*havildar*. "You can crawl down the barrel instead of using a pull-through."

But Fazil Ali, clinging to the rifle as if he feared that it might be snatched from his hands, was too happy to mind what he said.

When the story about Raisul Makmud's boast reached him he laughed much louder and longer than the colonel had done. A Mohmand rob the Unsleping Regiment! New boys and newly joined soldiers alike should be seen and not

heard, and his mirth earned him the rebuke of an older *sepo*y called Amir Din, who was a year his senior.

"Be silent, little fool," Amir Din snarled. "What do *you* know about Mohmand rifle-thieves that you should laugh? They say that Raisul Makmud the Fox would take the puppies from a jackal's den without disturbing the dam."

"Then Allah must have protected you in your youth," Fazil Ali said rudely, and then dodged a kick.

He disliked Amir Din, who bullied him more than any other man in the platoon. Amir Din, he considered, was not worthy of the Unsleping Regiment. He was only a low-caste Kuttuck who had enlisted to escape the consequences of a knife-brawl.

Amir Din glared at him.

"You that could protect a rifle no better than a gnat!" he sneered. "You'll sing a different tune if the Mohmand steals it from you!"

SOME weeks passed and the story of Raisul Makmud was forgotten. The expected orders for the Fifty-second Kuttuck Rifles F.F. to return from Gilgat to the winter depot at Siran Khot had arrived and everyone was busy. It was a fortnight's trek across rough, shale-strewn country where water was scarce and enemies abounded. They had to march in fighting formation with pickets on the hilltops and their advance guard in open order, for it was a land that had witnessed the ambushing and cutting up of many a fine regiment.

But the Fifty-second knew the game. Also, their reputation for alertness saved them a lot of trouble. It's no fun ambushing a regiment that strikes back hard and quickly, and the Mohmands watched their passing with sullen eyes and from a safe distance, leaving the Unsleping Regiment to swing its way proudly across a cowed land.

Vigilance was not relaxed. Especially at night when the robbers from the outlaw villages were on the prowl, were their precautions stringent. They had more to lose than their rifles. In their trust was a record

unique on the Northwest Frontier—one that had stood for seventy odd years.

Never in its annals had the Unsleeeing Regiment had a rifle stolen. Through the long night-hours, picked men stood guard upon that record. It was a family tradition as much as a regimental one, and the Kuttucks, men who held *izzat* (honor) dearer than life, needed no orders to uphold what their fathers had won.

They relied on patrols more than on posted sentries. A Mohmand can spot and avoid a sentry as easily as he can a tree, but a patrol that drifts from spot to spot as noiselessly as ghosts is another matter. And even if a thief avoided both the patrols and the sentries there were still barbed wire and cunningly placed alarms to be negotiated.

In the tents within the perimeter, the *sepoys* slept like the spokes of a wheel, their feet to the center-pole. Some regiments chain their rifles, but the Unsleeeing Regiment scorned that clumsy device which in the event of an alarm is apt to cause delay and confusion. Each man had his rifle by his side ready to his hand. The ultra-cautious and those who were unusually sound sleepers took the precaution of fastening the sling round their wrists as an additional safeguard.

Sepoy Fazal Ali was one who did so. He was excused from all guard duties, not on account of his tender years but because of his inexperience, but the long marches were as much as his strength could manage and at night he slept like the proverbial log.

ON the tenth night of the march when even the old hands were beginning to feel stiff and the neophytes to limp, they arrived thankfully at the Gilgat camping-ground. It was a spot that had both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand it was sandy and level, with a well, but on the other it was close to the mouth of the Gilgat Ravine and ringed about by rough *mullah* where camel-bush and scattered boulders afforded excellent cover for a rifle-thief. For, say, Raisul Makmud, if

the fox were rash enough to attempt to fulfill his threat.

Betting in the Unsleeeing Regiment was that he would not be rash enough. In case, however, that he might be lurking in the vicinity a patrol went out at dusk with orders to make a search. They came back at the end of the prescribed two hours empty-handed and in a bad temper. They had neither caught nor seen the Mohmand, but they had heard him.

He'd mocked them like a safely hidden fox barking at the hounds. From the darkness of the ravine he had shouted queries about their ancestry and the virtue of their mothers. And he'd advised them to go back and have a rifle-inspection, for at dawn there would be one missing.

For a long time after the return of that patrol with its tale of insult the camp seethed like a nest of angry bees. Kuttuck Pathans have their own brand of humor, but they don't like jibes from a Mohmand rifle-thief. A deputation to the colonel *sahib* requested that another patrol—this time composed of the best trackers in the regiment, might go out and avenge their *izzat*. And the colonel *sahib*, who thought even more highly of the *izzat* of the regiment than did the Kuttucks, sent them with his blessing.

That patrol had no better fortune than its predecessor. Raisul Makmud told them they were spindle-legged sons of basely-born camels. He shouted to them to take his *salaams* to the colonel *sahib* and tell him the fox'd be visiting the camp that night.

To catch or shoot him in the rocky fastness of the Gilgat Ravine was beyond the powers of even the Kuttucks. The *havildar* in command of the patrol called a halt.

"Useless to pursue the cur further," he said. "Anyway, he's only yelping out of spite. He will not dare to come within a *koss* of our camp this night."

The patrol returned with its report. Most of the regiment agreed with the *havildar*—that the Mohmand had realized the impossibility of taking a rifle and was only venting his baffled spite. But the

colonel *sahib* was an old hand and wiser in the ways of Mohmands than the Kuttucks themselves. By his advice, or orders rather, the sentries were doubled, the barbed-wire perimeter intensified and the roaming patrols warned to be vigilant.

But the rank and file were quite decided that the Mohmand was only bluffing. To add to their feeling of security a brilliant moon arose making the *maidan* and the heights above the ravine appear as if coated with snow. It was an intensely quiet night.

The patrols, picked men every one, scattered soundlessly across the moonlit *maidan*. The sentries stood with every sense strained to the uttermost. In the eighty-pounders the excited Kuttucks boasted of what they would do if they caught Raisul Makmud, and in the big E.P. that was the British Officers' mess, subalterns laid odds of fifty to one against the Mohmand.

The hours passed. The "lights out" sounded and silence fell upon the camp of the Unsleping Regiment. In the tents the dog-weary men slept, but ceaselessly and noiselessly as circling owls the picked men patrolled a perimeter where scarce a lizard could have moved unnoticed.

EARLY to bed and early to rise is the rule when marching on the N.W.F. Half an hour before dawn the shrill crowing of the bugles aroused the camp. Some men were already astir. Cooking-fires had been lighted and in the transport lines cold, hungry *sepoys* fought with protesting mules and camels in the gray half-light.

All was orderly and usual. No sign of Raisul the Fox had been seen; no shot had been fired at a suspicious shadow. Suddenly peace was shattered. A half-dressed *havildar* rushed howling from one of the B Company tents.

He was shouting in his excitement as he raced for the guard-tent.

"Look to your rifles! One has been taken from our tent. That of Fazal Ali is gone! The sling was cut while he slept and the rifle taken!"

And then there was an uproar that might have heralded a mutiny.

The Unsleping Regiment left the camping-ground three hours later than they should have done. All the gear and in particular the ammunition had had to be checked; also there had been the rifle-inspection Raisul Makmud had kindly recommended. But all that could be established was that only Fazal Ali's rifle had been taken, as mysteriously as if it had evaporated into air.

No one could cast any light on the mystery; least of all Fazal Ali himself. He wept when giving evidence to his company commander. He had gone to sleep as usual with the rifle at his side. The sling had been fastened securely round his wrist. All he knew was that in the morning the sling had been cut by a knife and the rifle was nowhere to be seen.

