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JULY 30

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Slimuel X. Evans *in a New Novel by* THOMPSON BURTIS

...entists Learn ...n and Where to ...edict MURDER?

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The Two-in-One Magazine

ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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Illustrating Murder Masterpiece

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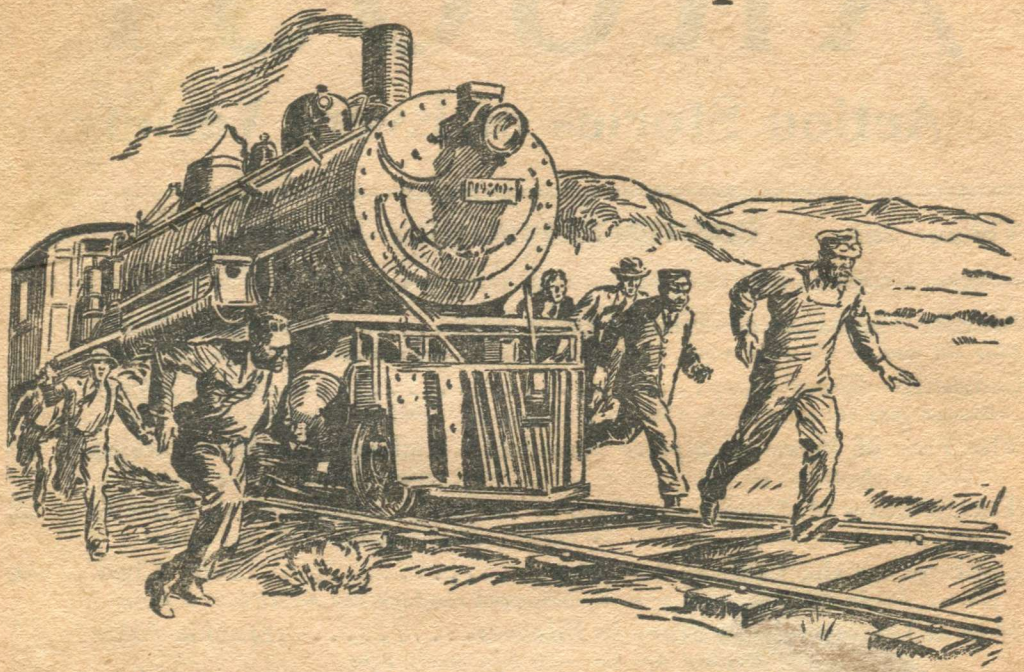
Murder Masterpiece



Captain Slimuel X. Evans, that stout-hearted bull in the china shop of crime, finds a body from the sky, smashes up his plane, and concentrates his wits on the puzzle of the fifteen old men with the money bags. An exciting novel of extra-legal hi-jinks along the Border

By THOMPSON BURTIS

Author of "Soldiers of the Storm," "Hot Airmen," etc.

CHAPTER I

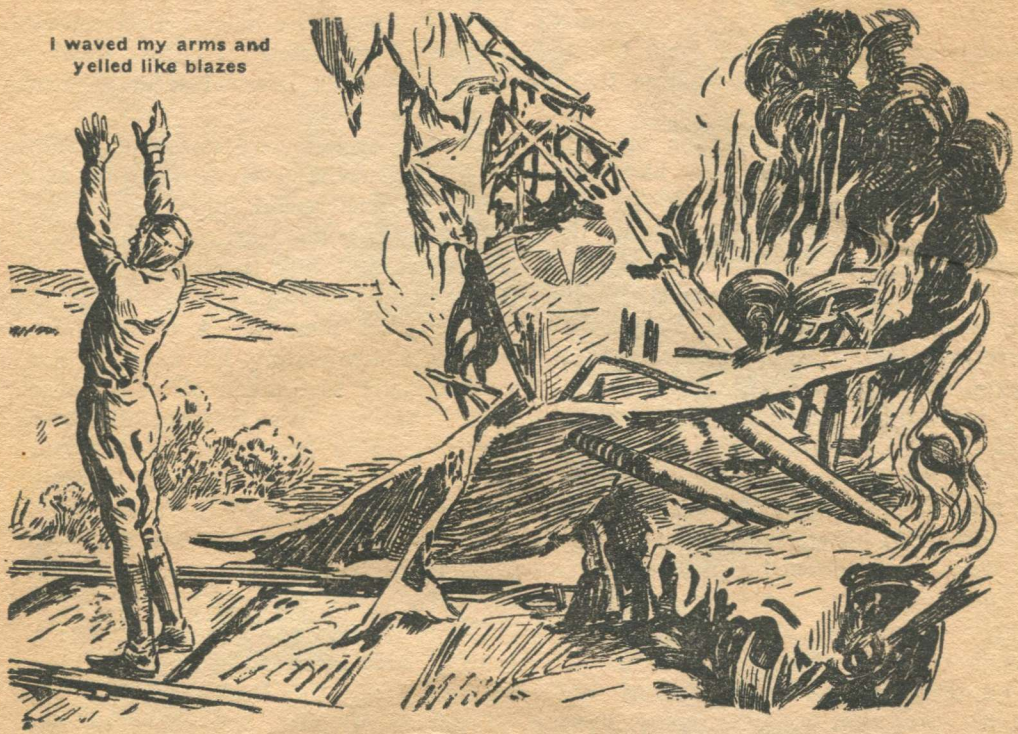
A CORPSE OF SOME IMPORTANCE

I SEEM to remember reading about a cloud that appeared on the horizon one time, no bigger than a man's hand. And before that cloud-hand got through it had delivered a knockout blow to everybody in the immediate vicinity. Well, I'm just fresh from running into a speck no bigger than a man's foot, as you might say, because it was on the ground. And before said foot got through it had delivered a series of kicks to the pantaloons of some of the biggest men in America.

All of which sounds screwy, and was, and this was the way of it:

I was flying down the single-track railroad which wanders through the two hundred miles of chapparal between San Antone, Texas, and Nueces City, which abuts on Nueces Bay, which is in turn a part of the Gulf of Mexico. I remember that the clock on the dashboard of my single-motored Lanning Bomber showed exactly twelve noon. At twelve midnight I'd be thirty-eight years old, and who wants to fight?

I was about a mile high, the radial motor was roaring along on an even keel, and I scarcely bothered to keep my eyes open. I was musing with somnolent satisfaction upon the fact that I'd been forehanded. Despite chronic anemia of the kopeck department, the liquor supply I'd already bought and paid for was suffi-



I waved my arms and yelled like blazes

cient unto my natal day. And a sufficiency for twelve flyers is something.

In my flight a birthday celebration lasted twenty-four hours, and the original cost was more than that of a bride. The upkeep for a day or two following, as we kept our hangovers polished, wasn't chicken-feed, either.

I roused myself just short of a coma, and took a casual look ahead. And I beheld a small black speck, squarely between the two shining lines of light which were the railroad tracks.

Anything was a relief from the boredom of just flying straight and level for a solid hour above a limitless sea of gray-green mesquite, so I fished out my field-glasses to see what I could see.

Leaning far out of the cockpit, and taking a firm grip on the binoculars so that the propeller wash wouldn't blast them out of my hand, I took a peek at this growing black splotch. And the sight which confronted my aged eyes temporarily renewed my youth.

It was the body of a man, dressed in conventional dark clothing.

A QUICK look at the surrounding terrain showed a long, narrow stretch of sand alongside the track which was a possibility as a landing field. I made up my mind to chance a landing and take-off, because this had none of the earmarks of a routine corpse.

For one thing no human being would be taking a constitutional at blazing high noon of a Texas summer day, a good forty miles from civilization. If by chance he were, he wouldn't be wearing clothing suitable for a stroll down Fifth Avenue. And even if you granted for the sake of argument that he might be rambling down a railroad track dressed for tea at the Savoy, you couldn't figure him being hit by the one rattletrap train per day which clanged and rocked its way over that jerkwater line at forty per, wide open.

Which train I may add would now be about thirty miles ahead of me.

Using a complicated combination of side slip, fishtail, and prayer, I got down all right, and walked over to scrutinize a gruesome scene. Reading from left to right, the elements thereof resolved themselves in this order:

His entire body, except for one leg, lay between the tracks, and had been pretty badly mangled. His left leg had been shorn off just above the knee by the wheels of the train.

As I came closer, I could see the fleshy face of an elderly man with a mane of coarse gray hair. It was a sort of sensual ill-tempered face, and the slightly overlong hair didn't seem to jibe with his jowls. I was bothered by a vague impression that I'd seen that face before.

I bent over his heart and felt his pulse and gazed into his staring eyes. The body was warm, but undeniably deceased.

"Enough to stop anybody's heart," I thought to myself, and started to go through his clothes to see who he was.

And those clothes, fellow citizens, had cost the dead man a pretty penny. Even a bull-buster from the wilds of Utah like myself recognized the feel and cut of the best money can buy, and the accessories were an elegant assortment—a tie made out of silk heavy enough to make a blanket, and a shirt that had been made to order. It didn't take a wing collar to make you think he had been somebody.

But there was no tailor's label in that suit and his pockets were a perfect vacuum—not a penny nor so much as a piece of paper therein.

My interest was now at white heat, and there was a *soupçon* of professional palpitation besides as I set to work methodically. Somewhere about him there must be some clue to his identity. I started exploring his clothes again more carefully. And as my groping fingers searched the upper outside pocket, on the left side of the coat, I noticed a tiny hole in it. A quick scrutiny of the inside showed that the coat had been pierced through as though by a large pin.

With a slight increase of blood pressure I examined what was probably the only weskit being worn in the State of Texas that day. Sure enough, a corresponding hole was visible in it, so small it might have been overlooked in a casual inspection.

Then I opened vest and shirt, pulled up his undershirt, and was looking at a chest that well repaid study.

Directly over the heart was a tiny blood-clot, scarcely bigger than the head of a large pin.

I squatted there for a moment, like Buddha contemplating his navel. I was, as you might say, taken all of a heap. High in the sky there had appeared some specks, growing larger and more numerous. I wasn't the only interested observer. The buzzards had heard the news, too.

And unless I wanted to leave that body to be eaten by them and thereby destroy all evidence, I'd have to bury it.

The blood clot was still soft. I scraped it away, and gazed down at blood seeping from a very tiny hole.

I got to my feet, and paced up and down that railroad track trying to put my thoughts in single file. The result was my moral certainty that the dead man had been stabbed by a needle-like instrument, and thrown between the cars of the train which had just passed. The murderer's idea must have been that the wheels of the train would mangle the body beyond all recognition—or at least to an extent which would obliterate all signs of as neat and nervy a killing as had crinkled my brow during ten years on the border.

On the other hand, he might have murdered without forethought, and thrown the body off the train in a panic. The instrument used, however, smacked of premeditation to me, in which case the use of the train would also have been premeditated.

And in either case, if I hadn't happened along before the buzzards, they would have left nothing but bones, and no man alive could have proved murder from the corpus delicti.

Having decided that, my brain, racing like glue, labored to another conclusion. There was but one procedure for me to take, personally and officially. That was to fly ahead of the train and get to Nueces City, its terminus, and have the law meet it in force.

I spotted a heap of old railroad ties some distance up the track and worked myself into a lather making a temporary mausoleum for the body through which the beak of no buzzard might penetrate.

Then I got into the air pronto.

As I'm easing through the ether, picking up the train, it may be wise to pause for station identification, so to speak.

I'M Captain John Evans of the Army Air Service Border Patrol along the Rio Grande. I'm known as "Slim," because I'm nearly six feet six inches tall. Making a lot of dough will never keep me out of heaven, because I'm so thin I can crawl through the eye of a needle with one hand tied behind me.

Our official status as border patrolmen was a little vague. So far as illegal entry and smuggling and such were concerned, we were Federal officers. In general, if there was a little robbery, rustling, or rapine going on in our territory or parts adjacent, we waded in and let our exact authority be determined later.

We helped Customs, Immigration, and other Federal boys whenever called on, often gave the Rangers a helping hand, and just sort of helled around wherever excitement popped, if any. As a regular diet, we patrolled the Rio Grande.

So you can see that in the case of the murder of the unknown old man I had a sort of official duty to perform.

In less time than it would take to enunciate the above biography, my wide-open Lanning had picked up the train, crawling along twenty miles ahead like a worn-out worm. I was doing one hundred and forty miles an hour, but as I nosed down to get a look at the train I left the motor wide open, and was ambling along at a very pleasing two hundred when I leveled off a few feet above the chapparal.

And what I saw as I whizzed by added another corrugation to my large collection.

Ordinarily the train consisted of a combination baggage and smoking car, an elderly passenger coach, and a Pullman constructed while they were still in the experimental stage. But today there was an extra car on the train.

It had an oversized observation platform, and on its side was painted: *Dolores*.

And I knew that the *Dolores* was the private car of David Wiley, who stood out in lonely grandeur as by all odds the richest, best known and most respected citizen of Texas. His nearest competition was like the foothills around Mount Everest—not in the same class.

The observation platform was unoccupied, and I knew why. The primeval engine on that line threw out enough soft coal to smother any one hardy enough to ride a rear platform. Instinctively I tied up the richness of the dead man's apparel with David Wiley's private car—and anyone rating a Wiley invitation likewise rated a front-page obituary and plush-covered pallbearers anywhere in Texas.

Deep in what I sometimes refer to as thought, I forgot to wave at Hank Sellers, the engineer. Local legend had it that if Hank would shave the walrus mustache which whipped in the Texas breezes, the speed of the train he skippered would be increased a good ten miles an hour.

I took me a good zoom to a thousand feet, and wasted no more time on getting altitude. Height meant no additional safety in that country, for if a forced landing became necessary, a man could be in the stratosphere, and still be within gliding distance of nothing but mesquite.

Which is just what happened. All of a sudden the motor threw a shoe and started limping on three legs, and oil started spraying back. Hot oil in the schnozzle is not only unpleasant in itself,

but it gives rise to a very unsociable feeling toward the world as one realized that the oil line had broken, that his goggles and windshield are opaque, and that one is far up the creek with holes in the canoe.

I cut the ignition, tore off my goggles, and surveyed the scenery through the haze of sulphurous smoke which emanated from my cursing mouth. It didn't take a mental giant to decide forthwith that the railroad track itself was the only place to land. Landing a plane in trees at fifty miles an hour or so, comes under the heading of too strenuous a sport for an old man of thirty-eight.

I was ten miles ahead of the train as I glided down with a dead stick toward the uneven roadbed below me. I stalled the Lanning as much as I could, and her tires hit the ties at around forty miles an hour. We bobbled and bounced along like a bucking broncho with delirium tremens, and finally the nose snapped down, the tail whirled over, and Captain Slimuel X. Evans folded his arms around his head and himself into a neat little ball in the cockpit. Amid the din of tearing linen and clanging metal and other assorted noises appertaining to a first-class crack-up, we came to rest with me hanging upside down on my safety belt, my head a few inches from the ties.

I CRAWLED out with considerable celerity, it being too hot a day for fire to be comfortable, and waited not on the order of my going. As I started to gallop up the track to flag the train I was thinking that now I'd brought down more American planes than Baron Von Richthofen.

I hadn't any more than started, either, when the train puffed into sight, so I stopped and waved. Hank Sellers had observed more than one railroad-track landing during the years of the border patrol's existence, so as he came to a stop right alongside where I stood, he remarked:

"You'd cover more ground with them things if you'd take the wings off 'em."

Oh, well, once a railroad man always a railroad man, I guess.

Conductor and crew were likewise veterans in such matters, so in no time at all the passengers had been herded back into the train, and by the time the other people aboard were getting curious we had the wreckage pried off the track, and I was a free passenger as the train got under way.

I knew fat old Ike Rawson, the conductor, could keep his mouth shut. In one corner of the swaying daycoach I had the pleasure of seeing his crinkled eyes widen spasmodically as I told him what I'd found along the right of way.

"He's one o' Dave Wiley's guests!" he drawled very slowly. "Ain't but the three passengers you see in this daycoach, and none in the Pullman."

"Listen, Ike," I said. "Is there any member of the crew that could possibly be suspected?"

"Course not—you know that's well as I do," the fat conductor said. "Furthermore, they all been up in the baggage car, as per usual, the hull trip. Why, I've knowed 'em all from twenty years up—"

"I know. Just checking them off," I nodded. "Now about the daycoach passengers?"

"Two fat Mexican women—and old Daddy Burch, comin' back from the hospital in San Antone! He couldn't swat a fly hard enough to kill it."

He pulled at his tobacco-stained mustache nervously, and his fat face was woebegone. "Boy, will there be hell t' pay about this!" he said, and I could see his beefy hand tremble.

Ordinarily he was about as nervous as a well fed hog, which charming beast he somewhat resembled.

His worried little eyes stared into mine.

"Know who Dave Wiley's got back there?" he demanded, his throaty voice trembling a little. "Just an ex-Secretary of the Treasury, Arthur Morton—and a dozen more of the biggest and wealthiest men in this country, that's who!"

My back hair waved gently as I digested this information. Whoever had committed murder had done it in fast company.

"Don't say a word," I commanded. "That's official, Ike. And take me back to that private car, pronto!"

CHAPTER II

RAFFLE IN CANVAS

WHEN we hit the Pullman I saw the smartly hatted head of a girl, whose back was toward us. At the very end of the car, four men in a section were seated at a table, eating.

"Thought you said there were no Pullman passengers," I whispered to the distraught fat man.

He stopped and faced me.

"That's Dolores Wiley—Dave's adopted daughter," he whispered. "She's been ridin' up here so's not t' git in the way o' the men, I guess.

She evidently hadn't heard us above the noise of the train, which sounded like a battle in a boiler factory anyway. I got a look at her face in the little mirror set between the windows.

Her face was dark and sullenly beautiful—olive skin, big velvet eyes, and blue-black hair making an ensemble worth a respectful leer from any man. But it was not as a nationally famous connoisseur of feminine loveliness that I continued my ogle.

It was because her mouth was working nervously, and because the hand in which her chin was cupped as she rested her elbow on the window sill was trembling so that the motion of the train could not be solely responsible. If ever I saw a person whose every nerve was jumping, I saw it in Dolores Wiley.

I'd have given anything to be able to turn and look at her as I passed, and get her reaction to my uniform-boots, breeches and khaki shirt, but there's a shrinking violet somewhere in my ancestry.

The two men at the table who were facing me gazed at me with interest much less than that with which I favored them.

One was a little white-haired man with an aristocratic, gentle face whom I recognized as Arthur Morton, former cabinet member and one of the three or four richest men in the world. And the mammoth gentleman next to him was John Penrose Corbin, America's leading financier. He had bristling eyebrows and a heavy mustache.

"They been eatin' and playin' cards up here in this car because the *Dolores* is so full," Ike told me as we reached the Pullman door. "Honest, Slim, I don't believe a railroad ever carried as much dough as I'm carryin' today!"