His company commander was excusably angry. He promised Fazal Ali a court-martial directly they had reached the depot. For the remainder of the march he was to walk rifleless among the camp-followers, a keen disgrace for a Kuttuck of a fighting clan.

"There was some carelessness or else the rifle could not have been taken. When we reach the depot the matter will be probed thoroughly and your lies exposed. You have blackened the *izzat* of your regiment and shown yourself unfit to serve the Raj."

To himself he thought, "Poor little beggar! He looks heartbroken," and he was sorry.

To recover the rifle was impossible. At last the angry, disgruntled regiment left the scene of its disgrace.

The colonel, his face like thunder, gave the word for the main body to form fours. As he did so, a low mutter that could not be repressed ran down the sullen ranks. He turned and saw what they had seen. From a hilltop, clearly silhouetted against the sky, a figure in Mohmand dress was waving farewell with a rifle.

He was too far for his words to be heard, but his impolite gestures needed no explanation.

WHEN the regiment had gone and to wave longer would have been pointless, Raisul Makmud dropped the old Martini Henry he had been waving, rolled on the ground and laughed till his sides were sore.

What tickled his Mohmand sense of humour was that the rifle had not yet been stolen. It was still in the camping-ground, hidden beneath a few inches of sand.

For there was a traitor in the ranks of the Unsleeping Regiment. Sepoy Amir Din, that low-caste Kuttuck, was a friend of Raisul Makmud. For a bribe he had consented to help him to get a rifle.

He had selected Fazal Ali, as the youngest and rawest, to be his victim. They were in the same section; that night Amir Din had lain on his left-hand side. While all slept he had cut the sling, pulled the rifle off Fazal Ali's ground sheet and buried it a foot deep in the soft sand. He had done it all without sound and without even moving his body.

Eager as he was to handle the rifle Raisul the Fox waited until evening before descending to the open ground. When the Indian night rolled across the hills and plains as if the setting sun were pulling a blanket over the world, the rifle-thief arose and swung himself down the rocks. He knew he could find the rifle without difficulty. Amir Din had promised to leave, as if by accident, an empty tin that would mark the exact spot where it lay.

But Raisul Makmud was not the only person in the vicinity of the camping-ground that night. In a cave close by the mouth of the ravine there was a deserter. Fazal Ali had not gone with the camp-followers. In the bustle of departure he had slipped away and hidden in a cave.

When evening came he would make expiation. A Kuttuck is a proud man, and he belonged to the proudest clan of all. Now that he had lost his *izzat* there was only one honorable path to go.

All day he had been praying in the cave. He watched the sun set for the last time. Then he rose and went out. He had

his knife. When men found him in the open with his throat *hallal'd* men would know that a Kuttuck had kept the Law.

Just as he reached the edge of the camping-ground a cloud passed from the face of the moon and the sand became like silver. Fazal Ali stopped and gasped. For a moment he thought the tall figure in Mohmand dress must be some evil *djinn*.

It was moving about, peering at the sand. Then he saw it stop, go down on its knees and begin to burrow in the sand with its hands. Now it was lifting something out. A rifle! And at the same instant a very human laugh of triumph came to the watcher's ears.

And then Fazal Ali understood all. The rifle-thief had taken the rifle from the spot where he had slept; he remembered Amir Din, whom he distrusted, had been beside him. And he no longer thought about the expiation of disgrace.

His knife would *hallal* a throat other than his own! There was a path by which the Mohmand must return to the ravine. He had time to cut him off and lie in wait. In a flash he became a black serpent creeping among the moonlit rocks.

Perhaps it was the coldness of the night that had rendered Raisul Makmud less alert than usual; perhaps it was his joy at the possession of the rifle. He hurried up the path like a fox with a chicken in its jaws. And when he reached the appointed spot the Kuttuck sprang and struck with all his strength, and his knife sped true.

* * *

Hours later a sentry of the Unsleeping Regiment heard approaching footsteps. They were tired feet that stumbled. He whipped up his rifle; his stentorian challenge startled the night.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Sepoy Fazal Ali answered in a voice choked by emotion and weariness.

"It is Fazal Ali who has brought back the *izzat* of the regiment."

Then he staggered forward holding the rifle proudly like a flag.

Kingdom Come

By MARTIN McCALL

CHAPTER XX

REUNION ON FORTY-EIGHTH

CORCORAN went back to the flying field with Dominick. Both men were trembling with excitement.

"It's a tremendous idea, Corky! Magnificent! But I'm afraid he's almost certain to be killed!" Dominick said.

"There's a chance he won't," said Corcoran grimly. "We've got to see to that. You still might get your hands on those contracts if they exist now. But if you can't, it's vital you have Jaxon and Miss Dawson there to speak their piece. Those contracts—or witnesses to the fact that they once existed—are vital."

"I know," said Dominick.

"Guard those kids with your life, Nick," said Corcoran. "The chances are a thousand to one the contracts were destroyed after you escaped from that place in Westchester."

Dominick's hand went out and gripped Corcoran's arm tightly. "Can you picture it, Corky! Can you picture that grand guy back there, willing to step up there in the face of almost certain death! Can you picture what will happen when the people hear him and realize what he's risked for them?"

Corcoran laughed shortly. "Hell, I *did* picture it, didn't I?"

Pilot and plane were waiting for Dominick at the field. Corcoran shook his hand warmly just before he climbed into his seat.

"Barrett and Hewitt and I will arrange getting the President there; and for our bunch in the crowd. All you have to do, Nick, is produce either the contracts or the kids or both! That ought to be easy after what you've been through."

"Count on it!" Dominick shouted over the roar of the motor.

"Utmost secrecy," Corcoran was yelling as Dominick climbed into the plane. "If a word of it leaks out our goose is cooked."

Dominick's spirits were high on the trip back to New York. He was proud of his friend Corcoran; proud of that great man in the White House who had quickly seized the chance offered him, despite its danger. And he had hope—great hope—for the success of the scheme. American people are easily moved, and tremendously stirred by courage. Well, tomorrow night they'd be stirred to their boot tops. And they'd learn the real truth, they'd hear of the type of men behind the revolution.

It was nearly five in the morning when the plane dropped lightly on the deck of the airplane carrier. The commander of the ship was there to greet him.

"Successful trip?"

"Very," said Dominick.

The commander looked over toward the city. For the first time Dominick noticed that there were strange red flares dotting the sky line all over the town . . . fires!

"Some sort of terrorist business going on there," said the commander grimly. "We've only got vague reports."

Dominick scowled. "Terrorist?"

"I don't know what's up," said the commander, "but it seems the Red Sleeves have squads out putting the bee on all public men who are known to be against them. Politicians, lawyers, doctors, even priests, our men hear. Anyone who has any influence with crowds of people. I gather they have some big propaganda stunt in mind and are silencing the boys who might do 'em harm before they spring it."

Dominick felt a premonition of danger.

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, was published in the *Argosy* for August 28



Even priests! "Can you get me a boat to take me ashore quickly?"

ALMOST the first thing Dominick saw when he got ashore turned his stomach and left him weak and dizzy. A corner saloon, lights blazing, was full of men, loud, drunken, crazy. They were singing and waving their glasses at a grisly object that hung from the chandelier in the center of the place.

It was the body of a man, a rope tight around his neck, dead.

Dominick plunged on across town. In the space of ten blocks he saw three more victims of cold-blooded murder. A doctor, a

lawyer, a politician whom Dominick had once known—shot to death on their doorsteps. They had been shot because Ellison was going to speak! And men who were loyalists, who had influence with the people would do everything they could to discredit him before his speech came off! The Red Sleeves were taking no chances.

As he got nearer to Doctor Pancote's house Dominick found himself almost running. Doctor Pancote was a rabid loyalist. If they knew that—a man with two or three thousand people in his church!

Dominick was running now—down the

last block toward the rectory. And then, as he swung around toward the front door he stopped dead in his tracks. His fingers reached up to loosen his collar which was suddenly choking him. He tried to move, but for a moment his muscles were dough that he could not control.

The door to the rectory was open. Lying across the doorsill was Doctor Pancote. The silvery white hair had an ugly crimson stain at the base of the skull. Dominick knew, by the grotesque way one arm was twisted under the body, that the old rector was dead.

Then energy came pounding back into Dominick's body. He leaped over the doctor's body, through the door, into the house.

"Angela! Philip! *Angela!*"

Dead silence—and then a groan. Dominick spun around. That sound had come from the next room. He wrenched open the door, stepped across the threshold.

"Philip!"

Philip Jaxon lay face down on the floor. His fingers were clutching at the carpet as if he had been trying to pull himself forward. Quickly Dominick lifted him to a couch in the corner. There was a bullet wound in his shoulder. Another grazing wound on the side of his head. Neither was particularly serious but the boy had lost much blood.

"Philip! Where's Angela?"

Philip's eyelids fluttered open and he looked up into Dominick's face. "Dominick," he muttered.

"Where's Angela?" Dominick demanded harshly.

Philip's lips trembled and there was a look of terror in his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Moxelli!" he whispered.

SOMETHING snapped in Dominick's head as Philip whispered the name of the Red Sleeve terrorist. He sprang up from beside the couch and started for the door. He could hear the sound of his own voice in a sort of frenzied cry—meaningless—full of anguish and hate and insane murderous fury. At the door some last

vestige of sanity checked him, like a tiny steel wire holding back a load ten times too big. He couldn't leave Philip here to bleed to death! He must take care of him first.

For a minute he stood, looking about him helplessly, as if he expected the room to offer up the solution to his problem. Then he was running again, upstairs, along a corridor, opening doors.

At last! He wrenched open the door of the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. His fingers were stiff, they refused to function for him. Bottles toppled off the shelf to smash in the porcelain basin in front of him. Was there nothing here? No bandages? No disinfectant?

At last he found something—cotton, towels, mercurochrome. Then he leaped down the stairs to the room where Philip lay.

"Easy . . . easy," he heard himself saying to Philip as he poured the red liquid into the shoulder wound. He knew his hands were rough as he staunched the flow of blood with cotton and wrapped towels around it. But he had to be rough. His muscles were like bars of iron, unpliable.

"Philip! Philip—do you hear me?" he was shouting. "I've got to leave you here. Do you understand? They won't come back! They think they've finished here. *Philip!*" His fingers bit savagely into the unwounded shoulder. Open your eyes and listen to me!"

Philip had fainted.

Once more Dominick ran. He couldn't seem to avoid furniture. He smashed into chairs, kicked them aside. Like a horrible caricature the vision of Moxelli's thick-lipped, sensuous, leering face was before him. He was in the kitchen of the rectory now, pulling open the doors in front of shelves. At last he found what he had been looking for. A bottle of brandy, almost empty, but enough. In the icebox was food—a cold roast of lamb, milk. He snatched them out. He stumbled back to Philip. The food he put on a little table beside the couch. The brandy he forced between his lips.

And then he was out on the street—running.

"Stop, you damn fool, and think!" he shouted at himself. Where was he going? For a moment he stood in the middle of the sidewalk, his hands pressed to throbbing temples. "Get hold, Vane! You're acting like a madman! Where would he take her? *Where would he take her?*" Not back to West End Avenue. That address was known and Moxelli would have abandoned it! So where? Where, in the midst of ten millions of people, was he to start looking? It was six o'clock—daylight. He couldn't run around the streets yelling like a maniac. "*Think!* There has to be some logical course of action. Use your head!"

And then it came to him. Not two blocks away was the Mordaunt Hotel. Lefty Brace's hangout. He might be there now, in his room. If he was, Dominick knew he had a chance. And once more he was off. Part of his cunning had returned as the outline of a plan suggested itself. He walked now, calmly, leisurely; he mustn't attract attention. The Mordaunt was a Red Sleeve establishment. He couldn't walk into the lobby and hope to get to Brace without the Red Sleeves being warned. At least one of the clerks there knew Dominick from a previous call. But he remembered the number of Brace's room—1511. He remembered that it was a corner room at the back of the building. There was a chance, a good chance, he told himself.

A FEW minutes later he was climbing up the fire escape through the gray morning light. He counted the floors as he climbed. He couldn't remember whether the Mordaunt had a thirteenth floor. Many hotels skipped that number. Was fifteen eleven really the fifteenth floor or actually only the fourteenth? Once he looked down and felt a faint sense of nauseating dizziness sweep over him. Well, he was taking a chance that there was no thirteenth! He was crouching on the little platform outside the window that must be Brace's. The

window was closed and locked. He edged a little closer and peered in. The window across the way was open—there was an indistinguishable figure asleep on the bed.

Dominick's teeth were clamped tight together. If this wasn't the room he was done for. He looked once more, and this time his heart beat a little faster. Hanging from the bedpost near the sleeper's pillow was a leather holster containing a gun. This was it!

For a single moment Dominick crouched where he was. Then he covered his face with the crook of his left arm, lowered his shoulders, braced himself, and dove like a plunging fullback through the window. Dominick stumbled blindly toward the bed. He had fixed his course and even the momentum of that drive through the window did not alter it. There was a cry from the bed and Brace sat up. But already Dominick had his gun, and with his own gun in one hand and Brace's in the other he covered the startled Red Sleeve leader.

"And now, Mr. Brace, it's my turn," said Dominick, in a voice that had a note of doom in it.

For a moment Brace stared at him, resting rigidly on his elbows, and then very slowly lowered himself back against the pillow. A very faint smile flickered on his lips.

"Damned if I don't think it is," he said softly.

"Where is Moxelli?" Dominick demanded.

Brace's smile broadened. "Ah, so you *want* something, Mr. Vane. That makes this all terribly interesting. I was afraid you might just shoot me and be on your way."

"I haven't any time for chatter, Brace," Dominick said, his voice shaking. "I'm giving you just about thirty seconds to make up your mind to tell me where I can find Moxelli."

Brace laughed, and Dominick's nerves tore at him. But he stood, steady as a rock. "You couldn't kill me if you wanted to, Vane," said Brace. "It wouldn't be cricket! And I'm sure you're a sportsman."

I remember being very touched by your remark that I'd only take a poke at you if your hands were tied. Why don't you drop those guns and see what happens?"

"BRACE," said Dominick, and his voice was chilling as cold steel in flesh, "I'm not kidding. I've seen my friends shot down by your men; I've seen an innocent minister of the gospel lying dead on his doorstep; I've seen enough brutality in the last few days to knock any notions of sportsmanship or chivalry I may ever have had out of my head. You've got ten seconds left to tell me where Moxelli is!"

Brace moistened his lips. "You wouldn't dare shoot. You'd have the whole hotel down on your neck."

"No one's paying any attention to gunshots this morning, Brace. They've heard too many of 'em in the last few hours! I'm giving you a chance, Brace. Tell me where Moxelli is and I'll see to it that you live to stand a fair trial. That's all I'm promising."

"Nuts!" said Lefty Brace, grinning.

The gun in Dominick's right hand flashed. Brace screamed and sat bolt upright in bed, clutching a shattered knee.