I stopped on the platform, and what I saw was the clincher for my theory of the murder. Ordinarily the antedeluvian Pullman had been the last car on the train. It was not provided with an apron to cover the space between its platform and that of the private car. Ike had indicated that Wiley's guests had made frequent trips between the *Dolores* and the Pullman for purpose of eating and bridge.

It would have been a leadpipe cinch for a nervy murderer to draw his victim close to the vestibule door, stab him, and drop his body between the cars to the track below. They would be invisible to passengers, if any, in the Pullman, and the door into the *Dolores* had no window.

While I was making my inspection, a round and copper-colored Negro emerged from the *Dolores,* tray in hand, and expertly navigated the swaying platforms, into the Pullman.

I nodded at Ike Rawson, and he led me into Wiley's rolling residence. We went down a sort of hallway between kitchen and compartments and such, and emerged into the lounge which took up the rear end of the car. Gathered there were more than a dozen men, all looking as though they were about to say:

"Buy me a hundred thousand General Motors," or "The Rolls Royce tonight, Farquar."

RAWSON steered me up to a huge gray bull of a man whom I recognized as Texas' leading citizen. Wiley, whose custom it was to add a hundred-dollar Stetson to Bond Street clothes, was an ex-cowpuncher who'd become a rancher, and then found that there was oil enough on his property to float the navies of the world. From then on about everything he'd touched had turned to gold.

When he went in for horse-racing he got the champion three-year-old of the year and, rumor said, had won a million on him before the season was over. Same with real estate or speculating in cattle or having a whirl at Wall Street or the Chicago grain pit. And in addition to being a jovial buccaneer of big business and sport, he was the type of good Southern Methodist who said his prayers every day to give God the benefit of his advice.

He had the bold handsome face of a cowtown Caesar, with bristling white eyebrows, and a voice that could give orders above the roar of a stampede—or even that train.

He crushed my hand with a hearty: "Glad to meet you, Captain! Heard a lot about you and the other boys on the patrol. You machine-gunned 'Honeyboy' Drake some time back, didn't you?"

He was referring to a pretty famous bank-robber that I'd shot from the air while he was hightailing it for the border.

I nodded. The train was slowing now to take on water, so a man could hear himself think.

"Great work!" roared the Gargantuan old pioneer. He turned to the carful of men—three of whom I noticed were young—and his hearty voice rang out as he gripped one of my weedy arms.

"Gents, meet Captain Slim Evans, of the Border Patrol—the man that nicked 'Honeyboy' Drake a little while back. Some of these fellows own a lot of banks, Captain—they ought to take up a collection for you."

I was embarrassed, so I said: "I was in the air, so the thing had all the earmarks of a battle to the death between a man with a shotgun and a clay pigeon."

Quite a lot of them laughed. I recognized Homer Macey, maker of the Macey line of automobiles, because his picture adorned the ads for his cars; and also George M. Knight, whose long horse face was reproduced almost daily in one or the other of the biggest string of newspapers and magazines in the world. And despite the fact that I was all a-twitter to find out who the murdered man was, I forced myself to hold my tongue until I could get the topography of the terrain, so to speak.

Then Mr. Wiley hit me right between the eyes with a suggestion that was more a command. "Listen, Captain," he said, waving me to a chair. "Why don't you spend the weekend with us on my estate?"

"Huh?" I grunted. And then, with my customary suavity I asked: "Why?"

We were standing now, and the engine was taking on water, so conversation much lower than Wiley's hearty bellow could be overheard.

"Come on out on the platform and I'll tell you," he said in a raucous stage whisper. "Meanwhile take a look at that young chap—good-looking if I do say it myself—over there in the corner."

I did so as we walked toward the platform. This young fellow in the corner was long and lean, with a narrow aristocratic face and sort of languid, low-lidded eyes. He was dipping casually into a magazine, his body utterly relaxed and boredom oozing from every pore. Wiley stopped in front of him and introduced us:

"Captain Evans, my son Bruce."

Bruce made a lazy movement to get up before I stopped him. "How do you do, Captain?" he said with a slow, polite smile.

He laid aside a copy of *Popular Mechanics* with a sort of repressed sigh as though saying to himself: "Now I've got to chew the fat with this bohunk to be polite. Why won't they leave me alone?"

Which was immediately arranged for, as Wiley commanded: "Come on, Slim—"

SO out we went onto the platform. Seated there were a middle-aged and a young man, and they were the only people I'd spotted who didn't look as though they'd been swimming in dippers-full of dough since the day they were spawned.

I was introduced to Captain Murphy, who was the square-faced, shaggy-headed older man, and Lieutenant Sharp, who was the young one. He had the face of a Boston terrier set on a body of a greyhound, if you get what I mean.

"Captain and lieutenant of what?" I asked with all the tact for which the Evans' are famous.

"Nothing, right now," smiled Murphy, who had very keen and frosty green eyes and a clipped white mustache. "Once upon a time we were captain and lieutenant of detectives, New York Police."

"That interests me—professionally," I said. "May I ask what you're doing here? Bodyguards or something?"

Wiley's roaring laugh drowned the clatter of the starting train. "You're in a remarkable gathering, Slim," he chuckled. It was characteristic of the old pioneer that he was calling me Slim right from the jump. "You recognize some of the hombres inside there, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, there's fifteen head of 'em, son, and they've all got one thing in common besides having *muy dinero*. That is that every last one of them, including me, are art collectors."

"I see," I said, and now I remembered that Wiley's assembly of old masterpieces was famous, and that men like Arthur Morton and J. Penrose Corbin had built private museums to house their collections of canvases, crockery and such.

I noticed that Wiley was reverting to the colloquial speech of his cowboy youth as he said:

"Here's the layout. All these men are friends and associates of mine, and they're my guests for a week's shootin' and fishin' on my estate in Nueces Bay. I got a big island there, as you may know. But there's another reason for this get-together, too. You're going to see the biggest raffle, maybe, that's ever been held!"

I just stared at him, waiting. Maybe we were getting close to a motive for murder—and I'd better keep my mouth shut for a while.

"Here's the way of it," Wiley proceeded, lighting a cigar which was about the size of an ocean-going torpedo. "I own *Sleeping Girl* by Johann Von Trent —an old masterpiece I paid four hundred thousand dollars for in Paris, and which is worth close to three quarters of a million now if it's worth a cent. Any one o' these birds would give there eyeteeth to own it. And it happens that I'm in a spot for a few hundred thousand in cash. It also happens that I'm dead set on havin' this picture, like the rest of my collection, end up in an American museum. So what does this old cowhand figure out? He figures out a raffle'll make your eyes pop.

"Each one of these fifteen men is putting up fifty thousand dollars cash. There's fifteen chances on the picture. There'll be a drawing. The winner gets his fifty thousand back, and also the picture, meanwhile agreeing that when he dies the picture will be willed to any American museum he chooses, I get the money I need, somebody gets the picture he wants —and the losers won't miss the money!"

His bold, bronzed old face was smug with self-satisfaction.

"That *will* be a raffle," I acknowledged "I suppose these officers here are—"

"Detectives for the insurance company," Wiley concluded for me. "They'll take charge of the picture and escort it north to the home of whoever wins it. Seven hundred thousand is a lot of money —and there's one thing about collectors. A hombre that's a real nut on somethin' will do things to get an item he wants that he wouldn't do to keep himself from starvin' to death!"

I GUESS the engine was being fed, for all of a sudden the cinders started dropping on us, like a gentle rain from

Hell. "Let's adjourn to a compartment," Wiley suggested.

While we were doing so I made a swift decision. Here were two expert detectives, and here was Wiley, with no one else around. And it was time to show my hand. It sort of made my heart skip a beat to think what might happen before this thing was over—because if any one of the fifteen men aboard had their throat sprayed it was a first-page story about a major operation.

When we were settled in the master bedroom of the *Dolores,* I said: "Mr. Wiley, I don't know what you wanted to say to me concerning your son, but it will have to wait. I'm talking officially, and I'm glad Captain Murphy and Lieutenant Sharp are here to help. In the first place, look over your guests and find out if any one is missing."

Wiley stared at me, his gray eyes very bright and piercing.

"Why talk in riddles?" he demanded.

Captain Murphy stared at me, and then without a word, went out to call the roll.

Sharp also favored me with a long look. He had an opaque black eye that had a surface brilliance which gave the impression that he was looking right through you from behind an impenetrable curtain.

Murphy returned from his quick survey.

"All present and accounted for except Mr. Chapman," he stated.

"And he went up to the baggage car a while back to see that everything's all right with some of the finest huntin' dogs in the country," Wiley said complacently. "What's on yore mind?"

"If you don't mind," I said casually, "I'd like to see him. I'll take a run up forward—"

"No you won't. I want to talk to you," Wiley said flatly. "Murphy, why don't you run up to the baggage car and git Barney? Sharp, would yuh mind tellin' Allan—you know, my adopted son—I want to see him?"

Murphy's eyes were very bright and hard, and Sharp acted as though he smelled something, too. Without a word, they got up and left the compartment.

"Who is Mr. Chapman, exactly?" I enquired.

"My brother-in-law and right-hand man for years. Bug on this art stuff—assembled my collection. I like what I like, but I don't know nothin' about it."

Even at that moment I got a kick out of his lingo—he talked his cowpuncher talk as though soaking himself in every slurred syllable. Said syllables removed any lingering hope I might have had that the deceased had not been a passenger on this train.

Any member of the Wiley family eating a bowl of soup was a society item for Texas newspapers, and buying a new horse or picture was a double-column spread on the front page. I was fairly certain now that I'd seen the face of the dead man in connection with Wiley doings, and the name Chapman registered with me.

I was certain that a member of the first family of Texas had been murdered, and that I was in for it.

CHAPTER III

MOTIVE FOR A MURDER

NEVERTHELESS, I'm a bit squeamish about announcing the name of a murdered man unless I'm pretty certain of my ground, so I didn't open my mouth. Just then a big beefy young fellow of around thirty came into our cubicle.

"Captain Evans, my son—Allan Wiley," the old man introduced us. "He's really my foster-son but since I adopted him when he wasn't knee-high to a katydid, sometimes it seems like he's more my son than Bruce is!"

Allan's jovial, pleasant face broke into a wide smile, and a big paw crushed mine too hard, and he was a roaring Rotarian as he said heartily:

"Mighty glad to know you, Captain!"

I got the impression that he was barely able to restrain himself from hauling off and slapping me on the back.

At first peek he looked portly, but it was all solid flesh. He was just bigboned, with a lot of hard meat on the frame. His face was a little pear-shaped, this impression being helped by black hair which grew high on his forehead, and was parted in the middle. Even so, the jaw, a bit wider than the forehead, was not jowly at all. A pretty good-looking, impressive hombre, whose brown eyes looked as though they could be mean, on occasion.

"Sit down," Wiley ordered. "Captain Evans is spendin' the weekend with us, and I aim to have a confab right now with him about Bruce."

Just as I was about to say that I had a weekend date with a bouncing brunette at my own birthday party, Allan made an entry in the record.

"I don't want to be in on any talks about Bruce," the big fellow protested. "It doesn't look right to an outsider, and I'd be embarrassed—"

"The hell you say!" Wiley retorted. "You're stayin', and likin' it. It's just this, Captain. Bruce is my blood son. But he ain't worth a damn!"

"Now, now, Dad," Allan said deprecatingly, and that ox trying to deprecate was like a charging rhinoceros stopping to smell a violet.

"Well, it's so. He doesn't want to do anything a man ought to do, Captain. He won't hunt nor fish nor ride a horse. He won't work. Reads all the time that he ain't fiddlin' around about inventions. Now I can take inventors or leave 'em alone. But what does he work on? Trick pocketknives, and a new kind of can opener. And designing ashtrays and such, for God's sake! I wouldn't be surprised to see him start designin' a new permanent wave machine!"

I listened, waiting for a hole to open up in the conversational line that I could get through. The thought I was anxious to convey with such suavity as I could muster was that I had plenty of problems of my own, and that the life and lily-livered preoccupations of Bruce Wiley meant considerably less to me than the number of buttons on the Duke of Windsor's sleeve. But I got no chance to defend myself at all.

"Some of his stuff is good!" Allan protested.

Then I forgot myself in a very new and shiny thought.

Bruce invented gadgets, did he? Well, the weapon which had stabbed the dead man might have been quite a trick contraption at that. The blade must have been so fine, and yet so strong—

"And he fights with Barney all the time!" Wiley continued in a series of snorts. "Which in a way, I can understand—even I find it hard to get along with Barney."

"Why listen, Slim."

The old man leaned forward impressively.

"There's somethin' wrong with Bruce's head, I tell yuh—otherwise I wouldn't be talkin' to you. Would you believe that Dolores—my adopted daughter, sir, and as fine and pretty a girl as ever was born in Texas—is engaged to him—and he don't seem to give a single, solitary damn?"

BY A slight elongation of my giraffe-like neck I could see Bruce from where I sat. I took a look, and I was sorry I did. Because I caught Bruce looking squarely at me with the most ironical, know-it-all-but-don't-give-a-damn smile I've ever seen on a man's face.

Blond hair, aquiline nose, lean, aristocratic face—that languid young man had about as much of the old pepper as a Peach Melba, but for my dough he might be the toughest man on the train.

Which subject Papa proceeded to expound without lack of heat.

"Why, listen!" he exploded. "He won't even go out and get drunk once in a while, like a young man should! If he'd ever git enough git-up-an'-git to paint some town even a light shade of pink, or do any hellin' around whatever, I'd set up the drinks for the whole shebang, if it was the size of Houston!"

"Sad," I murmured wistfully. "What an opportunity for a young man!"

"Now let's git down to cases," pursued Wiley senior. "He can fly, but he never does. In fact, there's three seaplanes I bought down on the island right now. Allan here's a pilot, too. In fact, you might say that Allan, my adopted son, is everything my real son ain't!"

"You're too hard on Bruce," Allan said.

"The hell I am," snorted Wiley. "And I ain't givin' you half credit enough. Why, Slim, Allan here, in addition to almost runnin' my affairs, is such an income tax expert that a lot o' those fellows out there come to him for ways to keep their taxes down. I reckon Allan't saved me and some of my friends a couple of million in the last four years."

"We all have our different abilities," Allan said modestly, but I wondered whether he meant it.

Wiley leaned forward, tapping me on the knee with a huge finger that was like a triphammer. "Now here's what we're going to do," Wiley went on, with sublime assurance that what he was going to say was more important than any thought of mine could be. "By education and training he's eligible for a commission in the Air Service Reserve. Over the weekend you're going to persuade him to join up, and go on duty with the border patrol. You boys are men—you're twentieth-century rangers, if you ask me—and a year down in the brush with you lads'll make a man out of him! I'll see to it in Washington that he gits a year's active duty—"

"Mr. Wiley!"

It was Murphy's metallic voice, and the syllables were like steel clanging against steel.

"Yeah? Where's Barney?"

"He isn't in the baggage car, and never did get there, and he isn't on this train!" snapped Murphy, his square face set. He whirled on me. Behind him Sharp was like a coiled spring. "Now what do you know, young fellow?"

"That he was murdered and thrown off the train fifty miles back," I said quietly.

Wiley gave a sort of grunt, as though it was jarred from him.

"Keep coming," Sharp said very softly, those eyes like black agates.

I did so, in a few ill-chosen words—including the fact that all marks of identification had been removed. Wiley just sat there, as though a little dazed. The flesh seemed to have gathered about his eyes, and his face was not good to see. He was like a great cat, waiting to spring. Big Allan's mouth was slightly open, and if ever I saw a man look stupid, it was him.

Murphy clenched his fist, and from the doorway his eyes swept that carful of the biggest men in America.

"This is a hot one!" he rasped viciously. "Right under our eyes—and with all hell to pay!"

FOR a moment there was utter silence. Then I said: "Let's get a few things straight. Until the regular law takes charge at Nueces City, we're on our own, and I discovered the murder. So I'm in charge. Understand?"

Sharp stared at me from that dark, bulldog countenance. There was something deadly about him—lithe and yet terrier-like. The ordinarily genial-looking Murphy had his big jaw thrust forward like a snowplow ahead of his face. He nodded.

"Now that doesn't mean that I think I'm Sherlock Holmes," I went on. "I bow to the superior experience of you fellows. I probably wouldn't know a clue if I was properly introduced. I'm just saying that if it comes to a division of opinion on procedure—I'm boss."

"And here's what we've got to do!" blared Wiley, as though he'd suddenly been blasted out of a trance.

"Listen, Slim. My island in Nueces Bay is a mile from shore. We all know there isn't a real criminal aboard this train. Back there are famous men. We

can't have this spread over the papers of the world—after all, only one man is guilty!"

"What's on your mind, Mr. Wiley?" Murphy asked respectfully.

Allan was flushed, and sat there like a side of beef. He didn't seem to pay any attention to anybody—as though he was physically and mentally paralyzed.

"Just this," Wiley said, talking grammatically now. "Every man jack of us is going to that island. We telephone Sheriff Trowbridge from Nueces City. He's a lifelong friend—and he can bring as many trusted deputies as he wants. We put the boats out of commission, if necessary, so no one can leave the island. And right there, without ruinous and unnecessary publicity, we find the murderer—and then the papers can tell the tale without dragging innocent people into it!"

Much as I didn't want to, I saw his point. And I was sore! In my mind's eye I saw that twenty-four-hour birthday party going on without me. Then there was a little matter of a brunette I'd been sneaking up on for weeks, and I'd figured I'd throw the noose on my natal day. There'd be eleven chiseling peelots of my flight to beat my time, on my liquor—

Now I'd have to stick around a lot of old fogies, and pretend to be a detective, and I didn't give a damn about Chapman or who killed him anyway. At least, I didn't right then.

But, being a fair man, as long as everything goes my way, I couldn't be blind to the fact that it would be wrong from every angle for me to be responsible for putting this collection of the peers of our industrial realm through a wringer that might affect Wall Street, for all I knew.

Murder in that crowd was a newspaper story to make every sheet in America curl up with the heat of it. There'd be a mob of newspapermen descend on 'em that would make a White House press conference seem a total void—and life wouldn't be worth the living for days or maybe weeks.

And the men that made the story, I was convinced, hadn't committed a crime since they'd left their offices.

"OKAY," I said, "if my superiors don't object. Now let's lower the boom here, boys. In the first place, let's do our questioning, before this collection of gilt-edged bonds knows that a murder has been discovered. Check?"

"Sense!" exploded the monosyllabic Sharp.

When he said something, it was as though the word was hurled forth by some terrific inner pressure.

"So no one will be protecting anyone, except himself," nodded Murphy.

"Now, then. You were all on the train when the murder happened. Anybody notice Chapman having a private conversation with anybody—or leaving the car in somebody's company?"