"Talk!" rapped Dominick. "Where's Moxelli!"

Brace clutched his leg, sweat running off his face, calling Dominick every foul name in the vocabulary of a gutter rat. Grim as an avenging angel Dominick's gun spat flame again. Brace fell back on the pillow, his left arm hanging useless at his side.

"Will you talk?" Dominick asked sharply.

"You've gone mad!" Brace cried. "You can't get away with this!"

"Why not?" Dominick snarled. "You and Moxelli and your lads have. You've no mercy on anyone. An hour ago Moxelli killed one friend of mine, gravely wounded another, and kidnapped Miss Dawson. What makes you think I can't pay my debts in kind, Brace . . . or that I won't. It's your other leg next—then your other arm. And then if you haven't talked I'm

going to drill you straight between the eyes. Look at me Brace! Look into *my* eyes and you'll see that I am not bluffing."

Brace's breath was whistling between his teeth and his face was twisted in an agony of pain.

"There's not a shadow of doubt about it," Dominick went on. "And in about fifteen seconds I'll prove it. You've got just one chance to live, Brace. It may go easy with you if I find Miss Dawson unharmed. But your game is up! In twenty-four hours the whole Red Sleeve cause is going to be smashed to hell."

But Brace wasn't thinking of causes. He was looking at the unwavering muzzles of Dominick's two guns. In a second one of them would stab at him with flame and agony. His teeth were gritted hard together.

"I don't know where Moxelli is," he said slowly. "But I do know where you'll find him if he's with a woman."

"Hurry!" said Dominick grimly.

"Studio apartment—top floor—ninety-one East Forty-eighth Street."

For a second Dominick stared into Brace's sweating face. He was satisfied. The Red Sleeve's nerve was broken. He was telling the truth. Dominick stepped over to the telephone on the bedside table and ripped out the cord. He stepped into the bathroom and came back with two towels. One of them he tore into strips and with it he lashed Brace's good hand to the head of the bed. The other he tied tightly across the gangster's mouth.

"I want you to be here if I come back," said Dominick. "And I'll be back, Brace, if you haven't told me the truth!"

MOXELLI lay half sprawling on a couch, his fat stomach jiggling as he laughed. His small pig eyes were looking at the girl who stood with her back to the door of the apartment, panic in her eyes.

"And you can yell your pretty head off, my sweet," Moxelli drawled. "No one is going to pay any attention to you—because there isn't anyone else in the building. And there aren't any windows you

can throw yourself out of. Only that skylight, which you can't reach."

Angela stood where she was, motionless. "Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"Now that's a silly question," Moxelli drawled. "But I'll tell you some of the reasons. One of them is that we are mighty anxious to lay our hands on Mr. Dominick Vane. When he finds you're gone I've got a hunch he might give himself up if—it meant your safety. Another is that Vane got my girl killed. I don't know why I shouldn't get even by taking you for myself. Another is that I like you. And another—but what the hell! It all seems quite simple."

"And you're going to hold me here?"

"And how," said Moxelli, with a broad grin.

"My uncle—" Angela began. "Mr. Dawson—"

"Mr. Dawson is in a funny spot," Moxelli chuckled. "Right now he's in the Union Club pretending with all his might that he's a loyalist. That's just in case there are any rumors floating around. After tonight—well—after tonight he'll be out on the limb with us. He won't dare lift a finger to do anything about you, my sweet. So why don't you settle down and take it easy. You're going to be here for a long time."

Those were the last words that Moxelli, the Red Sleeve terrorist, ever spoke. There was a crash of breaking glass and a great section of the skylight came smashing down into the room. At the same moment there were stabbing flashes of flame. Moxelli never drew his own gun. He may never have known that it was Dominick Vane who poured three bullets into his heart.

Dominick dropped down through the hole he had kicked in the skylight. Angela still stood at the door, the back of her hand pressed against her mouth. When she recognized Dominick she began to slide very slowly down toward the floor. He caught her before she fell.

Dominick held her very close in his arms. For the first time he could remem-

ber since he had been a small child he was crying. Angela opened her eyes and looked up into his face.

"Dominick!" she whispered.

"It's all right, darling. Everything is going to be all right," he said. "I'm not going to let you out of my sight again—ever."

"Philip?" she asked.

"I think he'll be all right," said Dominick. "You and I are going to him now. And darling—in a few hours I think, I believe, these terrible days are coming to an end."

And Dominick felt that he himself was weak and trembling. The mad fury that had lashed him to the frenzied action of the last hour had sapped his strength to the limit.

CHAPTER XXI

"PEOPLE OF AMERICA!"

THE pressure was on the Red Sleeve High Command. Dominick would not have found Lefty Brace had he gone back to the Mordaunt after him. General Ellison, unable to reach his chief of intelligence at this critical time, had sent men to the hotel and found him wounded, bound, gagged. They had gotten a doctor for him, and though he was in terrible pain he refused any kind of drug.

"I've got to have the old bean working in the next few hours, doc," he said, between his teeth, as the doctor dressed his wounds. About an hour later he was brought to the Red Sleeve headquarters on Fifth Avenue on a stretcher.

The business of paving the way for the Red Sleeve Broadcast that night was already under way. It was being announced over radio all over the country that General Ellison would speak at exactly ten-thirty that night. Newspapers carried streamers about it. Radio engineers were busy setting up amplifiers on an improvised bandstand in the park and arranging for the radio hookup.

The appearance of Brace, his leg broken, his left arm useless threw the headquarters into a high state of excitement.

"What's happened to you?" Ellison demanded.

"Vane!" said Brace dryly. A cigarette dangled between his lips. He was propped up on pillows.

"How did he find you?"

"Stupidity on my part," said Brace grimly. "Before things started he knew I lived at the Mordaunt. I figured it was safe enough to stay there in spite of that. Everybody in the hotel is in our pay. He came up the fire escape and—well—you see what happened!"

Ellison glared at him from under his shaggy eyebrows. "But why this crippling? That's not like him. If he'd killed you outright . . ."

Brace studied the end of his cigarette. "He wanted me to talk?"

The general's fist was clenched. "Did you?"

Brace inhaled smoke deep into his lungs. "I have to report, general, that it is extremely doubtful if you will ever see our friend Moxelli alive again."

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean that I told Vane where he could find Moxelli. Moxelli is—or perhaps I should say 'was'—a fool, general. We sent him out last night to quietly eliminate a few undesirables. He makes a bloody massacre of it. He stumbles across the Dawson girl. Does he bring her here to headquarters? No, he takes her to a hideout of his. Vane wanted to know where that hideout was. In the end I decided I'd better tell him because otherwise he would have killed me. I thought you needed me more than you needed Moxelli."

For a moment Ellison was silent. "You did the right thing," he said finally. "You should have told him sooner. I can't afford to lose you now."

"Don't worry," said Brace. "From now on I stay right here with plenty of guards around me. About tonight—is everything under way?"

"It is." Ellison was scowling darkly. "I've been wondering what move the government will make when they learn what's coming. It's occurred to me the President

may give the order to attack *before* our broadcasting time. I have ordered patrols out on the roads to report any sign of troop movements. I have redoubled the number of our chemical stations. If there is the slightest movement against us I've given orders for the men to commence a gas attack at once."

Brace nodded and winced as pain shot along his arm. "About your own personal bodyguard, General. Moxelli's tough guys are good, but they are not impressive. I suggest our best-drilled regiment, done up as smartly as possible. This is a show, General, and don't forget it. We're out to impress."

"You're right, of course," said Ellison.

"I'll have four or five hundred of our best strong-arm boys circulating in the crowd," Brace went on. "but the uniformed men, I think, must be our best-drilled unit." He chuckled. "I've got a hunch when you get through playing the great white father tonight, the country is going to fall plop into your lap, General. My only disappointment is that I won't be able to be on hand."

IT WAS a strange, tense day all over America. The news that Ellison was to make a nationwide appeal seemed to have put a stop to all sporadic outbursts of the loyalists. They were waiting to hear what the Red Sleeve leader had to say. And in the background was the menace of a terrible and bloody conflict to come. At any moment after midnight the government forces, waiting ominously quiet outside the limits of many of the big cities, might attack. The greatest panic centers were New York, St. Louis, and Los Angeles. Here the greatest concentration of government forces lay in wait. Citizens found themselves unable to leave because of Red Sleeve blockades. They could do nothing but wait for the explosion. And it seemed that it must come. The Red Sleeves were riding the crest of success. If the government failed to strike now after this three-day wait, they were done for. Everyone knew that. And everyone knew that the

man in the White House was not going to give up without a fierce struggle!

Citizens stayed indoors. Mothers hovered over their children. Families clung together as if they realized that this was the last moment of peace before a tornado.

As early as six o'clock that night people began crowding around radios. In rural centers country stores were jammed. Outside New York men foregathered in bars and restaurants to listen; families waited tensely in their homes. There might be some change in the time schedule. It was rumored that Ellison would offer terms of peace with the Federal Government; it was rumored that he would agree to let people leave the storm centers before the hour of attack; it was rumored that the President was dead—that this broadcast would really be the announcement that Ellison had taken over the reins of control.

There were other places where the tension was even greater. In the battered rectory near Fifth Avenue Dominick and Angela had spent the day tending to Philip. Philip was going to be all right, but Philip was not going to be able to attend that broadcast in the park. If testimony about the contracts was to be given, Angela must give it alone. And she was willing. But cold fear gripped Dominick's heart. If anything happened to her again, if she were shot as she stood up on the platform to speak . . . He had given up all hope of getting the contracts themselves even if they still existed. He dared not leave Angela. And so they must wait—wait for hours until that moment when she would step forward to tell what she knew.

And there was tension in the mess of one of the battleships in the harbor.

At the head of the table sat the President of the United States. He had been whisked up from Washington in a plane and hidden on this boat. He seemed alone . . . terribly alone. Corcoran, Barrett and Hewitt, his chief aides had slipped ashore. They were arranging for the evening's events. The officers at the table knew what was to take place. Somehow they could not talk.

Calmly the President ate. From time to time he tried to stir the others into some kind of conversation. Always it died down as it began—with the President himself. In a little more than three hours he would go before the American people—would probably sacrifice his life—in an attempt to reach them with the truth. He was quite calm. There were high spots of color in his cheeks. Somehow, with action at hand, he seemed to have thrown off his weariness and despair.

He took a stroll on deck with the commander after dinner. Their cigars glowed red in the darkness. From time to time the President looked across the black waters at the lights of the Manhattan, where presently he must face his destiny.

Once he spoke. "I have only one hope," he said very gently. "That they will listen to me before they kill me!"

"You mustn't talk that way, sir!"

The President paused, listening. "I think I hear the launch coming, Commander. That means I'll be going ashore presently. I—I should like to have a few minutes alone in my stateroom before we go."

BY SIX o'clock that night people had begun to gather in the Park. There were thousands upon thousands who wanted a glimpse of Ellison in the flesh; the man who seemed destined, by force of arms, to be the next ruler of their country. A barbed-wire pen had been built around the platform on which the General would stand to make his speech, and already, inside this barrier, Red Sleeve soldiers waited, machine guns set up and pointing out toward the crowd.

Men, women, even children were taking up points of vantage near the front of the platform. Great amplifiers towered over the platform; engineers were still working on the radio hookup, testing microphones, making certain that everything would be perfect for the Red Sleeve leader when his moment came.

And as the crowd grew in size, its citizen body was perhaps unaware that hundreds of Red Sleeve shock troops were

present, dressed in civilian clothes, adroitly bumping and shoving people around for the purpose of discovering anyone who might be armed. Now and then some man was discovered carrying a revolver. Action was quick. His gun was taken away from him; a fist was jammed in his face, and he was hustled out of the throng to be taken into custody by waiting squads of uniformed men. So smoothly did they work, so quickly and sharply, that there was very little disturbance in the crowd.

And still the thousands kept pouring into the great open grass space. By nine-thirty there were probably a half a million people jammed around that platform . . . a roaring hum of voices . . . a high-pitched, hysterical laugh here and there . . . a cry of pain as one of the Red Sleeve undercover men slugged some poor unfortunate and took away his gun.

And in that crowd, close to the speaker's stand, were Dominick and Angela, clinging tightly to each other, nerves keyed almost to the breaking point. Dominick had been unable to get in touch with Corcoran or any of the government men. He had no idea how their plans were progressing. And as he, with his trained eyes, saw the efficiency with which the Red Sleeve undercover men were working his hope waned. Corcoran was going to get no five thousand men in this crowd without the alarm being spread. But he and Angela were there, waiting to answer the call for their services, when and if it came.

"They'll never manage it, Dominick, never!" Angela whispered tensely.

"Hush, darling!" His hand gripped her arm tightly. "You must not even think about it. Everywhere in this crowd are enemy ears and eyes. We must simply wait—and trust Corcoran!"

And then suddenly his muscles went tense. Not five feet away from him was a man whom he had already spotted as one of the Red Sleeve undercover men. He had jostled into a bulky-looking fellow, wearing an overcoat. He started to draw back his fist to slug the man. Then an extraordinary thing happened. The overcoated man's

right hand went up . . . there was a gun in it . . . and he brought the butt down in a savage blow on the Red Sleeve's head. Then quite calmly he took the unconscious man by the collar and dragged him out through the crowd!

"Look!" Dominick whispered excitedly. "The G-men are here! They're working on the Red Sleeve spies and nobody knows the difference!"

It was true. All through that crowd the Red Sleeves strong-arm men were suddenly having the tables turned on them; one by one. They were being slugged into insensibility; The crowd had seen this weeding-out process going on for hours and there was no outcry.

TEN minutes past ten! From out on Broadway the strains of martial music reached the multitude. Ellison was coming! He sat in the back seat of an open touring car, his chin sunk forward on his chest, his burning eyes looking out at the people who lined the streets, cheering and yelling. It was the triumphal procession of a conqueror.

In front and behind Ellison's car marched the crack regiment of Red Sleeve troops, smart, jaunty, precise, bayonets glistening on the end of rifles. Into the entrance of the park they swept. A great avenue was broken open in the waiting throng and the troops marched proudly through to the platform. Here they deployed round it in a huge circle, ten deep. Ellison stood up in the back of the car, his hand outstretched in a salute to the crowd who greeted him with a wild ovation—an ovation overtone with hysteria. And then he got down, surrounded by guards, and made his way through a gap in the wire barricade to the platform.

And at that moment Dominick felt a hand on his arm and he looked up into the face of General Barrett, dressed in civilian clothes.

"Get in as close to the platform as you can," said Barrett grimly. "The minute we take over you and Miss Dawson are to make for the platform." And before Domi-

nick could speak, Barrett was gone in the crowd again.

A man was coring across the platform toward the microphones. Dominick recognized him as a former labor agitator. He held his hands high above his head for silence. The result was extraordinary.

A half a million people were suddenly standing dead still—listening. Dominick felt suffocated by that strange quiet. He knew that at that moment millions and millions of people all over the land were sitting tensely at their radios—waiting.