None of them had. And as Murphy remarked:

"Everybody's been going back and forth all the time to eat or something. Couple of hours ago there were two bridge games going up in the Pullman. Any man on this car, including those present, could have been alone with him. Mr. Wiley, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Shoot!"

"You've made a will?"

"Shore."

"May I ask the terms of it?"

Captain Murphy came close to looking and speaking like one of the tycoons he was mingling with, but the inferences behind the subject were obvious.

The leonine Wiley seemed about to explode with a loud report, and then thought better of it. Allan was still steaming in a fog, which made me wonder no little.

"I don't mind," Wiley said finally. "After gifts and charity, the estate's divided into four equal parts—one each to Barney Chapman, and my two adopted kids, and Bruce. Barney was to git his share outright, and be sole executor of the others' shares, the kids to have the income only."

"And now that Mr. Chapman's dead?" Murphy asked suavely.

"Yeah!" snapped Sharp.

Again Wiley blew up like a balloon, and I looked around for a windbreak. Then he deflated a little, with an obvious effort.

"I know what you're getting at," he said a little thickly. "Financial motives in my family. But I reckon I've got no right to object—now. So here goes.

"Barney and me had a deal. He made his will same time I made mine. His leaves whatever he had—including what he got from me if I died first—to be divided equally among the kids. In other words, with Barney dead the kids would have what Barney had added to their original shares from me. Allan, here, was to get his outright, and act as the sole executor for Bruce and Dolores.

"But don't forget I ain't dead yet! So any motive for killing Barney—"

"And if Allan died?" Sharp interrupted.

The words were like projectiles.

"Bruce and Dolores are gittin' married. They'd share it all, with no strings attached. Allan has made his will, too, at my direction. Dolores might have sense enough to hold Bruce down to earth!"

"I see," Murphy said thoughtfully, and Sharp grinned a wolfish sort of grin.

"Yeah," he said.

No one was tactless enough to say what was obvious—that is, to everybody except the dazed Allan. He was still looking stupid without effort.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEANEST MAN IN THE WORLD

PLAIN as the nose on my face was the fact that the death of Mr. Chapman, whom Bruce admittedly hated, meant an increase of probably hundreds of thousands of dollars apiece in the inheritances of the three young people. In addition, it gave Allan his share outright, instead of in trust, and made him sole executor of an estate of several million. And David Wiley, although he didn't look it, was known to be over seventy.

Either Allan or Bruce, or both together, had plenty of motive—unless money has ceased to motivate the human race.

Suddenly Mr. Wiley stiffened, as though he had read our minds—or at least mine. What millionaire present could have conceivably killed Chapman? None, on the face of it. Which left the murder strictly a family affair—and a strangely assorted family at that.

"That's that," I said. "Now before we start prowling around—and I want to talk to the Wiley family, myself—let's get our minds clear on the thing. We agree he was stabbed by something like a long needle. That means that there must have been a sort of head or grip on one end of the weapon so the murderer could get purchase enough on it to ram it home. I imagine he probably threw it overboard, and that the sheriff's men will have to search alongside the tracks, but sooner or later we need a collection of any possible weapons we can find among the passengers. Right?"

Murphy nodded.

"I've been wondering why all marks of identification were removed, when the murderer didn't have much time to work," he said. "I figure that the criminal thought this way: That death would be considered accidental. But there was no sense of telling the guy who found it—engineer or whoever—who the corpse was. Eventually it would be *thought* to be Chapman. All of which wouldn't do the murderer any harm."

He scratched his head.

"I also figure that there ought to be two men in on it, by rights," he went on slowly. "Seems almost too much for one man to stab him on the platform, search his pockets, rip the tags out of his clothes, and throw him overboard."

As we all digested this old man Wiley burst into speech.

"There isn't so much to that," he stated thoughtfully. "In the first place, Barney had a lot of peculiarities, and one of 'em

was that he didn't have the New York tailor he patronized put any label in his clothes. Claimed his kinfolks wouldn't like it if they knew how much he paid for his duds, or that he had 'em made in New York."

"Even so," I said, "he must have carried a watch and some money and a handkerchief—"

"He carried all his papers and money, even change, in a pocketbook big as a small suitcase," Wiley stated. "Anyways, it wouldn't take a minute to grab a pocketbook and a handkerchief and a watch—"

"And throw 'em away," Murphy cut in.

"You aren't going to search folks right now, are you?" Wiley asked quickly.

"I don't believe it's necessary," Murphy said. "Any man capable of pulling off this little job would be too smart to have the evidence on him—and too smart not to wear gloves. I'll just look over the train itself, later—but the stuff'll be found thrown away, I'm sure."

"There's another point," Wiley said. "And it means, maybe, that whoever killed Barney knew him and his peculiarities well. And it's this: Barney Chapman was gittin' crazier by the day! He always was temperamental, and if it hadn't been that he was the smartest business man you ever saw, plus bein' a shark at this art stuff, I wouldn't have given him house room, even if he *was* the brother of my dead wife! What I'm gettin' at is this: everytime somebody argued with him, durin' the last few months, he'd disappear in a huff—sometimes for days. And right on this train him and me had an argument about raisin' the ante on the raffle to seventy-five thousand—"

"And he started popping off to me about the same thing, and I got sore as hell at him!" Allan contributed absentedmindedly.

"So when I missed him after we got off at Nueces City know what I'd have thought?" demanded Wiley. "I'd have thought that he'd just slipped away by himself to have a good hate for a few hours, or days."

SHARP leaned forward, and one of his few complete sentences crackled forth. He was chockful of suppressed eagerness, like a hound smelling blood.

"So maybe the murderer knew he was a little nuts, and counted on his habits, eh?"

Wiley inclined his head wordlessly. Again no one was tactless enough to say the obvious—that in all probability no one but Wiley and the three younger people would possibly be aware of all of Chapman's idiocyncrasies.

"Well, I aim to get going," I said. "As I said before, I'll take Allan and Bruce and Miss Dolores. You fellows know these big shots and I don't—"

"There's one big shot you'll take, Captain," Murphy said, and a wintry grin flickered above his undershot jaw. "That's Adam Iver—third chair on your right."

He took me to the compartment door and pointed out a disagreeable old party I'd noticed before. He had a puffy, flabby face that was blue with a closely shaved beard, and a pot belly that stuck out like an orange in an ostrich's neck. His expensive clothes were messy—covered with dandruff and cigar ashes—and from bald head to gaitered feet he wasn't attractive.

Furthermore, no one seemed to exactly yearn for his company—he just sat there drinking highballs and smoking a cigar as though he was taking out his grudge against the world by chewing the weed to death.

"How come?" I enquired.

"He's about the worst-tempered hombre that ever built a ten-foot wall around his place to keep himself from bitin' passers-by!" Wiley informed me. He was talking eagerly as though anxious to divert suspicion from his own family. "Iver there invented Iverola, that patent medicine, and some other products and his royalties are a million a year. Got about the fifth or sixth best art collection in the world—and won't let hardly a soul in to see it! Fact! And he's got a ten-foot wall around his place in California, and inside it a bunch of big dogs that bite

themselves to keep in practice while they're waitin' for some trespasser to eat up! Adam just sits inside his self-made prison with his pictures, and stews in his own venom!"

"He's been in plenty of trouble in his time," nodded Murphy. "Used to beat up people. Got a terrible temper, but his money always got him out of it. An old pirate if there ever was one. I wouldn't use that Iverola of his for anything except rat poison, maybe."

"Okay—I'll take Iver," I told them. Then, I snapped a question right into Mr. Wiley's teeth. "Mr. Wiley, do you know anybody at all with a motive for murdering your brother-in-law?"

The old man took a long, probing look at me, and there was a gleam of fear in eyes that were unaccustomed to such.

"Nobody liked him," he said with difficulty, "includin' me. But he was capable, and I hated to hurt his feelin's. He deserved what I put in my will for services rendered, although I never figured he'd outlive me. But regardless of that will, or anything else, I swear that nobody on earth that I know of had any reason, or was capable of, killin' him!"

"Thanks," I said. "Now I'll beard Mr. Iver in his dandruff."

OLD ADAM was just getting to work on a fresh drink. I eased into the chair alongside him. "You'll pardon me if I ask you a few questions—officially, as a member of the border patrol?" was my opening bid.

A protuberant and bloodshot eye rolled up at me. "What the hell have you got to ask me?" he snarled cordially.

"Whether you've had a private talk with Mr. Chapman since you've been on this train," I answered.

Meanwhile I noticed that in his wide, old-fashioned tie there was a huge pearl stickpin, like an egg on a blanket. If the pin part was in proportion to the size of the pearl, it would be long and probably sturdy enough to use as an icepick. Or spear Chapman. Fantastic? Sure. But no more fantastic than the murder itself, brethren.

Iver played with the huge gold chain across his waistcoat. There was a gleam of curiosity in his veined eyes. He treated himself to another swig of his highball.

"You can quit bothering me," he stated, "until and unless I know what it's all about. What business is it of yours whether I talked to the old goat or not?"

"I see your point," I said. "All I can tell you is this. Mr. Iver, we've got to know who was with him alone, and if you were—"

"What's happened?" he snapped.

"I can't tell you now. And officially I am warning you to say nothing to anybody."

He stared at me with those turbulent angry eyes. He seemed to rouse himself, and show a gleam of interest. Then he said abruptly: "All right. I did talk to him in the smoking room of the Pullman, and he made me so mad I couldn't see straight!"

"Why?"

"I could see Wiley's point about not taking eight hundred thousand for *Sleeping Girl*. All these fellows are down here because they want the picture. But when I offer him a cool quarter of a million for that *Holland Family* canvas, and he leaves it up to Chapman, and that old goat knows that the picture will complete my Frenchen collection, but won't sell out of pure meanness—"

"So what happened?" I interrupted the tirade. Iver's face was getting purple with rage.

"So I told him what I thought of him! Now you tell me what's happened to him, and I hope it's something serious!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," I lied as I got up. "And thanks."

CHAPTER V

HAPPY FAMILY

AS I loped forward to the Pullman I was thinking that old Adam was such a logical suspect that in any detective

story he must of necessity be perfectly innocent. And I wished heartily that I was in a book instead of that car.

Murphy and Sharp were chatting with two of the passengers. As I passed among that collection of human cash boxes I thought to myself:

"Too bad Sherlock Holmes isn't along. He's about the only famous man that isn't."

As I entered the Pullman there was no one in sight but Dolores, and she was sitting with her back to me. The train was making such a clatter, with the engine sounding as though it was bursting all its blood-vessels, that she apparently didn't hear me close the door. And neither, apparently, did Bruce Wiley, whose voice emanated to my ears from behind the curtain screening the smoking room. Always the gentleman, I indulged in a good old-fashioned eavesdrop.

"—and it's nothing to me whether you edge your way into the top spot in the Wiley family," he was saying with cool contempt. "But I'm telling you this once and for all. I'm going my own way, see, and I don't want or need your help or advice. In other words, keep your nose out of my business or I'll break it for you!"

"Why, listen, you gutless lounge lizard," came Allan's voice, choked with fury, "I'm tempted to break you in two right now—"

"Stand at ease," Bruce said with that maddening lack of heat. "You may win at first, but I will win in the end—and I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

For a minute there was silence. Then Allan said thickly:

"All right. I don't give a damn what happens to you, but I do care about your father's feelings. And we've got to stick together!"

Their poison sacs seemed to have been drained of venom for the moment. I just stood there, trying to digest the fact that to all intents and purposes Allan and Bruce Wiley hated each other. No other word could express the spirit back of the argument I had overheard.

I made up my mind on a course of procedure, and entered laughingly. Immediately I was facing them, I forgot all this carefully prearranged strategy for the bull-in-the-china-shop technique at which I am an adept.

"Tell Bruce about Chapman?" I asked Allan.

Flushed and angry, his eyes smaller because the flesh had gathered around them, he nodded unthinkingly.

"Then explain yourself!" I snapped. "You were ordered not to!"

That stung him, and his little eyes blazed. Then he said with careful self-control: "Blood is thicker than water—"

"Whose blood?" inquired Bruce, benign as an angry bush-ranger. Then he saved Allan from an attack of apoplexy by saying smoothly to me: "And I had a battle with Uncle Barney on the platform of this car and I've hated his guts for years. Does that help, or am I boring you?"

Completely at ease, he smiled engagingly.

"You damned fool!" grated Allan.

"Well, gentlemen," I said quietly, "everybody is getting off very easily, right now. A murder investigation over the teacups, so to speak. But in an hour or so we'll be on your island, and nobody will be much interested in comedy."

I turned in the doorway. The atmosphere in the little cubicle smelled of psychological poison gas.

"Right now you two seem to need a psychiatrist," I said. "You'll both need some good explanations a little later. Maybe Allan's suggestion about the two of you sticking together is a good one, if you don't let your foot slip."

I grinned at Bruce.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your shop and your trick inventions," I said. "If we can only find a finely tempered little stiletto concealed in a fountain pen or something—"

"Best of luck," Bruce smiled casually.

AND I proceeded up the aisle, holding an almost inevitable thought. Those two hombres, and Adam Iver were a short distance out of their respective minds. They were capable of bouncing off on a bias anytime.

If I got a break, perhaps Dolores would be what passes for normal in a woman, and I could find out something.

As I sat down opposite her I had a hunch that I was getting a prevue of an important pawn in the game. She was the kind of a girl who flows through men's lives like a Kansas twister. All the Wiley men must inevitably revolve around her.

"Mind if I talk to you a minute?" I smirked.

She looked at me, wide-eyed, and I half-fainted into the seat.

Her eyes were so big and deep and soft, with a haunted quality in them, that I was going down in them for the third time when she saved me by inclining her blue-black head.

Having doped out a careful plan of campaign, subtle as Socrates on a philosophical prowl, I threw it all out the window and proceeded to say: "Your uncle, Mr. Chapman, was murdered on this train about three hours ago."

Her lips parted like a lark about to sing, and her eyes snapped wider open in what I swear was exultation. Then, so abruptly that it was a shock, the expression on her sultry face changed to horror.

"You say—murdered?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"How—do you know?"

I told her, and I was thinking fast. I even noticed that she was wearing a bar-pin all of six inches long, with what looked like a very sturdy pin. When I finished, she gasped:

"But it might have been a—a mistake. He might have just fallen off—"

"Sure," I lied. "Now what I want to know from you is when you saw your uncle last, and whom you saw him with. He spent some time in the smoking room yonder, and no one knows whether he finally started for the baggage car to look at the dogs. He was waylaid by a couple of men en route, so to speak—"

She shook her head in a dazed way. "I saw nothing!" she said half hysterically. "I've—I've been worried about my personal affairs and I've been riding in a sort of trance—"

"So I noticed. And if you had seen anything you wouldn't tell me, eh?"

"Why do you say that?" she stammered.

"Well, why should you?" I said lightly. "After all, it might be a member of your adopted family that did it, and you'd naturally protect them."

Well, it seemed to me that this shot in the dark had found a target. She turned, and put her elbows on the window sill, and hid her face in her arms.

And then her whole body shook with sobs, and I'm a sucker for sobs.

I SAT there feeling like a bottled-in-bond heel of the old school, and right here it might be wise to say that yours truly is not only a human skeleton, but possessed of a long horse face calculated to make any woman in the world feel happy because she's already got a man.

Consequently, I not only can get away with being brotherly—any other attitude gives rise to hearty laughter from the lady concerned.

So I patted her heaving shoulders, and said as gently as I could: "You're terribly bothered about something, aside from Chapman. I want to be your friend, and it might be better to let me in on the inside before the real cops arrive and find it out anyway. Feel like telling me?"

"I—I know nothing of the murder," she said, her head still in her hands.

"All right," I said as I got up. "Sorry I upset you."

But I wasn't. For as I made my way back to the private car I was thinking: "First she was relieved that Chapman was dead. Then she was horrified at the idea of murder. The question is: was she horrified at the idea of murder—or at the knowledge that I *knew* it was murder?"

TO MY forthright and unsubtle mind, came a picture of an unpleasant old man running the roost in the Wiley family—an old man that all the kids wanted to get rid of. An old man that Bruce admittedly disliked—and one whom Dolores seemed glad to hear was dead.

I didn't set too much store by the financial angle. If that was the important factor in the murder, it was almost a cinch that any one capable of murdering Chapman for money would be likewise able and willing to knock off old man Wiley in due course.

On the other hand, some of Chapman's machinations might be along the line of advising the old man not to raise the allowances of his children. They might be satisfied to wait for their inheritances, providing the watchdog of the Wiley treasury was removed so that they could wangle Wiley into more immediate money.

The first family of Texas was rapidly turning out to be beautiful outwardly—and a bunch of festering sores underneath. And as I passed the smoking room, two of the aforesaid human boils emerged in the persons of Allan and Bruce.

One look at their faces, and a hunch hit me. Another murder in the Wiley family would not be surprising.

When I entered the private car, Wiley was standing at the lower end, completing a statement to his guests.

"—and possibly it wasn't murder," he was saying to his startled congregation. "It may be found that in falling off the train something accidentally pierced him. In any event, I do not want it to spoil your good time. There will be no publicity. Barney was an old man, due to go almost any time, and no blood relative of mine. Of course, I'm sorry, but I don't pretend that it'll ruin my life."

The two detectives made a beeline for me as soon as Wiley's statement was over. We adjourned to the Pullman smoking room.

"We got nothing important," Murphy said. "You?"

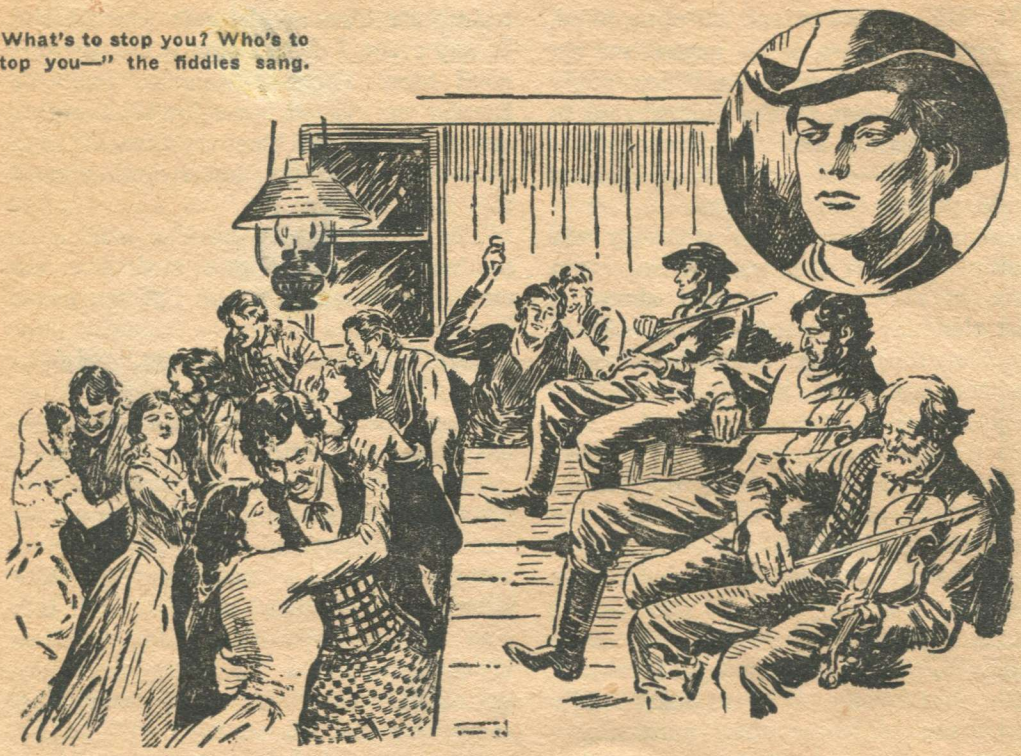
I told them what I'd seen and overheard, and then said:

"On the island with the real law present, we've got to find out who was the last to see Chapman alive, and place his movements together in chronological order. When they get scared enough they'll talk. And it sure looks like a family affair. When we've found out where the Wiley-go-round breaks down, we may have everything else we need!"

"Yeah!" exploded Sharp.

"Allan versus Bruce, Mr. Wiley versus Bruce, maybe a girl angle in it somewhere nobody can figure, and all three kids against Chapman," Murphy growled. "Add a trick will, and the fact that Allen would stand to gain plenty by Chapman's death because he'd take over Chapman's niche running the whole shebang, and you've got something to chew on. Looks to me as though the whole damn family had only one thing they agree on—that is they're glad Chapman is dead!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



"What's to stop you? Who's to stop you—" the fiddles sang.

Gunswift

By RALPH R. PERRY

Author of "Shorty Builds a Cow," "Filibusters Five," etc.

The old West was young in the days when they told this tale of the stray lamb who changed into a wolf

THE Union Pacific was only ten years old. The Texas Central railroad hadn't yet reached El Paso, and General Crook was still campaigning against Geronimo up in the Dragoon Mountains. But Ed Schieffelin had found the silver ore at Tombstone that assayed fifteen thousand dollars a ton, and that spring John Chisum burned his Fence Rail brand on fifteen thousand calves.

Throughout the Southwest chances to make big money were springing up everywhere, like the grama grass, only growing faster and higher.

Why, at Fort Sumner in New Mexico the army was feeding ten thousand Apaches on beef. A cattleman could buy steers in Texas at eighteen dollars a head and sell them to the army for thirty-five, cash and gold. Double his money, almost, within a few months, with only a little trail driving to do.

Plenty of them did it.

And if a hombre didn't have money, or a brand registered, why the dark-of-the-moon price for prime steers was five dollars a head, with plenty of buyers who were plumb blind when they came to look at brands. All a hombre needed was nerve, and his chances were big—big and growing bigger. Not everybody has cash but every cowboy has a rope and a gun, ain't he? Well!

The feeling was in the air. It made the

dancing gayer than ever that spring at Riley's *baile* at Roswell.

"What's to stop you! Who's to stop you—
Git it made, hombre, git it made!"

That's what the fiddles at Riley's *baile* were singing into most ears, though the fiddlers would have said they were playing *Sandy Land*. Everybody for fifty miles and more around was there at Riley's dancing and drinking or eating, and feeling fine.

Even the strange kid from Arizona was happy. What lay back of him, way off in Arizona, was behind by a long two weeks' ride for the best posse. The kid didn't like the name the dancers at the *baile* had saddled on him, but it was new, and different, and names didn't matter here along the Ruidoso.

What he did like was the girl he was dancing with. His own hair was light brown, but for a girl, he favored yellow. He had gray eyes, the same as hers; and though he was good looking, she was more. She was a beauty, and she'd taken a liking to him.

"I reckon you ride for the Fence Rail, Bunny," she was saying, with big gray eyes cornering up at him. "A long way off at South Spring?"

"Fact is, I'm riding chuck-line. Foremen allow I'm too young to draw top-hand's wages and I won't work as no common cow hand."

"Why, Bunny. You must be twenty-one, or twenty-two."

His face warmed. She could have said nothing that would have pleased him better. He was eighteen.

"Of course, I wouldn't ride for no outfit unless it was close to the Ruidoso now."

"Why?" She asked the woman's question.

"You know why," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jebina Allison," she answered primly, but softened the rebuke with, "Most people call me Jeb. My father named me for General J.E.B. Stuart. He rode in Stuart's cavalry, and he used to make the general's saddles. There's no good saddler, father says, between Fort Worth and Santa Fe. He runs the Lazy A ranch, but he'd like to set himself up in a saddler's shop."

"What would you like?" Bunny interrupted.

"Hush up, smarty, If you want to ride on the Ruidoso, that big brown-haired hombre is the man you've got to work for. He's Clay Tighe—a *segundo* with John Chisum's Fence Rail."

"What's the matter with working for the Lazy A? Or with that ugly hombre Clay's augerin' with? The man that looks like he'd been scalped."

"That's Baldy Symmes. H was scalped. The Apaches left him for dead in '71. My father says that when Baldy finally does get his needings, the devil will make him his *segundo* in hell." Jebina glanced sharply at the kid. He was a stranger after all. She added slowly, "You've got to work for Clay, because if you pick a little outfit like the Lazy A you won't get ahead fast enough. The little outfits can't hold enough range, father says. Whereas Baldy's kind, they get ahead *too* fast. You savvy?"

"Sure," the kid nodded. "I've been looking after myself since I was twelve. You'd like me to get ahead, Jebina?"

"I'd like anybody to get ahead, Bunny," she told him, wide-eyed, but added, "and I sure enough would like to see you riding for Clay—"

SHE broke off with a gasp that was half-scream. The argument between Clay and Baldy had flashed from altercation into gunplay. Both were drawing, but Baldy had started first, and had the edge. The whole *baile* saw that, and because they watched Baldy's hogleg clearing leather to kill, they missed the movements of the kid from Arizona.

He did not move much, but he did not hesitate at all and each act flowed into the next so that three separate things

were accomplished by one split-second sequence. He and Jebina were sitting close to the stove, directly in Baldy's line of fire. The kid stooped. As he bent, his shoulders thrust Jebina behind the stove and his hand closed on a mesquite root piled there for fuel. He threw the root at the gunfighters backhanded, without straightening up.

He was not a big man, but his arms were long and his shoulders powerful. The heavy root hit Clay Tighe in the back of the head and dropped him like an oat sack. He tumbled at Baldy's feet as the Indian fighter's six-gun cleared the holster.

For Baldy to have shot would have been plain murder. He yelled:

"Who threw that? Who butted into my play?"

"Me," said the kid. "No gent can throw lead toward any lady I'm with when the only stove I can shove her behind is a tin stove." He rose making a gesture toward the thin sheet metal with his left hand. His right hand hung naturally at his side; not poised, not tense, but ready to slap gun butt before Baldy could wink.

"I didn't aim to spoil your play especially, suh," the kid went on calmly. "Fact it, I was nowise particular which of you the root hit."

From the floor Clay Tighe muttered thickly, "I had him shaded. I'd shore a-got him—"

"You're plumb wrong," said the kid. "If you do think so, you're a damn fool." The Fence Rail cowboys were moving toward their foreman, and other riders as lean and hard bitten were drifting into position to back Baldy. Nevertheless the kid all but imperceptibly relaxed. First of all the crowd he recognized that there might be plenty more talk, there would be no shooting. He bowed to Jebina.

"I'll promenade you to your father, ma'am, and thank you kindly for that dance," he said. "I aim to step outside a spell, but if you save me the next polka I reckon I'll be back to claim it."

The gray eyes swept the group of cowboys and the gang of rustlers. With Jebina on his arm the kid walked between Baldy and Clay to a small, worried looking man with a scraggly gray chin beard who was standing near the door. With a nod to Shiloh Allison and a smile to Jebina, he stepped outside into the starlight.

Fifteen minutes he was back, dancing the polka with Jebina. No one followed him—then. Yet twice, before the dance broke up, a man sought him out.

Clay Tighe came early, and alone, trudging up to him as he drank at the barrel. "Whether you were right or wrong, kid, you shamed me public," Clay said heavily. "I cain't have you riding anywhere's on our range and go on bein' foreman for the Fence Rail."

"Your range is most of New Mexico."

"Yep," Clay agreed. "You better go get you a job in Texas, or up North. I got nothing against you personal, you savvy?"

"You sure?" the kid demanded. "Fence Rail steers are being drove off in broad daylight in bunches of hundreds. Any rustlers you catch can always seem to kick the door of the jail off. Seems like you wouldn't be so touchy—unless it's the partner I pick with for dancin' that pesters you."

"SHUCKS no, kid," said the foreman. "I'm married." He smiled, while his mind grappled with the greater problems. "We're bein' rustled, and even the Fence Rail ain't big enough to be bled so fast and frequent," he admitted. "However, we're doing something about that, and aim to do plenty more. I've already been made deputy in charge of the jail at Lincoln—that's how important John Chisum thinks it is.

"No, kid, I've just got to ramrod the range or quit, is all. You ride on. Hell, they're going to make money in Wyoming as fast as here. A hombre that has something seldom about him, like you, could make it there."

"When I was twelve," said the kid

with his eyes far away, "my own mother gave me the last money she had and told me to ride far, because I'd just killed a man. I've drifted—" the kid checked himself, for he had almost told his age—"ever since then. I'm sick of it. I've found what I want here, and I figure a good man can fix things like they should be, if he wants to enough. Startin' tonight, I want. So I'm stayin' and that's final, mister. But there's nothing personal, you savvy?"

The scowl gathering on Clay's stolid face was lighted suddenly by a flash of insight. Unconsciously he slipped into Spanish:

"*Vaya con Dios, hombre* . . . Sure, I savvy. More than you do, because I reckon you'll always be a kid, and that's too bad." He nodded and walked away, with his boot heels stamping the floor with the measured tread of a hangman crossing the scaffold.

The second man to seek the kid out was Baldy, who came neither alone nor openly, but stepped from among the milling ponies as the kid came to rope his mount at dawn. Two silent men drifted behind Baldy, and spread fanwise to the kid's right and left.

"You're sudden enough," Baldy challenged. "How come you got the name of Bunny?"

"It ain't right mine, quite," Bunny told him. "You come to say *adios?* Or what? Git at it."

"Clay told me where I could ride, too, but *I* didn't leave him grinning," Baldy sneered. "Clay and John Chisum figure they've pre-empted New Mexico, with all who ain't on their payroll fenced out. I figure different and any hombre that Clay don't like, I do. If you ain't a cottontail, climb on that pony and me and Frank and Pecos here will show you how you can get a thousand dollars a month."

"Tonight I ride with the Lazy A. That agreeable?" the kid answered. His gray eyes roved from face to face. They didn't care where he spent Saturday nights. Nobody but himself cared about Jebina Allison. And Baldy had the facts correct: You rode for the Fence Rail, or you fought it. For a cowboy there was no middle ground, except the thinly disguised charity of the chuck-line. The kid decided quickly and completely, as he did all things.

"I'll see you—Monday night," he answered significantly, and swung into the saddle, turning the pony toward the group of men who were harnessing up buckboards to carry their womenfolk home.

"Hell, what'd you let him sass you again for, Baldy?" growled one of the rustlers. "The kid's biggety. Acts like he was the best man that ever hit the Ruidoso."

"Let him crow," said Baldy contemptuously. "John Chisum's on the prod, and Clay Tighe's got orders to catch a rustler and hang him. You want it to be one of us, or a stranger I pick up to chuck away to the Fench Rail. Hell, Frank, you should have fought Apaches. They'll crawl through cholla cactus to get even."

MAY warmed into June. The limp-brimmed hat and worn wool pants in which the kid had ridden chuck-line were tossed out on the tin cans. He called on Jebina in a white Stetson, gray trousers, dark coat and vest, gray flannel shirt and black four-in-hand tie.

Under the two hand-carved gunbelts—the work of Shiloh Allison, and bought to please him—the kid wore a money belt that fattened week by week. He rode with Jebina every Saturday, or baited her hook and fished with her for perch in the stream that ran behind the kitchen. Yet though he came often, his visits grew shorter as the summer warmed. The early rides with Jebina were at a lope, with frequent races and laughter. By the end of June they more often walked their ponies, in silence.

July came in with hot winds that swirled the red dust up from the flats. In the midst of a duster, Clay Tighe caught

the kid in the open, driving away more than fifty Fence Rail three-year-olds. Clay and a single cowhand were hidden in a piñon thicket with Winchesters. The kid hadn't a chance.

They took him—just the two of them—to the county seat at Lincoln. The road led through many more piñon thickets and past many piles of boulders. The kid had separated from Baldy, Frank, and Pecos only a few minutes before Clay ambushed him. The three rustlers could have rescued him easily, if they'd wanted.

The kid was no fool. He let Clay tell him "as to how the Fence Rail put out them three-year-olds for a bait."

He said nothing. He knew that the jail was strengthened by a cage made of half-inch iron rods and that the door had a new lock which was the best John Chisum could buy. He rode as though he were alone, single-footing without haste to a destination that was foreordained.

Clay offered to get him a lawyer. The Fence Rail wanted a courtroom trial as well as a hanging, for it was Law they were bringing to the Ruidoso.

The kid refused; refused even to send a message to his friends. He said he had no friends.

Three days he sat in the cage, eating heartily of the meals Clay brought and amusing himself by rubbing matches to powder between strong, supple fingers. The fourth day was Saturday. Just before noon Clay ushered Jebina Allison into the kid's cell.

"She's brought you a Jeff Davis pie she baked," Clay said. "She—damn it, kid, I'll go get the rest of yo' dinner. I got to lock the cell, but—hell, kid you savvy?"

He hurried out, flushed and embarrassed. It is worse to watch a man say farewell to his girl than to hang him. The kid gave Jebina the stool with a rawhide seat, which was the only furniture in the cell, and took the sugary, gooey, crustless pie she held out.

"This Saturday, I reckoned I'd better come calling, 'stead of you," she began breathlessly. "Eat it quick, Bunny, like you were complimenting my cooking. Clay's kindly, but he's slow. See—here."

She broke off a bit of the flaky lower crust. The tip of a hacksaw blade peeped through.

"They aim to hang you, Bunny." Her face was defiant, frightened.

The kid never needed time to think. He pulled the blade from the pie, wiped it as well as he could with his fingers and handed it back.

"Slip it into your dress and carry it out," he said gently. "No, Jebbie, you got no call to do anything like this. You warned me, you argued with me, and you even told me to go away and not to call on you no more. You told me I'd git caught, and done everything to keep me out of here, and I ain't going to let you throw yourself away by getting me out thisaway. Clay and everybody would know you had brought that saw when they found the bars cut."

SHE said, clearly: "Supposin' they did?" Then, womanlike, refused to look at him. He said:

"Last Saturday, you refused to marry me. And now you say that. Why, Jebbie?"

"Last Saturday you didn't need me." She looked up. "I wouldn't marry you now if you got away, Bunny. We can't and that's all there is to it. It isn't because you were a monte dealer and a gambler, nor the men you've killed. You've always been scared to tell me how many, but I wouldn't care if you'd killed a hundred. It isn't how many, it's why, and you don't savvy that at all.

"You've been rustlin', but who hasn't some? You been arguing trying to get me ready to hear you were wild, but I knew that from the beginning, Bunny, and I didn't care. I never said I didn't love you, Bunny. Not once. You think back. But get married we can't."

"It was twelve men," he muttered, but aloud he said:

"Then what? I don't savvy, *querida*. If it ain't anything I've done, and if you

love me sure enough, why can't we marry?"

She dropped her hands helplessly in her lap. "You can't settle down. Your wildness has got something seldom about it. I can care for you, and help you out of trouble, but there's something in you I can't ever reach . . . Bunny!"

She spoke sharply. He lifted a brooding, puzzled face.

"If you sawed out, what would you do?"

"Kill Baldy Symmes," he answered.

"Supposing I asked you not to? Suppose I was waiting for you when you sawed out, would you got to Wyoming with me, and never come back?"

"Jebbie, I—reckon I couldn't. I—couldn't rest easy." He sat on the cell bunk as still as she. His expression was startled. "I reckon the real facts about me is that there is nothing I won't do *for* them I like, and nothing I'll go without doing *to* them I don't. Baldy is a sneakin', lyin' snake an'—"

"Sure, Bunny," Jebina said hopelessly. "Yet he don't matter, to us. If it wasn't him there would be someone else. You savvy now, though?"

"I'll never love anybody like you," he told her gloomily.

"If you did, Bunny, I don't reckon I could stand it," she confessed. "Won't you keep the saw? I'd like to do something for you mighty bad."

"No," he refused. "I care for you more than that." He crammed his mouth with pie, and when Clay returned the whole confection was gone. The foreman-jailer found them sitting in silence, the kid on the bunk, Jebina in the hide-bottom stool.

"Here's yo' dinner," he broke in with heavy good nature. "Bet yo' cain't stomach ordinary vittles aften them she's brought yo'. I'm sorry, Miss Jebina, but it's time yo' was goin'."

Jebbie got up promptly. The kid kissed her, picked up a match and ground the head to powder between thumb and forefinger.

Late that night he packed the ground-up powder from many match heads into the seam that bisected the seat of the hide-bottomed stool.

CLAY TIGHE always sat on that stool before he left the kid's cell. He was sitting there the following night, as usual, and the kid leaned across from the bunk to scratch a match on the hide bottom. He had lit a match that way twenty times in Clay's presence. The foreman was careful to keep the butt of his gun well away from the kid's outstretched hand, and that was all. What was there to fear in a lighted match?

This match ignited the phosphorous and sulphur and powder wood packed into the seam. There was a hiss, a puff of smoke, and for Clay, agony worse than the touch of a red-hot bar of iron.

The foreman went straight into the air, both hands clasped where blazing sulphur bit through the cloth of his trousers and clung to the flesh beneath.

The kid plucked Clay's gun from the holster and clipped him alongside the head with the barrel, not too hard. With a little smile he beat out the fire that smoldered in the foreman's trousers and bound and gagged him with strips of blanket.

He took Clay's jail keys and his gun. In the front office he searched the locked closets, and took his gunbelts and his money belt. He was in no hurry; he even stopped to scribble a note:

Clay,

This wasn't personal. I was just too busy to stay in jail.

B.

Outside, he appropriated Clay's horse, which had a carbine in the saddle boot, and set out at an easy lope into the foothills around El Capitan mountain. The quickest route to the Border was westward and then south, skirting the malpais and the Yellow Sands.