"People of America!" The words boomed out loud and clear over the vast throng. There was a little murmur of satisfaction as people on the outskirts of the crowd realized that they were going to be able to hear satisfactorily. "In the last week," the speaker said slowly, clearly, "history has been made! A great people have risen up in face of a system that has been crushing out their life blood, and have tossed it aside and trampled it under foot! In these times, my friends, there have been hardships. Many of you have lost friends and relatives! There has been bloodshed! But there can be no great social upheaval without loss of life. The leaders of this great cause have been forced to strike quickly, sharply, and without wavering from their objective. And now, with victory in their grasp, with the tyranny of a corrupt and bureaucratic government at an end, we are faced with a terrible catastrophe brought about by the selfish determination of that government to wreak its vengeance on the people of America.

"Outside this city troops and battleships wait to strike! For what? To keep one man in office—a man who is the representative of capitalism, of corrupt politics, of graft, of oppression. In a vain effort to maintain the old inefficient status-quo, the old rulers are prepared to spill the blood of millions of innocent citizens."

There was a booming roar of anger from the crowd. The speaker held up his hands.

"You have not come here to listen to me! On this platform is a man whose courage, whose ideals, whose great love for his

country—these United States which were conceived by our forefathers that their descendants might have a place to live in liberty and freedom—this man, I say, inspired by these ideals, has had the courage to strike a blow for America. It is he who will talk to you now. He will tell you of his dreams and hopes for his country, and of his plans for the future. He will tell you what he intends to do to *protect you* from the murderous plans of the government! People of America, I give you . . ."

He didn't finish. Ellison had already risen from his chair when the storm broke.

CHAPTER XXII

ATTEMPT

SUDDENLY the front of that great crowd that encircled the speakers' stand seemed to sweep forward like a great sighing wave. From under hundreds of overcoats appeared hundreds of rapid-fire guns. A solid phalanx of them were leveled at the troops around the stand. And back to back with these men were an equal number with rapid fire guns leveled at the crowd. It had been done with the speed and precision of a magician's sleight-of-hand trick. Out into the open, between the soldiers and the government men limped Corcoran. A soft-brimmed hat was pulled down over his eyes, and he carried a rapid-fire gun.

"You will drop your rifles in ten seconds or we open fire!" His voice rang clear and steady over the crowd.

Even as he spoke a rapid fire gun belched death from one sector of that grim circle—at Red Sleeve soldiers who had raised rifles to their shoulders. Sudden terror gripped the crowd. People were shouting, screaming, cursing and cheering! On the platform the speaker had reached for a revolver, but there were men swarming up the steps to seize him—to seize Ellison who was tugging at his own gun. Somewhere else from the circle a rapid fire gun raked the ranks of soldiers. A Red Sleeve officer shouted an order to attack and fell as the top of his head was blown off by

a government agent. Another rapid-fire gun spoke! It was enough. Rifles clattered to the ground. Red Sleeve soldiers held their hands aloft.

Someone seized Dominick by the arm. It was Barrett again. He and Angela were whisked through that grim circle to the steps of the platform. Barrett and Admiral Hewitt followed them up. John Dewar, famous liberal senator from the West, was shouting into the microphones for quiet. He was to be the first speaker for the government. Somewhere in the crowd a pistol flashed. Dewar fell, clutching at a wound in his stomach.

Barrett gave Dominick a quick look. "Speak to them, Vane! We're got to hold this crowd until we can get the President up on the platform!"

"But General, I'm not qualified to—"

"*Speak to them!*" Barrett rasped.

And so it was that the first loyalist voice that went over the microphone to that hysterical crowd and into a million homes was that of Dominick Vane—a man of whom none of them had ever heard—yet a man who had risked his life ten times over for all of them.

Dominick was not an orator. His voice was harsh; yet there was a passionate intensity as he shouted: "*Listen! Listen, all of you!*"

It was a strange picture. That seething crowd, raised to an insane pitch of excitement by the sudden turn of events; the Red Sleeve soldiers with their hands raised; that grim double circle of death covering the platform and the crowd.

"You've been tricked!" Dominick was shouting. "All of you have been tricked. You, who have been followers of General Ellison, have been led to believe that you are fighting for a great cause. That is a lie!"

A thunder of disapproval from the crowd.

"*Listen!* I'm a government agent—I don't deny that! But I'm an American like any of the rest of you. I fought overseas alongside many of you! I'm not holding any brief for our government. I'm here

to tell you facts about Ellison and the revolution. They say they are fighting capitalism! Fine! But how have they financed this revolution? I'll tell you how! The men who are paying for this are H. R. Dawson, Paul Frampton, John Corbett and other Wall Street powers!"

There was another roar of derision and disapproval.

"**L**ISTEN!" Dominick stormed. "This is not propaganda! For five days I've been fighting to get the proof of this. Would you believe Ellison and the other Red Sleeve leaders were on the level if you knew that they had signed contracts with Dawson and his friends, promising them control of all our natural resources once he is in power? Would you still believe in their high-sounding phrases if I told you that your love for your country is being exploited so that your country can be torn from the hands of those who govern constitutionally and given over to a group of robber barons. I'm going to give you the proof of that. Standing beside me here is a girl—the ward of H. R. Dawson himself. She saw those contracts with her own eyes! You are being sold down the river, People of America! Listen to what this girl has to say!"

Angela was white and trembling. Dominick stood close to her, holding her hand as she spoke. "It is true," she said. "Every word that you have heard is true! Mr. Dawson and his friends have financed this rebellion. They are behind it for their own personal greed. After you have fought and died you will find yourselves the slaves and dupes of these men. There were contracts between Ellison and Mr. Dawson and his friends! I saw them! I read them with my own eyes."

The crowd was muttering. There was a curious low angry buzz. And then Dominick saw a little body of men pushing their way toward the platform. They were permitted to pass through the ranks of the G-men. Dominick seized Angela's hand and pulled her quickly back from the microphone.

"People of America," he shouted, "the first speaker tonight promised to present to you a man who loved his country, a man of high ideals, a man who has the courage to strike a blow, a man with dreams for the future of his country! Well, I am going to present that man to you! He has come here at the risk of his life to tell you the truth about America! Ladies and gentlemen"—Dominick's voice shook with emotion—"I give you the President of the United States."

He raised his hand slowly, like a figure in a dream, to brush sweat from his brow. Until he straightened it by a suddenly conscious effort, his body slumped with aching fatigue. He hadn't realized how boneweary he had become.

Dominick stood back from the microphone and looked out toward the President. The President wore a heavy overcoat but he held his hat in his hand and his head was thrown back, the light from the platform glistening on his gray hair and lighting his broad calm forehead. There was a dignity about him that did not arise merely from his erect carriage or the habitual poise of the man: it came, not from the man, but from those ideals the man stood for. And the crowd seemed to feel this. For a moment in the vast quad of the Park none seemed to breathe; there was no sound but the sound of the President's, and his followers', footsteps on the trampled grass. And then there was a rustle, like a wind in a forest, and the crowd stirred and muttered and some shouted out taunts and some faintly cheered.

The President came slowly forward toward the microphone. He was pale, but very steady on his feet.

Then bursting out to the front of the crowd came a man. It was all so quick. . . . Foul abusive curses came from his twisted lips. He fired. . . .

Before he could pull the trigger a second time he was buried under a stampede of clubbing, frenzied listeners.

On the platform the President staggered. Dominick caught him before he fell. And

for a moment he clung to Dominick, bent, shaking. Then very slowly he stood erect. Dominick saw the sweat on his forehead—saw the dark wet stain spreading on his coat.

Dominick turned quickly to Barrett.

"We've got to get him out of here, General. He's badly hurt."