The kid did not head for the Border. At about nine o'clock he swung from the

saddle near Baldy's corral and peered through the uncurtained window of Baldy's shack. The three men he sought were there. They would be, on a Sunday night. The kid drew his gun and kicked the door wide open.

Baldy and Pecos and Frank were caught flat-footed. They had been dealing cold poker hands and the cards fluttered in a greasy shower as they came to their feet, hands going over their heads. It was not only the threat of the leveled gun which paralyzed them, but the look on the kid's face.

"Right then you had your one chance in a million, and you lost it," he said contemptuously. "Now—shuck your gunbelts. Drop them at your feet."

"Why kid! How'd you git out?" Frank babbled.

The kid said, "Shore bad news, huh?"

"Shut up, Frank," ordered Baldy, who had fought Apaches. He loosened his belt and let it fall. Pecos and Frank did the same, though their fingers fumbled more.

"When I give the word, dive for your guns and start shootin'," said the kid. "One—"

"But you got your gun out. We ain't got a chance!" Frank screamed. "Kid—let's talk this over some."

"Got more chance than you gave me. Ain't nothing to talk over," said the kid. "Three to one, ain't you? What do you reckon I am? Green?" He paused, and then took up the count. "—two—three!"

Baldy moved like a flash. The result was merely that he was first to die; the kid chopped a bullet through the top of his bald head. Frank took a slug through the forehead while still erect. Pecos was able to get his hand on his gun, but he died with it uncocked.

The kid had fired three snap shots, at three different targets, yet each bullet centered. He blew the smoke from his gun, rammed out the shells and reloaded. He felt neither elation, nor remorse. He had come to kill them. Now they were dead, as they deserved.

He blew out the lamp and shut the door carefully to keep out the coyotes, then mounted and headed east. Still he did not hurry. He had close to a hundred miles to ride before he could face John Chisum, at South Spring.

HE TIMED the ride to arrive ahead of any messenger from Lincoln. No one knew him so far from his home range, and the Fence Rail brand on Clay's horse was sufficient passport. Shortly before dinner he dismounted at John Chisum's headquarters and walked without haste or trace of excitement into John Chisum's huge adobe house.

All day long strangers came and went at South Spring. John Chisum never sat down to a meal at which places were not laid for twenty-six guests, and usually all were filled. A cowboy dusty with long riding who wandered through the halls attracted no notice.

The kid searched methodically, and it was his luck to find Chisum alone, writing at a table with his back to the open door.

The kid closed the door. John Chisum swung around in his chair to see a drawn gun in the hand of a stranger.

"I never wear a gun. The whole Southwest knows that," Chisum said.

"They say about you that your word's good, too," the kid answered. "If it ain't I'll kill you, whether you tote a gun or not. I'm here for business. I'm the hombre Clay Tighe caught rustlin' up by the Ruidoso. I'm called Bunny."

"I see," said John Chisum. He was a brave man. He added, challengingly: "Well?"

"I left Clay alive, tied up comfortable in the jail at Lincoln. Riding here, I stopped at Baldy Symmes' shack. Pecos and Frank was with him. They were rustlers, too. I left them all dead. They took me into the bunch to chuck away. For you to hang."

He paused and John Chisum repeated: "Well?"

"I've been chucked away, only not by them, the skunks." The kid's face twisted

sharply, once, and was again chill and impersonal. "I reckon I was chucked away long ago and when I tried to settle down on the Ruidoso it was plumb too late. I had the best reason ever to settle but I found I cain't. I—never mind. That's personal."

He swallowed; started again. "There ain't nothing I won't do *for* them I like, nor *to* them I don't. You believe that?"

"Yes," said John Chisum. "I can believe that, Bunny. But why tell me, over a six-shooter?"

"Because so far I've only done things *to* them I don't like. . . . There's a few small ranches up Ruidoso way. The Lazy A is one. They're all friendly with your riders. Why?"

John Chisum looked into the gray eyes and decided not to evade. "I set those people up as ranchmen in the hope they could keep the rustlers off. A small outfit can watch its stock better than a big one. I thought I'd learn from them who the rustlers were, but I haven't. Take the Lazy A, now. Shiloh Allison has never given me a rustler's name."

He paused.

"Ain't he?" the kid said. "I knew he was fit to ride the river with before you said that, but I'm glad to hear it. Shiloh ain't a cattleman, though. He'd rather sew leather than raise it. He's the best damn saddler West of the Pecos."

"Well?"

The kid unbuttoned his shirt and drew out the money belt with his left hand, tossed in onto the table.

"There's three thousand dollars," he said. "I want your range word, John Chisum, or I'll kill you. You take that and you move Shiloh Allison and his—his family, off the Lazy A. You set them up in a saddler's business. In Santa Fe or clear south in El Paso. Will you do that?"

"Seems like I'd better," said John Chisum dryly. "I will, on my range word. But why, cowboy, *why?*"

"Because they'll get ahead better. Because," the kid gulped, "after a man finds a girl like Jebina Allison all other women—are only women. She won't have me because she sees too clear what I am. She's made me see it. I'm a hombre that's going to use a gun. The best I can do is to see to it my gunfighting helps my friends."

"I see," said John Chisum softly. "And yet they call you Bunny?"

"They miscall me, and that's a name I never want to hear again," the kid said. "It isn't right mine, quite. My name's Bonney—William H. Bonney. Those that know me well call me Billy the Kid."

Heil, Forever

BERLIN is to be made into an "Eternal City." This is a scheme particularly dear to Hitler's heart since he is, among other things, a house-builder. Only last month the first cornerstone was laid with appropriate benedictions from der Fuehrer and Dr. Goebbels.

Probably the most extensive city planning project of our time, the reconstruction of Berlin will take some twenty-five years and cost 25,000,000,000 marks. But, Hitler said, the whole thing will be paid for by tourists later on. "The world will come to Germany and see for itself that Germany is the citadel of European culture and civilization." Perhaps, perhaps; but does Hitler remember that great men before him have built eternal monuments to themselves—and almost always they built tombs?

—Eric Sharpe

The Fate of Five

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Feather Foot," "Sidewalk Man," etc.

It started on a Miami racetrack—but the odds against the Hollywood hero were heavier than any bookie would give

I

THE line of smart and gleaming cars was unending. Apparently the supply of people in Miami eager to feed their money into a tote machine at the race trace was limitless.

Rod Wood, who had wandered toward the track after a look at the city's airport, wondered if the suckers were right this time. The talk in all parts of town was that the horses were more to be relied upon than the stock market or the gambling houses that the sheriff had missed and certainly much better than the chances of getting a job.

"The horses have it," Rod muttered, filling his pipe. "But horses aren't my poison."

Somewhat sardonically his eye took in the unprosperous devotees of the horses who stood close to him at the roadside. One, a thin, black-eyed fellow with no chin, held aloft to the gaze of the people in the cars a placard whereon was printed:

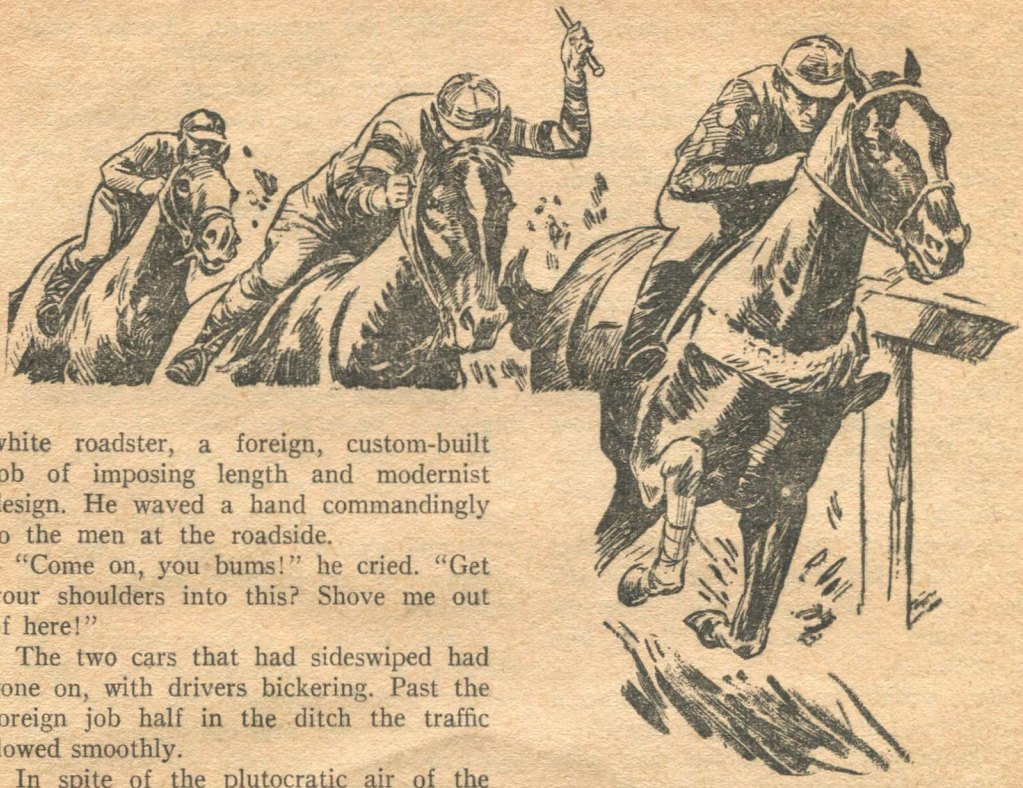
STABLE BOY

The inference was that here was a fountain of inside information concerning certain winners at long odds, ready to be tapped by anyone wise enough to risk a dollar. Most of the others had no placards; they held up in their hands cards or envelopes, the tip sheets of themselves or their masters, also certain to click in eight races out of eight. With shouts and wavings they importuned the hurrying racegoers to stop and accept a fortune for a dollar.

One tout, too anxious to press fortune on the indifferent motorists, stepped too far out into the road. A car swerved away from him against another machine. As the running-boards clashed together both drivers braked instinctively. The tipster jumped back into the shallow ditch by the road.

The man at the wheel of a gleaming white roadster behind, moving too fast to stop, tried to get past the jam on the shoulder of the road. The right wheels slipped off into the ditch. The rear tires whirred furiously, shooting sand into the air. But the car's momentum was gone. It stopped, helpless in that soft footing.

Swearing, the driver jumped out, a tall, Panama-hatted young man. He was as strikingly good looking and flashy as the



white roadster, a foreign, custom-built job of imposing length and modernist design. He waved a hand commandingly to the men at the roadside.

"Come on, you bums!" he cried. "Get your shoulders into this? Shove me out of here!"

The two cars that had sideswiped had gone on, with drivers bickering. Past the foreign job half in the ditch the traffic flowed smoothly.

In spite of the plutocratic air of the roadster the tipsters stood still or moved reluctantly. This was work and this was Florida. Only the chinless stable boy jumped at the chance.

"Right, sir!" he cried. "Here, you guys! Give her a shove!"

Rod Wood was not looking at either the car or its imperious young owner. He was staring—that was the word—at the girl who still sat in the car. She made the car look shoddy and the driver look second rate. She was beautiful, a blue-eyed, fair girl who showed both poise and good humor in this situation.

Of a sudden Rod knocked out his pipe and thrust it in his pocket. He moved, too, toward the car, almost as if hypnotized by the girl. He pushed aside the gilded youth, who was excited now and jumping about, turned a commanding eye on the huskiest of the tipsters, and organized the job.

"Get back at the wheel," he said to the driver. "And don't spin your wheels; keep them turning slowly."

The young man paused, about to take umbrage; then looked at his watch and climbed back into his seat.

"We'll miss the three o'clock race, Betty!" he moaned.

The girl smiled quietly at his over-emphatic anguish.

"Come on; all together!" Rod Wood commanded. "Shove!"

OF A sudden, while they strained at the car, a big dark blue sedan which had passed slowly, braked almost to a stop beyond the white roadster. Rod Wood, glancing that way, became aware of three faces turned toward the car. One of these men who gazed had a square head with bushy gray eyebrows that stretched, level as the lintel above a door, over his keen eyes in thick profusion. The mouth was as straight as the eyebrows.

Rod Wood had only a glimpse; then this man turned and spoke to one of his companions. The one addressed, a squat, powerful looking fellow slipped out of his

seat onto the roadside. The dark blue sedan whisked on.

This new volunteer, if he were a volunteer, moved back to the roadster and without a word joined the other workers. He had a cruel face, that chunky man, a flat, hard killer's face, with pointed, projecting ears. It was all a matter of a few seconds. But the formidable, alert countenance of the bushy-browed man in the blue car remained in Rod Wood's mind.

Under Rod's urging the bums pushed; the tires caught in the sand; the car moved. With the driver signalling wildly to warn cars behind the white roadster moved back upon solid ground.

The handsome young man at the wheel was pleased. He stopped. He forgot the three o'clock. His eyes roved over his helpers and an idea occurred to him almost visibly.

"Good work!" he said. "I'm Masterson Pollard, and I'm grateful to you boys."

"I knew you!" yelped the man with the "stable boy" placard. "I've seen you on the screen, Masterson Pollard!"

The pushers looked hopeful.

Vaguely the name meant something to Rod Wood. Old Pollard had been the enormously wealthy president of Pollard Pictures; Masterson Pollard was a screen star because of or in spite of his father's enterprise. Rod looked at the girl again. She was beautiful but not his idea of a film beauty. There was a good bit of quality behind the face or else her looks were befuddling his brain.

Masterson Pollard was levelling a finger at the men who had worked. "You—you—you—you—and you!" he said. "You're in luck. Get on the running-board."

Eagerly the alleged stable boy obeyed; quite as quickly the squat, keenly observant man who had slipped out of the dark blue sedan jumped on. Rod Wood, looking at the girl called Betty, suddenly became aware that the girl was looking at him. Her lips were quirking in quiet humor; the quirk became a smile at his startled realization of her regard.

"Well?" she murmured. "Are you going to get on the running-board?"

He leaped onto the car. She hastily looked away, at the road, at Pollard. The other two tipsters were aboard. The roadster started.

"What is this, Masterson?" Betty inquired. "Publicity?"

He shook his head, frowning. "Gratitude!" he asserted.

THE car glided smoothly toward the clubhouse entrance and into the parking space. Necks craned everywhere at the sight of that ornate equipage with the five nondescripts roosting on the running-board. With charming courtesy Pollard paid and escorted the men through the expensive if not exclusive portals of the clubhouse.

There, while a curious, smartly appareled crowd thickened around them, Pollard gravely inquired their names.

"Stickney, sir," said the chinless, black-eyed stable boy, grasping the screen star's outstretched hand almost with reverence. "I ain't been in the stables for a while, but if you want any info on—"

"Kolb's my name," said the squat man who had jumped from the blue sedan. His lips barely moved.

Rod noticed that Stickney was eyeing the hard-faced stocky fellow uneasily, almost apprehensively. It was plain that they were not strangers to each other.

An old man, gaunt and anxious looking, who still clutched his pack of tipster's envelopes, spoke next, mumbling in his embarrassment: "Eaton, sir."

"Pete Hooker," the fourth man announced briskly. He was the dingiest bird of the lot, in a dirty green seersucker suit, but he grinned all over his lean, big-boned face as he shook hands. "And I hope you're bringing me a change of luck."

"I am," Masterson Pollard assured him promptly. He looked at Rod Wood.

"Wood," Rod said, glancing pointedly at the girl.

"Pardon me!" Pollard exclaimed. "Most unforgiveable of me! Gentlemen, Miss

Betty Yorke who will one day, I'm sure, be the screen's top number."

The girl smiled at them all with a faintly reproachful eye upon Rod Wood.

"Wait here!" commanded Pollard. He hurried away toward the mutuel windows, where lines of people were backing their hunches on their horses for the three o'clock race. Stickney accompanied him obsequiously trailing half a pace behind and talking incessantly. Kolb watched them out of sight.

Rod wood strolled over to Betty Yorke. The girl was unusually, but not flamboyantly good looking. "How long have I been wasting my time by not going to the movies, Miss Yorke?" he inquired.

"You needn't be upset about it," she said evenly. "My career, if any, is very much in the future. Are you, like these others, an authority upon the future of horse races?"

He grinned, shaking his head. "Small boats are my meat. I've designed 'em, bought 'em and sold 'em. But right now I'm on vacation—living on one."

"Thank you," she said. "You know, I was curious, but—thank you."

It was plain that the interview was over. Masterson Pollard was returning, still with the cringing Stickney at his elbow. The screen star had five tickets in his hands.

"Here you are, boys," he said, handing them out. "You each get a five-dollar ticket for a horse in this race. There are only six horses so somebody will win—at twenty to one if a long shot finishes first. Good luck."

There was a short silence. Somehow, from the buildup they had hoped for more.

"But what if my horse loses, sir?" Stickney said, his chinless face dropping. Old Eaton spoke his gratitude; Rod Wood, nonplussed, thanked the screen star gravely.

Masterson Pollard frowned at Stickney's question. Already he was wearying of his game. He shrugged his shoulders. "Can I change your fate?" he demanded harshly. "If your luck is out you might as well be dead. Come on, Betty."

He put his back to them and walked off, but the girl did not follow him at once. She paused, with a compassionate look at the five.

"Thank you all for helping us," she said. "And it's impossible, but I do wish that somehow you all get something out of this."

Rod Wood smiled at her. "I'm satisfied with my luck as it stands," he said, for her ear alone, as she turned away. He handed his ticket to old Eaton. "I hope it's the winner."

The mild-eyed old tipster took it eagerly, muttering his thanks. Kolb, with a quick low word to Stickney, broke away from the group.

Stickney looked at Pollard's retreating back and then slunk after the screen star.

Pete Hooker was laughing softly. "The way they been running the sixth horse in this scamper, the one that nobody's got a ticket for, will win. But hell! I'm in the clubhouse gamblin' with the tops, ain't I?"

ROD WOOD hardly heard him. He was strolling idly after Kolb. In a corner of the stand the squat man paused a moment, lit a cigarette and glanced casually at the ticket in his hand. Then, without haste, he tore it up. His eyes, lifting from the scraps, looked narrowly into Rod Wood's.

"You might have passed it on, if you're not a gambling man," Rod Wood said to him.

"I'll pass on something else, if you don't fade," Kolb retorted in lipless, covertly threatening speech.

Rod Wood began to fill his pipe. "What's your game—and your boss's, Kolb?" he inquired slowly.

Into the squat man's face leaped a queer apprehension. Then, with a snarl, he pushed past and into the crowd. Rod Wood clamped his teeth thoughtfully on his pipestem.

A bugle sounded. The horses—six of

them—came stepping nervously out of the paddock into the track, led by a red-coated official on a bay. The three o'clock would soon be over. Rod Wood watched the high-strung fidgeting animals parade up the track past the grandstand and then turn back toward the starting gate. He felt strangely strung up himself, as if from premonition of something to come.

Some one clutched suddenly at his arm. It was old Eaton. The man's lined face was red with indignation; his voice shook when he spoke:

"I've just seen that rat Stickney pick Masterson Pollard's pocket!" he gasped. "He got away with a wallet—the quickest thing I ever saw!"

Rod Wood nodded slowly. "I wondered what that so-called stable boy did for a living besides touting," he said. "Pick-pocket seems reasonable."

"I'm looking for a cop, one of these specials," Eaton said. "Stickney passed the wallet to Kolb instantly. I can't let them get away with that after Pollard's kindness to us. I've either got to make them give it back or find—"

He rushed away.

Not too worried about Pollard's wallet, Rod dismissed it from mind and made his way toward the top of the stand to watch the race which would probably bring a stake to one of the three men. He was hoping it would be old Eaton. The mild-eyed old man, who was obviously unable to hold his own in a tough world, now had two chances of winning. Kolb had contemptuously destroyed his ticket so only Pete Hooker, the out of luck gambler, and Stickney, the pickpocket, remained in the game with Eaton.

Up at the top of the stand he looked down on swirling animation. The horses were refractory and coquettish at the starting barrier; the starters and handlers were having their difficulties. Rod's eyes wandered from the rearing, milling animals in search of Betty Yorke but he could see her nowhere. Neither could he spot Masterson Pollard or the bushy-browed, sinister master of Kolb.

Of a sudden he forgot these people. The starting bell jingled. The horses, with haunches heaving in sudden effort, burst away from the barrier. But Rod hardly knew it. The crowd was on its feet, roaring, but that, too, escaped Rod. His attention was concentrated upon a peculiar incident below him in the stand.

Against one of the steel pillars that upheld the roof, the pickpocket Stickney had collapsed. The man's face was dreadfully gray in color and he clung to the post with shaking hands as if his legs were unable to hold him upright. Fright. Yet he was making no attempt to run.

Into Rod's ears, shrill above the shouts and cries of the crowd, came a shriek. It was a cry with death in it. Faint, almost drowned out as it was, it made the hair stand on his head. A chill raced up his spine. Somewhere behind him.

II

HE WHIRLED around and looked down over the back of the high grandstand. His eyes were caught by something below, a sprawling figure. For just an instant he saw the man clawing at nothing in mid-air, falling from a window below him in the rear wall of the stand. Then the man struck the concrete below.

The body lay still and limp.

Rod Wood darted toward the nearest aisle. Bounding down the steps, he sent shouting spectators reeling out of his way. Halfway to the bottom he reversed his course to rush down the steps that led in under the upper seats of the stand. As he ran he could glimpse no window from which the man might have fallen. He continued his headlong pace to the back of the huge structure.

A man or two had already come running from nowhere to the body that lay stretched out motionless. Grimly Rod Wood looked down at it. He had been right. This was old Eaton. The impact had almost torn the frayed coat from his body, and out of the inside breast pocket had fallen two mutuel tickets.

"Huh!" said one of the spectators. "He must ha' had a poor idea of his luck. Two five-buck tickets on Number Three and Five! An' he don't even wait for the horses to finish."

Rod Wood looked up quickly, noting the position of the only window from which Eaton could have fallen. Eaton had been in no mood for suicide.

He broke through the gathering crowd and went back into the stand. In a minute or two he located a door, the door of a washroom. In the opposite wall was set the window from which Eaton had hurtled downward.

"Murder," Rod Wood told himself. "An easy matter among thousands of people, when they're all watching six horses runnong around a track. A simple murder is a smart murder."

He walked out into the crowds again. A man's not murdered for nothing. The roar of thousands had subsided into a rumble of excited conversation. The race was over. From every side Rod heard the name of the winner—Tamarind, Number 4. His lips twisted in a brief, sardonic smile. Even in death poor Eaton's luck had been out. His horses had been Three and Five. But why was he dead?

Rod looked around. Though Stickney had a motive of a sort he could not have been Eaton's murderer. He had been under Rod's eyes when Eaton fell. But Stickney's quaking terror might well mean that he had known what was to happen. Now Stickney had vanished.

It was a long time before Rod sighted the squat figure of Kolb. The chunky man with the pointed ears was standing in a corner, flat face emotionless, smoke curling from a cigarette in his fingers.

Rod walked up to him. "Got a wallet on you, Kolb?" he demanded tersely.

The squat man looked up at him with hate flaring in his eyes. For a long instant he studied Rod's determined, alert face.

"Me? No!" Kolb said. "I don't need no leather to pack my wad."

Intently Rod studied the hang of the pockets of Kolb's lightweight linen suit. His eyes hardened. There was the bulge of something that could only be a holster under his left armpit. But his pockets seemed to contain nothing as heavy or bulky as a wallet.

"Go on, search me!" Kolb said softly. "They'll think you're kiddin', friskin' me for cigarettes or somethin'."

He spread out his arms invitingly. His flat lips parted in a confident grin.

The fellow was giving himself away. If he did not know something of Pollard's stolen wallet and probably also of Eaton's killing he would not invite a search so willingly. Outwardly playful, Rod Wood tapped his pockets. He made certain that the thing inside the holster was a chunk of metal—a sizable gun. There weren't even any papers in Kolb's pockets—nothing but a packet of cigarettes, a thin roll of bills and a key tied to a small piece of cork. Rod looked curiously at that key. Boat owners sometimes fasten a key to a bit of cork or wood so that it will float if it drops overboard.

"Find anything?" Kolb asked, still grinning. "For a roadside tout, fellow, you got quite a nerve."

His twisted lips hardly moved when he spoke.

"More than I need to make you back down," Rod Wood said.

Kolb wagged his head. "Quite a guy."

ROD walked away in search of Stickney. He had not the slightest proof that Eaton's fall was other than accident or suicide. And even if he could show some local cop that it was murder he still had no bit of evidence as to who had done the killing. But Stickney knew something, and Rod had an idea that Stickney might be scared into talk.

The crowd was busy over the next race. Not the slightest rumor of Eaton's death seemed to have penetrated the stand.

In the course of his pursuit of the vanished Stickney someone touched his arm. Rod looked around. It was Betty Yorke. Her face was troubled.

"Have you seen Mr. Pollard?" she asked.

Rod shook his head. "He's probably wandering around," he said.

Betty shook her head doubtfully. "It's queer," she said. "He went away, just for an instant, and a moment or two later one of his acquaintances asked me why he had gone home. This man told me he saw Mr. Pollard behind the stand going out the exit with somebody."

Rod frowned. "When did he leave you?"

"Just before the race for which he bought those mutuel tickets."

Rod was becoming interested in Pollard. "Do you know who it was he went away with?" he asked.

"Only that he was a man with very thick, straight eyebrows," Betty replied. "I didn't see him; a messenger brought Mr. Pollard a note."

"That description sounds like someone I caught a glimpse of in a dark blue sedan," Rod said slowly. He decided not to tell her that the unprepossessing Kolb took orders from this unknown man. "Has Pollard friends in Miami?"

She shook her head. "Only acquaintances, like myself."

Rod looked at her. "Like yourself," he repeated and his voice lifted. "And what are you doing, tooting around a race track with a spoiled cub like that? If you're looking for a friend—" He grinned at her disarmingly.

Slowly the anger that had flushed her face died away. She said quietly: "I'm an actress—legitimate. So have been most of the members of my family for two generations."

"But—?"

"But I've worked three weeks in every twenty. I have an agent—a wise old theatrical war-horse who knows all the tricks of the trade. He guaranteed that being seen a day or two at the races with Masterson Pollard would do more toward getting me a real part than a year of sitting in managers' offices. And —well—I'm an actress and I want to act."

She had lifted her head and was looking at him with level, challenging eyes.

Looking at her with a queer tautness in him, he felt suddenly that he had to help this girl if he could. She was not merely a casual acquaintance he could walk away from and forget. She was gallant enough, but she didn't know that something unpleasant was going on—something that had to do with Masterson Pollard and a dead man behind the grandstand. She didn't know about Eaton, and she shouldn't be involved.

"Listen to me," he said impulsively. "If I were you I'd postpone associating with Pollard for a day or two. I have a vague feeling that Pollard is in some sort of a bad mess right now. Why don't you go back to town."

Her head was still held high. She looked at him again with that direct, steady gaze of hers.

"Sorry," she said crisply. "I'm using Pollard, I've admitted it. For that very reason I can't run away if he is in trouble."

She was right and yet she was very wrong.

"You can't possibly help—"

His eyes suddenly picked up Stickney down by the fence beside the track.

"Please let me talk to you later," he said abruptly to the girl. "Wait here, won't you? It's important." He strode toward Stickney.

THE pickpocket was easily approached. He seemed to be unconscious of the crowd or anything but his own problems. His eyes were blank until they focussed suddenly upon Rod.

"So you got Eaton!" Rod said abruptly.

Stickney shrank back, chinless jaw sagging. "I—I didn't!" he managed to get out. "I don't know nothing!"

Rod clamped his fingers around Stickney's thin arm.

"Listen!" Stickney babbled, with fear leaping in his black eyes. "I'm your friend, see? You want to stay out o' this, fellow. I wish I could."

"Go on!" Rod encouraged.

"I'm clear o' Eaton. Plenty saw me here when he got his. I c'n prove it. And I don't know nothing, but I'm tellin' you—keep clear!"

"Gang stuff?" Rod inquired contemptuously.

Stickney gulped. "Gang hell!" he denied. "I c'n get along with a mob, easy. But this guy—he uses maybe a couple men, no more, an' maybe somebody like me—somebody that don't get to know a thing."

"You know who killed Eaton—and why," Rod said, tightening his grip. "The police will want to know that."

"I'll tell you this," Stickney whispered. "Eaton ain't a thing. He got in the way, I done what I was told and got out of the way—and that's all. You keep away from Pollard an' what's happened to him an' you'll be all right."

"Pollard!" Rod said. "What is it?"

"A snatch!" Stickney breathed fearfully. "The smoothest snatch that's ever been pulled—by an expert who's in the perfect spot to pick saps an' has pulled plenty of snatches nobody ever heard about. He studies his customers, see?"

"We're getting somewhere," Rod said. "Now tell me why these snatches are so smooth. Does he murder his victims to keep them from talking?"

Stickney hesitated but Rod's eyes were compelling.

"Somebody else'd talk if that happened," Stickney said. "It ain't that killing the one he grabs bothers him; he's too smart to kill when he don't have to."

"Why doesn't he have to kill?"

"He picks a yellow pup like Pollard and he throws such a scare into him that when Pollard's let go he keeps his mouth shut. Pollard wouldn't testify if the cops had this snatcher strapped down in the electric chair—for fear of what he knew the snatcher had arranged for a couple of hoods to do to him if he did squawk."

Rod nodded thoughtfully.

"Who is—"

A good pickpocket acquires a training peculiarly his own. A big factor in that training is a getaway in a crowd. One moment Rod had Stickney in the grip of his strong, seamanly fingers and the next Stickney had twisted clear. Bent low, he squirmed into the thickest of the milling crowd. He was gone before Rod could decide which way to pursue.

Rod shrugged his shoulders and headed back to where he had left Betty Yorke. Somehow his mind kept returning to the girl. If Pollard had been lured away and kidnaped, town was the best place for her. The crowd was yammering about the current race, with ten horses smoking around the track. Rod went through like a plough through a snowdrift.

Betty Yorke was not where he had left her. He shuttled back and forth, searching the seats nearby. No Betty. Aware of a tightness in his throat he searched on.

A FAMILIAR face, big-boned, wreathed in smiles, showed in front of him. It was Pete Hooker, the dilapidated.

"Well, pal!" Hooker greeted. "I'm in the money. Tamarind was my horse—and he paid $82.40 for the five. If five bucks will help, pal, I'll—"

Rod shook his head. His grim countenance cut Hooker's flow of talk.

"Have you seen Miss Yorke?" Rod demanded.

"Sure; a couple o' minutes ago," Pete Hooker said. "She was hustling toward the exit." He pointed over the side of the grandstand. "That sawed-off tough mug, Kolb, drove her away in Pollard's lily-white roadst— What's the matter?"

"Plenty," rasped Rod. He took out his pipe and closed his teeth on the stem. Hooker watched him closely.

"Look here, Hooker," Rod said suddenly. "Does this face mean anything to you?"

Quickly, on his racing card, he pencilled a likeness of the master of Kolb. The straight, bushy brows, the square head and the level, formidable mouth, made the man easy to sketch.

Pete Hooker knit his brows. "I tell

you," he said. "I've seen that hard egg. It was when I first came here a month ago. I was in the money and for a week I got around—plenty of places—hot spots an' gambling joints. I seen him somewhere but that's all I know."

Rod nodded. He was not only worried but perplexed. He could understand why the girl might be kidnaped, too, to keep her from talking if she were with Pollard or knew anything. But to take her separately, after successfully spiriting away Pollard, was a move as unexpected as it was alarming. Puzzling over the thing, he realized suddenly that it was very important to him to know what had happened to Betty Yorke.

He had only Stickney's word that this was a kidnaping game, but he found it hard to doubt the pickpocket. His fear of the unknown snatcher had been genuine.

"What do I do now?" Rod Wood asked himself. "I suppose I ought to call a cop and step out of the picture."

He frowned. Pollard, or Pollard's people, could buy him out of trouble but Betty Yorke was in a different position. She hadn't been taken for ransom. She was in the most serious sort of danger. Any smart crook would discover, after a short time, that Betty Yorke wouldn't scare like Masterson Pollard. The girl had courage. She would help the police. She would do her utmost to bring a kidnaper to justice.

If Rod turned loose the police or the Federal Bureau of Investigation men, assuming he could get them to believe him, he would be heightening the girl's peril. In this snatch murder, for some reason, had already been done. Not an important murder but a man was dead.

"It's certainly a job for the authorities," he told himself. "But I've got just enough dope not to help them but to hurt Betty."

Reason told him that it wasn't his funeral. But he remembered how Betty had stood up straight and told him that she, because of a tenuous feeling of obligation, wasn't running away if Pollard was in trouble.

"I'm in this—up to my neck," he told himself; then added grimly, "if I can get in."

TIME enough to call in police or F.B.I. men when he had enough dope to give them a chance to pounce surely on the kidnapers, to pounce fast enough to save Betty Yorke. With that decision he felt slightly better. His teeth tightened again on the stem of his pipe.

"If my slippery friend Stickney is still around he won't get out of my grip so easily this time," he told himself. He moved to a position near a sandwich stand where he could watch the exits without being easily spotted. Stickney, he decided, would think the racetrack too hot a place for him.

Perhaps his reasoning worked. Within three minutes he saw the chinless pickpocket sidling unobtrusively out of the throng by the rail and moving toward the gates. But before Rod could intercept him he had slipped into a telephone booth.

Rod knew that the best way to hear what went on in a soundproof booth was to get in the next one. It worked well enough, though Stickney's call was not what he expected it to be.

"Miami *Tribune?*" the pickpocket demanded. "Hook me up with Ed Gammon, the town gossip guy. . . . Hello, I got a juicy paragraph for you. Never mind me, you can check the stuff easy. Here it is."

His voice became slightly wooden and inflectionless; it was plain to Rod that he was reading words that someone else had written down for him.

"Masterson Pollard, the dashing young Loch—Lochinvar of the screen, brought a beauty unknown to fame, one Betty Yorke, to the races this afternoon. They didn't pay much attention to the track. Long before the horses had quit running Masterson and Betty left—but separately. Each gave friends a different and unconvincing reason for departure. The queer part is that neither has been seen since. Masterson's luxurious roadster has also

vanished. Some wise ones don't expect a solution of the double disappearance for four or five days. Others, more charitable, predict wedding bells."

Stickney's voice changed. "Got it, Gammon? They've eloped for a while. Never mind me. G'bye."

Hot with anger, Rod destrained himself. He stood still, back to the door of the booth, until Stickney had walked twenty feet. That paragraph was obviously a lie, but one that would explain Pollard's dropping out of sight. Rod understood now why Betty had been taken, too. It made Pollard's vanishing a voluntary act.

"That's why it's a smooth snatch," he told himself. "The man behind it doesn't want the slightest fuss about it, no sensation, no search. But how about the ransom? How does he get that?"

He left the telephone booth and trailed along behind the pickpocket. Stickney turned through the nearest exit. Once outside he gestured imperatively toward the first taxicab in the row.

Rod, closing in on him, changed his tactics. Stickney had been a roadside tipster an hour ago; now he was summoning taxicabs. That meant something.

He waited until Stickney had given the driver an address. Then, with a rush, he followed the pickpocket into the cab. He pushed Stickney into a corner, with a jovial comment for the driver's benefit, and exhibited less publicly to Stickney a knotted fist.

"I'm going where you're going, wherever that is," he said softly. "Don't try to give the cabby another address."

III

STICKNEY was frightened of more than the fist. His thin body shook and his chinless countenance was full of apprehension. He watched in silence as Rod closed the slide to keep the driver's ears out of the situation.

"There's no secret about where I'm going," the pickpocket muttered. "I'm headed for Square Dan Swain's joint—the night club in town, not the gambling house. So what?"

"So where did you get the money to go there?" Rod replied softly. "I'm going to take inventory on you, Stickney."

"Like hell you—"

"I'll take it while you're conscious if you let me or while you're out if you don't," Rod interrupted. "Take off your coat; it's hot in here."

Sullenly Stickney obeyed. Rod pulled it onto his knees and went through it carefully. Being a pickpocket Stickney apparently kept his wealth in the inner breast pocket of his coat. A safety pin fastened the pocket together.

Rod whistled when he emptied the pocket. Stickney, the cadging "stable boy" of the roadside, had one hundred and twenty-four dollars.

"Out of Pollard's wallet?" he asked Stickney. "Speak up; maybe you can talk yourself out of this jam."

Sullenly Stickney nodded. "That's all I done; just lifted the poke accordin' to orders," he said. "I got the cash; *he*—" the word was accented—"just wanted the other stuff in it. An' Eaton stuck his face in so *he* used him."

"Who is *he?*"

"You'll never get a squawk out o' me," Stickney said. "I'm not tellin' no names I'm just givin' you enough to make you keep your nose out o' the play."

Rod glanced out the window at a street sign. They were on Grapeland Boulevard. That meant they were headed back to the center of Miami.

"What did he want the wallet for?"

"Listen!" the pickpocket muttered. "Pollard was back of the stand when Eaton went out that window. The guy beside him flashed a gun at him an' told him what was going to happen to Eaton before it happened. Object lesson, see? When Eaton got his, Pollard turned green and nothin' the guy with the gun told him to do was too hard, see? He was sold on the idea he'd die if he didn't play ball. That was how they got him away."