"No, no!" It was the President speaking. "I came here to speak. *I'm going to speak!*"

CHAPTER XXIII

"I AM YOUR SERVANT. . . ."

FURY swept over Dominick. He shouted into the loudspeakers: "Listen, all of you! The President is badly hurt! He insists on speaking to you in spite of that. And you're going to listen if we have to turn loose these guns on the whole lot of you."

The President took several unsteady steps toward the microphone and stood there, leaning heavily on Dominick's arm. Even out front it was clear that he was hurt—severely hurt.

And suddenly that great crowd was still again.

"People of the United States of America!" The President's voice was steady, clear as crystal, as it winged its way out over the length and breadth of a nation. "One of the first rights for which our forefathers fought was the right to speak freely. I haven't come here tonight to plead for your support. I have come here because, as your President, I have the *right* to speak to you.

"You have heard a great deal of talk in the last few days. Talk about rights; about causes; about capitalism and oppression. I haven't come here to talk about those things. I have come to talk to you about the one thing that we all have in common—our love for this country in which we live."

Dominick felt the President's fingers biting into his arm. "You can't go on, sir," he whispered. "We've got to get you to a hospital!"

Very gently the President shook his head and continued: "Tonight this great city faces a crisis. It is in the hands of a revolutionary group. Outside the city are government forces ready to fight if necessary to put down that revolution. But before any more blood is shed, you must know the truth. What you have heard here tonight about the leaders of that revolution is true. I swear that to you. But I do not ask you to take my word, or the word of Mr. Vane, who has risked his life to get that proof for you, or the word of this courageous girl who has stood here before you. I ask you to demand of this revolutionary party to prove to you that it is *not* so. I know that in your hearts is a dread of what may happen in the next few hours. I want to relieve you of that anxiety now. The government forces *will not attack tonight or tomorrow!*"

A mighty, full-throated murmur went up from the crowd. The President silenced them with raised hand. Dominick's throat was choked.

He could feel the strength waning in the frantic clutch the President had on his arm.

"**WE** are going to withhold that attack until you can prove to your own satisfaction that we are telling you the truth about the revolutionary leaders. Ask them where the money came from to arm and equip thousands of troops? Ask them who paid for the ammunition and poison gas and food and uniforms—millions and millions of dollars it must have cost. You know and I know it did not come out of the pockets of workers or any other group of society. And when you have realized that these men have spilled the blood of your friends, your families; that they have wrecked your homes for the sole purpose of getting into power, will you still shout for their warriors? The troops outside this city are not your enemies. *They are your troops!* The ships in the harbor are *your ships!* They are here to protect *you*. We, who have been put into power by *you*, believe that the Red Sleeve or-

ganization is a treacherous, an evil, a vicious ring which has led thousands of citizens astray by false promises, false battle cries. And because that army and navy is yours, organized for your protection, we must fight this enemy—the Red Sleeves—who are *your* enemies.

"And what do they bring you—? The meaningless waving of a flag that is defiled by their very touch. The ranting, high-sounding phrases of a patriotism they have dishonored. Vague promises of purely imaginary benefits to all of you which a knowledge of their purpose proves they have no intention of fulfilling."

The President paused. He was weakening rapidly. His face was paper-white; he trembled visibly. But he went on.

"I am not here because I wish power or glory. I am your servant. You elected me to office and I am sworn to serve you. If I could have averted these terrible days by giving my life I would have done so. But that would not serve. And so I have stuck to my guns in the face of your abuse and hatred, because that was the job I promised to do when I took the oath of office to which you elected me." He swayed on his feet and Dominick had to slip an arm around his waist to keep him erect. He knew it was useless to plead with the President to stop until he had finished.

And this was the man his people had so nearly betrayed. This was he who the Red Sleeves said was not fit to govern his country. A tool, they called him . . . a puppet!

"And I would tell you this—all you Americans!"—Dominick felt the President draw himself up for one last effort—"The men who built the structure of our government were wise men. They made it so that no man can hold office without the complete approval of the people. There is no royal dynasty here. They made it so that revolutions would never be necessary. They gave their lives to set us free from tyranny and they saw a way to avoid the necessity of that sacrifice being made again. You do not have to revolt against the men who rule you with guns and death, my

friends. There is no political machine in the world that can exist in the face of defeat at the polls. The reason for political corruption in America today is not because there is a flaw in our scheme of government, but because you do not interest yourselves in government machinery. If there are dishonest and corrupt men in positions of power it is *because you put them there!*

"I pray that these dreadful days will awaken you to your responsibilities as citizens of the greatest of all nations!

"I have promised you that for a time we will stay our hand until you have investigated the truth about the revolutionary leaders. I am sure that thousands of you who have fought for their cause will see that you have been misled and betrayed. I pray that you will then see that what we do to exterminate them we do for you."

"And now"—his whole weight was sagging in Dominick's arms—"I . . . I leave you. And remember, the soil of your country will never grow rich if it is fertilized by the blood of your brothers. You have been provided with a way of peace to get what you want. I pray that you will choose that way!"

There was a tense silence at the end of that speech. A murmur ran over the crowd as they saw that Dominick and General Barrett had literally to carry the President down from the speakers' stand. And then suddenly, as he was borne out through the crowd, a great cheer went up, to be repeated and repeated, like the roaring of a mighty wave thundering on a rocky shore. The President looked up at Dominick, and there was a smile on his lips.

"Well, Mr. Vane?"

Dominick choked, and his eyes were hot and smarting. "I think you turned the trick, sir."

* * *

Throughout America, it was a wild night. The President had pleaded for a way of

peace, but those early hours were bloody. The chief cause lay in the sudden rebellion of thousands of the revolutionists themselves. General Ellison who had come to Central Park so proudly, did not leave the speakers' stand alive. Dawson, Frampton and Corbett were on the high seas in Dawson's yacht headed for Europe. And while the Red Sleeves snarled at each other's throats the government forces waited calmly outside the city.

But the night, hideous and unbelievable as it was, drew at last to a weary end. Its blackness paled before the light.

At dawn Dominick, Corcoran, Barrett and others waited tensely outside the operating room of a great hospital. Angela sat by a window looking down at the street. Crowds still milled about. Outside the hospital thousands stood waiting for news.

Presently the door of the operating room opened. One of America's greatest surgeons came out, his face gray and tired. He still wore his white operating robe and cap. He looked at the anxious faces and his lips were compressed, tight and thin.

"Gentlemen," he said very quietly, "the President is dead."

There was a tragic silence for a moment, broken by the sound of Angela's sob. A wave of passionate anger swept over Dominick.

"Damn them!" he cried.

Corcoran's hand was on his arm, Corcoran, whose face was rudely lined and set now in a granite-hard mask. He was looking past Dominick . . . out the window over the rooftops of the city.

"We have fought for a country, not a man," he said. "The President has died for that country, and his death will insure the victory for which he prayed."

The door to the operating room opened and very slowly two internes wheeled out a stretcher. The body of the President rested on it, completely covered by a white sheet.

There was a sharp click as General Barrett's heels snapped together and he raised his hand in stiff salute.

THE END



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



FIRST of the month—and fanfare time again. During October (which really doesn't have much to it except Columbus Day and the usual number of week-ends) you Argonauts can look forward to a batch of fiction which even in our most blushing moments we wouldn't hesitate to label superlative.

Celebrating the annual gridiron doings is Judson P. Philips' new football novel: *Tiger on Parade*, which does for the triumphant, autumnal pigskin what the same author's *Grand National* did for the hedge-hopping thoroughbreds of England and America. It really is a grand yarn, as crisp as an October afternoon at Palmer Stadium, as exciting as a swooping, fifty-yard run to last-minute victory. Mr. Philips' story is nice, too, because you don't have to know the difference between a touch-back and a quarterback's shoulder-pads to have a good time with it.