"Come to the wallet part of it," Rod demanded.

"The way it works, the guy that's snatched raises his own ransom money by letter and telegram, and he does it so nobody guesses what it's for. Usually the sap explains to the bank it's for a swell investment, quick an' secret."

Don waited.

"Well?"

"*He* likes to have plenty of dope on the sucker to make sure he's worth snatchin' an' like that. When a fellow's traveling, like Pollard, there's apt to be pointers in his poke. It wasn't till he'd had a slant at his leather that he finally decided to go ahead on Pollard after watching him for a week. He don't miss. An' you can see what you're sticking your neck out for if you tangle in this."

The pickpocket's scrawny hand tapped Rod's knee with emphasis.

"You couldn't muscle in on that layout, not if you were twice as smart as I make you, cully," he said earnestly. "Maybe you c'n push me around, but that's where you get off."

Rod laughed. "I'm just getting on," he said. "And you've given me a grand idea."

He looked down at Stickney's roll of bills which he still held in his hand. Generously he peeled off three twenties and handed them to Stickney.

"Here's something for your trouble, kid," he said. "I might even get bighearted about you later on if you—"

"Lay off that!" the pickpocket snapped. "I won't even come to your funeral."

The taxicab screeched to a stop. Rod opened the door and jumped out. He was standing in front of a two story building on one of Miami's gaudiest streets. The building was of pure white stucco and above the entrance Neon tubes twisted in simulation of waves. *Blue Seas Over Club*, proclaimed the tubes, and in smaller letters was the name of the proprietor, Dan Swain.

"Pay the cabby, Stick!" Rod commanded. "Wait for me outside."

BRISKLY he walked into the club. It was plain that the "club" stood upon no ceremony. By turning to the right he came to a long mahogany bar; the other door, closed now, apparently led into the night club.

The bar was in the doldrums apt to prevail before the boys got back from the races. A man was walking from the front window toward a door at the back.

He was a man with a square head, and though Rod had no glimpse of his face he knew that this was the furry-browed, straight-mouthed man in the blue sedan who had dispatched Kolb to the assistance of the ditched white roadster.

The man went through the door at the rear of the room. As it closed after him Rod stepped up to the bar and ordered a drink.

He jerked his head toward the vanished man.

"I see him around," he said to the barkeep. "Who is he?"

The barkeep raised his eyebrows. "I thought everybody who got around knew Square Dan," he said. "Square Dan Swain. Owns this place."

Rod nodded. As easy as that to find out, when you asked the right man. And Swain, night club and gambling house proprietor, was certainly in the perfect spot to pick wealthy saps for kidnaping purposes! His eyes turned toward the window.

He caught a glimpse of Stickney. The pickpocket's thin figure was drooping at the curb. His chinless face was a mask of indecision. Square Dan had been looking out that window a moment ago.

Rod became conscious of music and a rhythmic stamping. It came from the other side of this place, or from the rear. The club wouldn't be in operation; this was a rehearsal. He took his drink in his hand and lounged toward the back door, looking at photographs of celebrities.

It was some time before an influx of customers gave him a chance. The door opened to his hand; he stepped inside. This wasn't the back room of a saloon;

it was an office, and empty. On the wall was the picture of an imposing house, a huge, Monterey style dwelling. He looked more closely at it. *Seven House* said the caption under it. Swain's gambling joint.

The orchestra and the shuffle and stamp sounded more loudly. Rod walked through the office and, not without caution, looked through the open door.

He was gazing on the floor of the club. Ten or a dozen girls in costume were going through a routine; the orchestra was shirtsleeved but brilliant lights and spots were being used on the floor. Rod felt reasonably safe back in the gloom. There were a few men at one table; he could not make out whether the square-headed Dan Swain were among them but he caught a glimpse of Kolb as the squat man hurried toward a back door.

Rod took a few steps, keeping to the wall of the big restaurant, sighted a curtained doorway and went on. The doorway opened onto stairs. He went up softly and came out upon a hall. The air was heavy with mingled perfumes. A glance through one open door revealed that this was a dressing room. Fortunately it was empty.

Methodically he inspected every room on this second floor. But his faint hope that Betty Yorke and Pollard might be imprisoned in this place, perhaps under drugs, was swiftly dispelled. There was nothing up here but what might be expected of a night club. And not a locked door could he find in the building, save for a few obvious closets.

He returned to the stairs and crept down. As he slipped through the curtains at the bottom he found himself confronting Dan Swain. The man showed no surprise; he had been waiting.

ROD WOOD braced himself. "Just been up to see if Masterson Pollard is home," he said. His voice was casual. "Where's he keeping himself—or where are you keeping him—these days?"

Square Dan regarded him sombrely. There was no sign of anger or apprehension in that still face. But the eyes beneath the thick, gray brows were almost physically heavy as they rested on Rod. The man motioned toward the office behind the bar and turned that way without a backward glance.

Rod followed slowly, looking around warily. One of the men at the table was haranguing the girls of the floor show; the others were listening. No one but Swain had crossed the floor.

Rod entered the office at Swain's heels. He closed the door behind him and jerked a chair in front of it, so that it could not be opened without making a noise.

Swain faced him, still without visible emotion. "You look fairly intelligent," the club owner said. "And you're no cop. I think you'd like to leave town."

Rod forced a grin. "Not without traveling expenses," he said meaningly.

Dan Swain nodded dispassionately. It was plain that he accepted that without question. "It might be better to forget that," he suggested.

Rod shook his head. "I don't scare easily, like Pollard," he said. "And I've just started looking for him. He isn't here, but he shouldn't be too hard to find—he and the girl."

In spite of himself Dan Swain blinked. He did not deny the intimation.

"Why don't you ask the cops about it?" he suggested, and his gaze was intent.

Rod shook his head, meeting Swain's eyes with eyes just as probing.

"I'd rather rely on your generosity than Pollard's gratitude," he replied evenly. "It's more in my line, too."

"Hijacking a snatch." Square Dan's voice was thoughtful. "It sounds dangerous to me."

From somewhere close at hand, in such swift succession that they seemed simultaneous, came a man's shrill cry of fear and the shock of a tremendous impact. The building rocked over their heads.

In spite of himself Rod started. "What's that?" he exclaimed.

Dan Swain was unmoved. "That?" he said. "I think that's a man gone traveling—without traveling expenses."

Rod thrust out a hand, straight-armed Swain out of his way and darted out the door into the bar. In another five seconds he was on the street.

A dilapidated touring car had crashed into the immaculate white wall of the *Blue Seas Over*. The seat behind the wheel was empty and the driver was nowhere in sight. Pinned between car and wall, smashed and flattened, was the figure of a thin man.

Rod stared. The face was so contorted with agony that he had difficulty in recognizing Stickney.

The pickpocket, despite his crushed body, was still alive and conscious. His staring eyes focussed upon Rod Wood as he came rushing forward. Suddenly his lips writhed in an effort to force a word out of his painwracked, dying body.

"Seven!" he mumbled. "Sev—"

His mouth dropped forward; he collapsed, dead with the syllable in his mouth.

ROD stared hard at the empty driver's seat. The ramshackle car bore an Ohio license. Around the corner, attracted by the crash, came an anxious-eyed tourist trailed by a woman and a couple of children. The man gave vent to a cry as he saw the wrecked machine.

"My car!" he wailed. "I just parked it back there and somebody stole it! Look!"

He stopped, transfixed, eyes rigid in horror-stricken paralysis at the sight of the dead pickpocket.

"Are you sure you weren't driving it?" demanded a smooth voice at Rod's elbow.

Rod swung around. Dan Swain was there, as unmoved now in the presence of the dead pickpocket as he had been in the club.

Another murder! As simple, as impossible to prove, as the death of old Eaton. To two men Pollard's favor had brought no luck.

A crowd was gathering. Rod turned, thrust past Dan Swain and walked rapidly away. It might be Swain's game to turn him over to the police as the missing driver. Putting him that close to the police would be a dangerous move but Swain had classed him as a crook. He would count on Rod's silence.

Rod had no doubt as to who was the driver of the stolen car. Kolb had been with Swain in the club a few minutes before. Doubtless Swain had seen Stickney and himself alight from that cab and Swain had decided that Stickney had been talking too much.

"With Stickney dead I'm further than ever from finding Betty and Pollard and from any evidence against Swain that would stick," Rod warned himself.

Through his head flashed the word that Stickney had gasped out so painfully.

"Seven!" That could only mean Seven House, Swain's gambling place on the river. He had already made certain that Betty and Pollard were not here at the *Blue Seas Over*.

In dying Stickney had said more than in life.

At the sight of a strolling cop Rod stopped dead, as if commanded by the red traffic light and the jingling bell at the street crossing. The sight of the policeman brought him hard up against the question of his own next move. Stickney's killing had shown him how ruthless Dan Swain was when his smooth kidnaping turned rough. He could not doubt now that Betty Yorke was in grave peril of dying. Expediency was Swain's one law.

"Will he kill her at once?" Rod wondered feverishly. He told himself it did not seem likely, since the police were not yet in the game. Once they were in it Betty's immediate removal would seem to Swain essential and worth the risk involved. He must go on, still posing as a crook muscling in on the snatch. But if he were eliminated then the police must take up the fight. He must be sure of that.

Rod had walked no more than four blocks before he had worked out his next step. It was no good rushing to Seven House in blundering pursuit. A gambling

house had means of repelling invaders and he had only a pickpocket's dying word—or guess—to go on.

He swung into a cafe on Flagler street. Miami is a town of quick friendships, not always ripening profitably on both sides. He had no difficulty in becoming buddies with a bookie and a couple of other nondescript gentlemen at the bar. He led the talk to the question of gambling houses and listened almost patiently while the bookmaker angrily denounced them as immoral.

In ten minutes he knew all about Seven House. It was a big place, a gentleman's house, with widespread and luxuriant tropical gardens backing on a canal close to the limits of the city. Dan Swain ran it high class and not too loudly though suckers with well-filled pokes were not as plentiful as usual. Some said he wasn't even breaking even this season but Square Dan didn't seem to be needing any cash at that. Rod knew why. One snatch, with a victim carefully selected for wealth and lack of the nerve to complain, would pay more than a year's return on both places.

Refraining from placing a bet with the aggrieved bookie Rod departed. He wasted ten minutes looking for a store where, legitimately or otherwise, he might buy a pistol. But the sporting goods stores and other possibilities were closed. He finally found a place where he bought a police whistle, a poor substitute for a gun, and headed east to imposing Biscayne Boulevard. He hurried on to the yacht basin. There his little yawl, *Typee,* was tied up at one of the piers. The sun was dropping under as he reached it. His eyes glinted as he regarded his treasured little yacht. He had designed her himself. And now she might prove of vital service to him in rescuing Betty Yorke from this perilous mess.

He mastered his urge for instant action, set up his portable typewriter on the swinging table and thrust in two sheets of paper with carbon paper between.

Briefly, but neglecting no clue nor piece of proof, he typed with flying fingers what he knew of the kidnaping, the killings and Dan Swain's game. He signed the two, stuck them into envelopes and addressed one to the Federal building and the other to Police headquarters. Then he put them both into a larger envelope and scrawled on it a request that they be mailed next morning if he did not turn up. He took them along the dock to the motor cruiser of a yachtsman with whom he was casually acquainted and stuck them through a porthole onto one of the bunks. The yachtsman slept ashore. For better or worse they would not be found until after that fateful night was over.

Hastening back to *Typee* he dug out of his clothes locker a white dinner jacket. His whole game might hinge upon being inconspicuous in a well dressed crowd at the right moment. As he changed hurriedly in the tiny cabin he studied chart 847 on his swinging table. It told him how to enter the Miami River. Ditch-crawling through a big city in a dinner jacket seemed a queer way to go about solving a kidnaping, but to him it looked like the most hopeful plan.

IV

FIFTEEN minutes later he was past the Royal Palm Yacht Basin and blowing three blasts on his horn for the lift bridge at Brickell Avenue, one of the many through which the *Typee* must pass. With the motor turning over slowly he chugged past dozens of yachts lining the side of the river, into the heart of the city and on toward the outskirts. The pilot book assured him of at least six feet of water to his destination. He had no chart of the inland waterways. He kept his position in mind by means of an automobile map of the city which showed the bridges and the course of the river and the canals that entered it.

An enormous, pallid yellow moon was climbing slowly above the eastern horizon before he began to look sharply ahead for his destination. The city electrics gave

him enough light to navigate by; he looked without favor on the famed Miami moon. Its light, as it rose, shrank and became a blazing silver disc, would hinder more than help him.

Boats in this ditch were most infrequent; his one ace in the hole was that Square Dan Swain would hardly anticipate a hijacker or muscle man to come upon his place by water. But the little yawl grew more and more conspicuous as she left Biscayne Bay behind.

The last bridge—if this automobile map could be believed—opened and rumbled shut behind *Typee*. His idea was that, while Swain, Kolb and whatever employees Swain trusted kept watch upon the motor entrance, he might land unobserved at the side of the canal, stroll through the gardens, and examine and approach Seven House.

He made out the place easily enough as he throttled down and crept on up the canal. It was a huge, dominating house in the Monterey style, though with more outer windows than the best of that type favored. These windows glowed above the cocopalms, mangoes, hibiscus and other tropical verdure surrounding the house.

His heart sank as he made out details of the estate. The gardens were enclosed by an unobtrusive but unscalable wire fence; this fence ran down at either side to the bulkhead of the canal. The water side, though unfenced, was unpleasantly well lighted.

Square Dan Swain offered some accommodation for infrequent patrons in yachts or motorboats. One craft, apparently a charter boat with tall, raised outriggers for catching sailfish, already lay alongside. But if Rod were to enter from the canal he must bring his yawl to the lighted landing place and trust to luck that it was unwatched by anyone who might have his description.

Promptly enough he took that chance. He turned the yawl around and brought her alongside.

An attendant, a young fellow with nothing important on his mind, hastened to make her fast. Rod nodded to him calmly enough and stepped ashore. He noticed no sign that his presence had been particularly noted. Patrons were subjected to no inquiry whatever in Seven House; no place living upon transient visitors could make a mystery of its purpose or use cards and passwords of admission.

Swinging across the lawns and past one corner of a huge parking space, Rod circled Seven House. In spite of the screen of bushes and small palms near the building his eyes missed little. What he was searching for was some secret exit—some doorway out of which Swain could, in emergency, smuggle the girl and that golden calf, Pollard, if they were held here in hiding.

Unexpectedly the rising moon gave him some help. Its growing white light fell upon a mass of poinsettia, suspiciously thick. Rod penetrated that perfumed bit of jungle. He came upon an inconspicuous doorway. It was near the rear of the building but some distance from the regular rear door.

Gently he tried the handle. The door, a blank surface of solid wood, was locked. It would take axes and sweat to penetrate that entry. He slipped away and continued his search. He saw nothing else of interest to him.

Back near the parking space he strolled along at the heels of a gay and excited group and entered the main portal of Seven House. Well he knew he was sticking his head between an alligator's jaws. But the memory of Betty Yorke's loveliness held his mind.

WITHIN, the place was elegant and, at that hour, fairly well filled with people. Baccarat had a room to itself; so, too, did plebeian craps and popular roulette. But Rod was not looking at games; he was examining the layout of the place and the doors and stairways which might connect with what rooms that hidden door led to. It was a larger house than he expected and not an easy layout to carry in one's head.

He had been in the house five minutes before he began to suspect that his movements were watched. He quickened his strolling pace.

Soon he was sure. A man, neither Kolb nor Swain, was keeping track of him. His long, narrow face, Rod noted in a quick glance, was vaguely familiar; he might well have been the fellow who had remained in the dark blue sedan with Swain when Kolb had been dispatched to the aid of Pollard's ditched roadster. An occasional constricted movement of his left arm indicated that he might be wearing a shoulder holster.

"I'm safe enough, as long as I keep in the crowd," he told himself. "Unless Swain has some unfortunate accident rigged up for me."

He would not admit, even in his private thoughts, that this job of finding and freeing Betty and Pollard was too big for him. The hard part was that the more deeply he got into this game the more rapidly trickled away any evidence that would interest the police. Swain's tracks were well covered; two witnesses were dead. And he did not doubt that Swain had friends in official circles.

Just to make sure that his nerves were not tricking him Rod wandered out into the patio. It was sufficiently well lighted and well peopled to make it reasonably safe for him and yet he could get a better check on the trailer behind him.

A man standing motionless and looking with gloomy eyes at a flowering cactus caught Rod's attention. It was Pete Hooker, but a different Pete from the dilapidated, happy winner at the track. Though he was clad in festive evening attire that probably was fresh from the pawnshop, Hooker's big-boned face was in mourning. He greeted Rod Wood with a surly nod.

"They got me," he said. "Took me at roulette. I'm clean as a hound's tooth."

"Roulette!" Rod exclaimed. "What made a fellow like you that gets around tackle a game like roulette?"

Pete Hooker shuffled a large foot. "I knew the wheel was wired," he explained shamefacedly. "But it was this way. There was a fat, bald-headed slob in tails—looked like millionaire meat packer on the loose—and he kept bucking the game big. If ever anybody looked like a sucker it was him. Well, when he played a stack of chips on black I played a smaller stack on red. Same way with odds and evens. I figured they'd take him and pay me. But they worked it different."

He shook his head. "Square Dan Swain, hey?" he snarled. "That fat guy was just a capper for the house. It was me they were taking—and did they!"

He tapped a flat pocket. "I'm right where I was before Pollard gave me that mutuel ticket," he said. "Nowhere! That dirty crook!"

"I'm not so fond of Dan Swain myself," Rod told him softly. "And he doesn't like me. He's got a thug tailing me now—a fiddle-faced fellow with a shoulder holster bulging under his coat. Look around. D'you see him?"

Pete Hooker nodded. "In the doorway," he said. "What's the racket?"

"You're probably too wise a guy to believe it, but Swain's got Pollard and that girl hidden somewhere in this house," Rod murmured. "He's a snatcher—scientific, not crude."

"He's a snatch, all right," the gambler conceded sourly. His face sharpened. "Say, was that runt Kolb that drove the girl away from the track workin' with Swain? Kolb's here tonight."

Rod nodded. "You've got it," he said.

"Well, look!" muttered Pete Hooker. "I'm no Galahad, see? But if there was a stake in it I'd stick my neck out pretty far jerking Pollard loose from this Swain guy. It hurts, fella, to be took for a sucker. I—"

"Figure it yourself," Rod said tersely. "Would Pollard come through if rescued?"

Pete Hooker narrowed his eyes. "Oke; he would, if I nailed him for it the first five minutes after we'd dragged him clear. I'm in."

"Good!" said Rod. "Now get this; Swain knows I'm here. But I'm pretty sure I wasn't spotted until I was inside. They don't know I came the back way, by boat. And they think I'm here to snoop and to chisel my way into the snatch, not to free his prisoners."