You've been enjoying the adventures of that Galahad of the Yukon, No-Shirt McGee, in Frank Richardson Pierce's short stories. So have we. So much so that we thought No-Shirt was ready for bigger and better things. After an interchange of telegrams, Mr. Pierce sent us, by special dog-team right out of Alaska, the manuscript of *Sable*, a two-part serial depicting the somewhat harebrained doings of Mr. McGee as he leads a movie troupe to location and almost certain destruction in the Far, Far North. To appear in a mid-October issue.

We're pretty well stocked up on novelets, too, including three blue-ribbon winners in George Surdez' fine Legion tale, *The Junkman Calls*; Theodore Roscoe's *I Was the Kid with the Drum*; and Frederick

C. Painton's sequel to *Resurrection in Paris*, entitled *Coronation Interlude*. To be strewn with typical ARGOSY prodigality throughout the month.

And finally, a third serial, by Allan Vaughan Elston, *Pacific Passage*, which tells in gripping fashion of unexpected adventure and sudden death on a cruise in the South Seas. Coming late in the month.

The postman has been a frequent and welcome visitor lately, and if this department is ever going to get the top of its desk cleaned off (You really should see it; I don't see how he ever finds anything) we'd better get to the mail without further delay.

BELOW (or approximately; you never can tell where the printer is going to put it) a letter from an old friend who, though he points out some of our shortcomings, isn't mean to us at all.

L. M. BUTTON

I began reading the ARGOSY thirty-three years ago and have followed it through its many transformations.

After that it shouldn't be necessary to say I like the magazine; I would hardly have read it for that length of time if I had not. I find a story now and then which I don't care for especially but buying the ARGOSY has become such a habit now that I fear I couldn't break myself of it. As to the authors: Karl W. Detzer is of course popular. That shouldn't need any explaining either.

I notice that several ARGOSY fans are asking for a reprint of the "Ship of Ishtar" and I think it's a good idea. But how about "Under The Andes," "The Devil and Dr. Foster," and a lot more? I think there are quite a few of the old stories which would stand reprinting.

Now for the kind of stories I like best: Interplanetary; science-fiction; sport stories

(especially boxing); any of the so-called "impossible" stories; stories of the East, West, North, South or any place in between. I have one kick to make: The magazine is too small.

Now the reason for this letter. I have kept still all these years while the ARGOSY took me through school, and out into the world of hard knocks. No matter if things went wrong, ARGOSY was always there to help me forget, and the front cover of my old friend, with the broad red stripe across the top, appeared regularly to cheer me up. But those days, it appears, are gone forever. ARGOSY has a new face now and while I may become accustomed to its changed appearance in time, I fear me it will never be quite the same. This isn't a kick, I'm just mourning, and you shouldn't pay too much attention to me.

The current serial, "The Smoking Land," is a daisy and I am eagerly awaiting the next instalment.

Just a word about the kickers: Constructive criticism is all very well but a lot of the letters I read sound like just plain kicks for the sake of kicking. Personally, I think the ARGOSY is O.K. I get notions about it now and then but they soon pass away and are forgotten. On the whole, I think it is probably the finest magazine of its type on the newsstands today.

Hoping I live to read the ARGOSY another thirty-three years.

Fort Lewis, Wash.

NEXT a complaint about the radio-playing in *The Big Wind Blows*. Upon receipt of Mr. Jaffie's communication, we scampered around, worrying, and asked people—some experts, some not—what they thought. Concensus of opinion was that, while the music wouldn't come through with so little electric interference as Mr. Adams pictured, it would still be possible for a radio to carry on until smashed or otherwise discombobulated (a word we picked up somewhere in our unhappy childhood) by the storm. Perhaps it was remiss of the author not to include a few splutters in his radio passages, but who wants to read a lot of static? We have a confession to make though, Mr. Jaffie. Even if we had thought the scene only remotely possible, we are afraid that we would have let it go through as was, claiming an artistic justification. The jazz pouring through the loudspeaker, as a purely dramatic device, certainly added the punch of contrast to the roar and thud and shriek of the storm.

Now that we've had our say first, let's



HENRY PLAYS A HUNCH

Astride his trusty swivel-chair, breathing terror into the hearts of all malefactors far and near, that doughty arm of the law, Sheriff Henry Harrison Conroy, comes gallopin' down out of the Tonto hills onto the pages of ARGOSY once more. Bespatted, cane-toting and puffing just a little, Sheriff Henry gaily obstructs justice and sends an innocent man on the way to Tonto's rickety gallows. Beginning a four-part novel, by

W. C. TUTTLE

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MEN PAST 40

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offer the very last word to radio expert:

ROBERT JAFFIE

I am not a radio man, nor have I ever studied radio, but there are a few things that common sense can tell me about a radio, and one of those things is since when can a radio keep right on going during a hurricane? It seems that the radio in the story "The Big Wind Blows" is really a wonderful thing as during the fiercest part of a storm it played dance music from New York. This happened in the last installment. I may be wrong, but it does seem quite strange, doesn't it? Or maybe after all the fantastic stories published this one is O. K.

Maywood, Ill.

POET'S CORNER

To the Poetry Editor:

Herewith is a poem. It is one which was written some time ago but inasmuch as it was slightly verbose, I have cut out all superfluous words and generally revised until I believe that it is one of the greatest epic poems ever written. Originally it was:

Listen to the humming bird

(Cute, isn't it?)

On going over it carefully, I reached the decision that the word "bird" was entirely unnecessary. Any fool can see it's a bird. Next, the word "humming" is useless since it is rather obvious, if you do "listen," that the bird is humming. The article "the" is fully implied and can therefore be dispensed with. The word "listen" is a rather foolish command or request to normal persons since they are not apt to stop their ears and even more foolish if the person happens to be deaf. (Silly, don't you think?) This brings the poem to the revised state:

To.

Please note the rhythmic resonance of this. It is especially adapted to singing or recitation and if rendered with the proper inflections and feeling will produce great emotion and awe in the listeners. Thank you for considering it.

New York City. —LEO LAWSON ROGERS.

WHY THE BOSS PICKED JIM



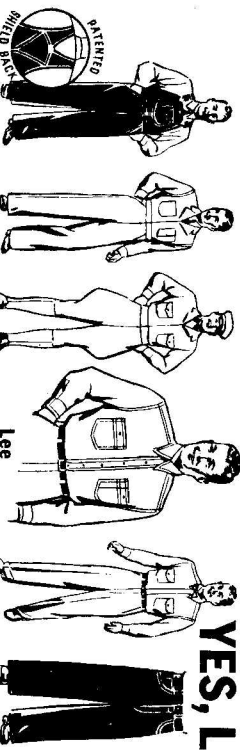
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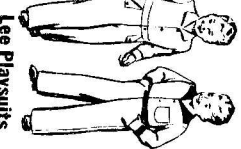
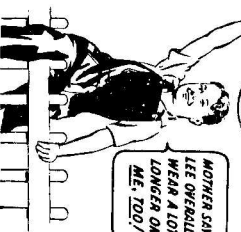
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(Right) **HAROLD "DUTCH" SMITH,** who holds Olympic diving championships, says: "I've found great pleasure in Camels. I long ago found Camels restore my energy after a strenuous meet."



(Left) **PETE DESJARDINS**—internationally famous diver—speaking: "Divers like a mild cigarette that doesn't upset nerves. That's why I prefer Camels."



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