"It's a wonder you're still alive," Pete Hooker muttered.

"No doubt they have something arranged," Rod said grimly. "But my game's not what they figure it. That's my one chance."

"So what do I do?"

Rod dropped his hand into his coat pocket, palmed the police whistle, and slipped it into Hooker's pocket.

"We split here," he said. "Go into the roulette room. In five minutes blow the police whistle. Yell that the place is raided, break some windows and run around. Get the crowd milling and shouting and rushing for the doors. They'll do it; people in a gambling house are right on edge."

"I'll panick 'em," Pete Hooker promised.

"I'll do the same in another room," Rod said. But I want you to start first, to take this long-faced crook's mind off me!"

Pete Hooker looked at his dollar watch.

"It's a bet," he said. "Five minutes. But—what's it going to get you?"

"Swain's not on the floor," Rod said. "The crowd will make it sound to him like a real raid. If Pollard and the girl are here he's got to get them away in a hurry. That will be our chance. He can't risk being caught with the goods. Meet me outside near the back."

"I hope I do," Hooker said fervently.

THEY parted, moving idly in opposite directions. Rod's trailer stuck to him. He dawdled away most of the five minutes, making no pretense of playing at any of the tables. He kept clear of the thickest of the crowds and never let the long-faced man behind him get out of close range.

Slowly the five minutes dragged on. Rod sauntered toward a doorway not far from the roulette room. As the last few seconds passed he had difficulty in keeping his movements casual. He was as tense as a bridge cable.

Of a sudden came the scream of Pete Hooker's whistle. It was followed instantly by a terrific crash of glass.

Pete was putting what he had into it. A table crashed over. The shrieks of women and the shouts of men helped him.

A second after the whistle shrilled the people in Rod's room awoke to confused action. Rod leaped through the doorway. On the other side he flung himself to the right, stopped and caught up a chair. He had hardly time to raise it before Swain's man came rushing past.

Rod let him have it. He hit hard enough to drop him to the rug.

"The place is pinched!" Rod roared, as startled eyes peered at him. "Get away, folks! Detectives! It's a raid!"

The eyes left him; the frightened suckers bolted for the door—any door.

Rod dropped onto the groggy man on the rug. His fingers slipped under the fellow's coat, toward the shoulder holster. His enemy stirred; and suddenly grabbed at his hand.

Somebody else came thumping down on Rod's back, clawing at him. He felt the blood stream from his face. Only by jerking his head did he save his eyes.

Rod risked a precious instant to drive his free fist into the jaw of the man under him. He felt him go limp. Then he squirmed around.

His attacker was a croupier, a thin little man who had scratched like a wildcat and now rushed in and clung like a monkey. His sharp nails clawed at Rod's throat. It took all Rod's strength to force him away. Then as he leaped in again Rod drove him back with a jab.

Suddenly the little man's nerve deserted him. He turned and fled.

In another moment Rod had the pistol. It was a heavy gun. He slipped it into his pocket and drove through the remnants of the crowd to the nearest window. It was screened but he kicked his way through. With a swarm of shrieking people follow-

ing his lead he sprang out onto the lawn.

The lights blinked out as he went racing around the building. He headed for that secret exit amidst the poinsettia. Through that doorway, he hoped, Swain would smuggle out Pollard and the girl.

He found the door. It was ajar. Queer! Grim-lipped he stared at it. Then he pulled out his gun. He jerked it open, ducked and went plunging in into darkness. The faint light showed he was in a passage. It was narrow and his fingers touched plaster on each side.

Deep inside the house he came to what groping hands and feet told him was a stairway leading upward. From above came no sound. He stole up the wooden steps. His gun was ready in one hand; he held a match box in his other. It seemed impossible to him that Swain could have gotten his prisoners away in such a short time.

At the top he stopped. Only the distant, muffled voices of the crowd reached his ears. He had no time to waste in caution. He lit a match. The flare of it showed him a small room without windows. There was a shut safe at one side. A couple of easy chairs of the same flamboyant upholstery as in the gaming rooms had been crowded into the place. He could see no other door. Two trays, with the remains of food on them, stood on a small table. A gold-tipped cigarette lay in one plate.

Rod took one look at that cigarette and whirled. He ran down the black stairs and stumbled at the bottom. He found the passage and bolted out of the house. Pollard had been smoking gold-tipped cigarettes that afternoon.

He ran on through the gardens toward the back of the house. That fight for the gun had taken longer than he reckoned; this search had stolen more precious time. He made out Pete Hooker, standing by a royal palm, Pete ran toward him.

"They're away!" Rod jerked out. "Seen anything?"

"I heard a house man yell something about the boss on the boat to another guy," Hooker cried. "Is there—"

For an instant Rod strained his ears. Above the dying voices of the calming crowd he made out the steady rhythm of a motor. And in a flash of enlightenment he remembered the key in Kolb's pocket that had been tied to a bit of cork. The key to the boat!

V

"COME on!" he cried. He ran toward the bank of the canal. His yawl still lay there, tall mainmast raking the moonlit sky. Down the canal was the white sheen of the other boat.

The dock attendant stood near the bulkhead, alternately staring down the waterway and toward the darkened house. Rod never slackened pace until he reached the fellow. He tackled him by the legs and flung him onto his back on the ground. He knelt on the man's chest and shoved his automatic into his neck.

"Talk fast!" Rod snapped. His eyes glared down out of his bleeding face. "Who was on that boat besides Swain? Talk!"

"A guy and a girl and Kolb," the man gasped. "What's—"

Rod leaped up off the frightened attendant and cast off the mooring lines of the yawl. Pete Hooker scrambled aboard with him. The starter whirred and the motor caught. The boat pushed slowly ahead.

Pete Hooker let out a groan of disappointment as he stared down the canal. The yawl, shuddering under full throttle was surging along through the quiet water.

"Swain's boat has got by the bridge!" he said. "Look; the guy's letting the bridge down again!"

Rod's hand was already on the horn button and he sounded three furious notes. But the bridge was rumbling down into place. The yawl was close to it. Again Rod set the horn wailing for clearance but the bridge stayed in place.

For just an instant Rod glanced up at the tall mainmast, a fine hollow spar and one he cherished.

"Get ready to dodge!" he said to Hooker through his teeth. With fingers on the throttle he sent the yawl thrusting on toward the steel barrier. From the bridge the tender yelled a warning. Rod kept the motor at full ahead. At the last moment, as the slender spar towered high above the bridge roadway, he turned the wheel a trifle.

With a crash the mainmast struck the bridge. The yawl reeled and trembled. Buckling in two places, the spar came thudding down into the water close beside them. Rod's twist of the wheel had swerved *Typee* enough to prevent the broken stick from smashing down on deck.

The full power of the propeller sent the yawl shuddering on. The top of the small jiggermast hit a girder and snapped off. The dismasted yacht passed under the bridge. Fine of line and narrow of beam the little craft swept through the water at a pace the boat ahead could not equal.

"Get that trailing wreckage aboard!" Rod snapped, jerking a hand on the mass of cordage and wires from the mast. Hooker gathered it in clumsily.

The pace of the yawl improved. The boat ahead was broad and designed for trolling speed. Under the moon its white hull showed more plainly. Hooker moved forward, staring at their quarry.

"Come back!" Rod cried sharply.

A revolver cracked and then another. Hooker flung himself down on deck. The guns roared again and again, echoing in the quiet night. On hands and knees Hooker came crawling aft to the cockpit.

"Plug you?" Rod asked curtly.

"Just in the shoulder," Pete Hooker rasped. "I'll—"

"I'm going to ram him; with the girl on board I can't cut loose until I'm sure of what I'm shooting at," Rod interrupted. "Get something heavy to fight with; tools under the companion ladder."

Pete Hooker disappeared below. Rod, watching the moving white boat close ahead, suddenly gave vent to a low cry. Hooker came scrambling up out of the cabin. A car from the direction of Seven House was running along the road by the canal, paralleling the course of the boat ahead.

"Swain's pulling in alongside the bulkhead!" Rod said sharply. "Trying to land. Hang on!"

The motorboat, with propeller threshing hard astern, was swinging in toward the wall of the canal. Rod spun his own wheel in a fever of swift action.

Bullets whined past his head; he ducked low, hands gripping the wheel. The yawl, heeling hard, headed in between the stern of the fishing boat and the concrete wall. Her bow sliced into the broad after deck.

Into clear view in the moonlight leaped the figures of Dan Swain and Kolb, crouching low, pistols in hand, waiting now for a closer shot at the men in the cockpit of the yawl. The shock of the collision flung them to their knees. They were up again in an instant.

Rod let go his wheel and shoved a hand into his pocket. He jerked out his gun. This was the showdown.

AT the moment that the yawl's stem knifed into the stern Swain's roaring motor coughed and backfired with a flash of red flame. The boat's exhaust pipe had been crumpled up by the yawl's bow; her motor was exhausting red hot gas into her stern compartment. Suddenly the intermittent thunder of the exhaust was interrupted by a leaping blaze of fire.

"Gas tank!" yelped Pete Hooker. He sent a mechanic's hammer whizzing through the air at Swain's head. It hurtled harmlessly past as Swain ducked.

At the sight of those flames enveloping the whole stern of the motorboat Rod leaped out onto the deck and pelted forward in a desperate charge. Simultaneously both Swain and Kolb, singed by the blaze, jumped for the bow of the yawl.

A heavy wrench, humming past Rod's ear, made him double up into a running crouch. Dan Swain, aiming coolly enough sent his bullet a foot above Rod's lowered head.

Rod's shot was delayed by his ducking.

But when he pressed his trigger the lead went whining into Swain's thick body. The man staggered; then jerked down his pistol for another shot.

Rod's momentum carried him almost into Swain; he flicked his pistol sideways against Swain's head as the gambler tried to bury his gun muzzle in Rod's stomach.

Dan Swain lurched sideways and caught his foot against the rail. With gun roaring he splashed into the canal.

Kolb, behind Swain on the narrow deck, got off a shot that burned Rod's ribs like a lance of fire. Next instant, before Rod could return the shot, a carpenter's plane came hurtling into Kolb's face. Pete Hooker had registered at last.

Hardly pausing, Rod stumbled over Kolb's prostrate body. With a last gulp of air, he covered his face and plunged through the fire enveloping the after deck of the motorboat. He darted forward, toward the cabin, flung open the door.

"Out!" he choked. "Out! Both of you!"

He peered into the darkness. The thrusting body of Masterson Pollard sent him reeling back almost into the flames. Pollard stopped short with a yell of dismay at the sight of the fire. Rod rushed into the cabin. A white face stopped him. He gripped Betty Yorke's arm as she came running out.

"Come on!" he said to the girl. "Keep mouth—shut!"

He felt her soft body against his, ready to follow. He tucked an arm around her waist and rushed into the flame. Seering heat nearly blinded him but next instant he had swung her through and onto the bow of the yawl. Behind them thudded Pollard. They pelted past the motionless body of Kolb.

Rod brought her down into the cockpit and beat out the smouldering fire in the hem of her skirt. Pollard, panting, collapsed on a bench.

"Keep an eye out for Swain!" Rod said sharply to Pete Hooker. "He had a gun with him when he went overboard."

"Look!" gasped Hooker.

Rod, still holding the frightened girl close to him, suddenly reached for a rope. The burning gasoline had poured out of the split tank and now was spreading swiftly over the surface of the canal.

In the midst of that blazing film the head and shoulders of Dan Swain had come up. For an instant he thrashed the flaming liquid around him. Rod's line swished toward him. But Swain did not seize it. With a scream of agony he flung himself under the water. He did not come up again.

Rod shoved his gears into reverse and backed the yawl as fast as he could out of the flaming gasoline. Then he swung the boat against the wall of the canal. He lifted the girl up onto solid land.

The car that had been following Swain's boat was gone now, a mere blur with two red tail lights vanishing in the distance. Pete Hooker came lumbering aft with Kolb on his shoulders. He dumped the squat man down on the wall.

"It'll be a long time before this bird helps skin an honest gambler out of his stake." He paused, coughed. "Uh—speaking of stakes," he said, looking at Pollard. "This ought to be good for more than a five-buck mutuel—"

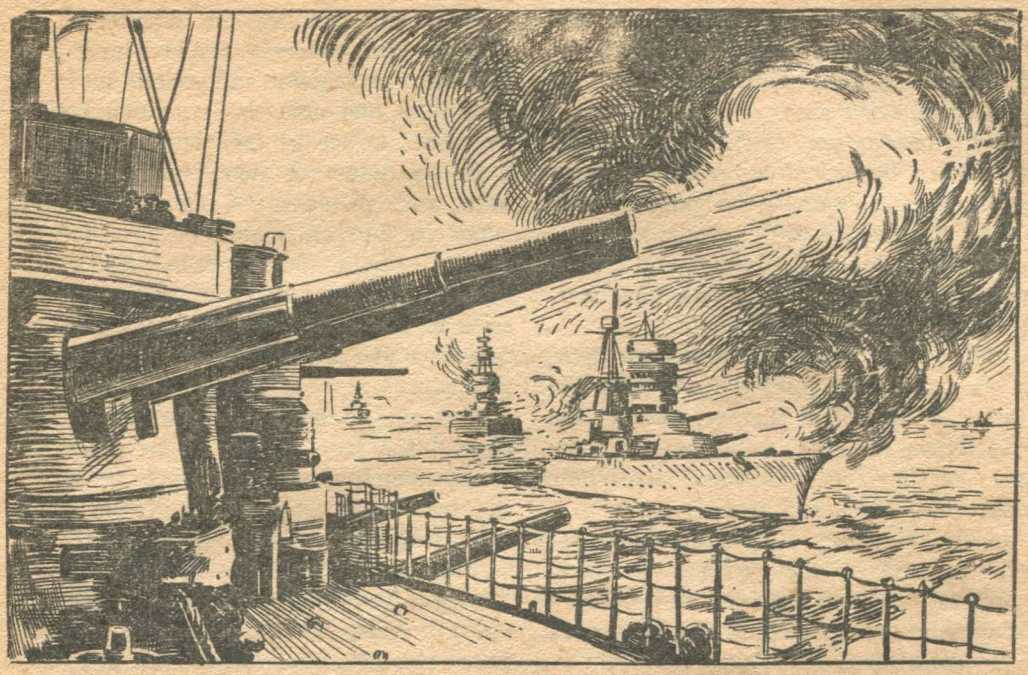
"Don't worry," Masterson Pollard assured him. "I'll see that you're staked to the limit."

He turned to Rod Wood with a magnificent gesture. "And that also goes for—"

Rod laughed. "The last time anybody took a stake from you it didn't turn out so well," he said. "Two of those mutuel ticket holders are dead; Kolb's on the edge and Hooker's got a slug in his shoulder and probably a run of hard luck at the nearest dog track ahead of him."

He laughed again, looking down at Betty Yorke, still resting contentedly in the curve of his arm.

"I gave my ticket away, which may account for my own good luck, Pollard," he said. "I don't want anything more from you than you've brought me already."



The Invasion of America

By FREDERICK C. PAINTON

THE world is seething with unrest; Hitler and Mussolini can no longer command the complete devotion of their people, and in the United States, on the eve of a presidential election, the muttering discontent of the unemployed grows louder—and more threatening. . . .

Then Spike Brenn, whose newscasting voice is known to twenty million Americans, discovers the real menace behind this unrest. A Fascist organization called the Steel Fists has secretly built up powerful echelons on three continents — and the leader of this movement is John Hannibal, a wealthy American who believes fanatically that he alone, as dictator, can save his country from chaos.

When Spike tries to broadcast the truth about the Steel Fists, he is laughed down. But two people believe him: David Farnham, an American millionaire, and Kay Carstairs whose brother has been murdered by the Steel Fists and who, ironically enough, is loved by John Hannibal. She pledges herself to use her intimacy with the Steel Fist leader in order to discover his plans.

BUT John Hannibal moves so swiftly that Spike Brenn is unable to warn the United States. Under Hannibal's orders a plane bombs a Japanese warship in the Pacific—and in spite of denials from Washington, the atrocity is blamed on the United States. Scarcely a week later Japan makes the first move of revenge: the seizure of Manila. At first the American people are insistently hostile to war, stirred to oppose the policies of the government by John Hannibal's American Fascist echelon, the League of Unemployed. But when Japan attacks and destroys the Pacific Fleet, President Henderson officially declares war.

While the United States throws her full naval power against the Japanese in the Pacific, Europe is shaken with revolt. Two Steel Fist leaders, Della Volpi of Italy and Von Eital of Germany seize the rule of their respective nations. And before Spike Brenn can puzzle out John Hannibal's tactics, the Panama Canal is bombed. Then, in a flash of insight, Spike grasps the enormity of the plan: invasion on the East and West Coasts simultaneously and an uprising within the

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nation itself—the only method of attack by which America can be defeated.

Spike is powerless to prevent what he foresees. The League of Unemployed grows more menacing; "pirate" raids along the Atlantic seaboard withdraws part of the Atlantic fleet from the Pacific, where it had been sent to carry on the defense of the West Coast against the Japanese Navy. Then, as Spike tries frantically to convince the government of its danger, Kay Carstairs appears suddenly in his office. She has been on a yacht with John Hannibal and has finally escaped him; she reports that Hannibal is in New York—and that Italy and Germany are prepared to attack. Three days later Della Volpi and Von Eitel declare war on the United States. . . .

CHAPTER X

ORDERS FOR DAWN

LIEUTENANT BURTON MILES stood on the flying deck of the U.S.S. aircraft-carrier *Wright* of the Atlantic Scouting Fleet and stared across the gray heaving ground-swell into which the great ship plunged her bow at twelve knots.

He held in his hand a letter from Spike Brenn, received just before the *Wright* hastily left Charleston to join the fleet; but he was not reading it. He was thinking that before many days had passed he would probably be dead. No, not exactly dead, because every man thinks he will live, but he was dwelling on the hopeless sacrfice which was presently to be made. He was thinking of the size and power of the combined Italo-German fleet, and the definite inferiority of the Atlantic fleet.

Within range of his eyes were twenty-odd gray ships lifting and falling to the swell, their grayness merging with the gray of the mist. Far ahead was the scout cruiser division, six ten-thousand-ton Washington Treaty vessels mounting eight-inch guns. Behind them was the submarine flotilla which might launch their attacks, or might retreat behind the screen of the main fleet.

Then came the scout cruiser division proper whose smoke he could just see. Just ahead of him, squat, powerful, was the battleship division, the infantry of the sea, the armored monsters with sixteen-inch guns whose hitting power decided naval supremacy. They were drawn up in two columns; the *New York*, the *Massachusetts*, the *Oregon* on the port line, the *Utah*, the *New Mexico* and the *Minnesota* at starboard.

Then there was the aircraft division of which his vessel, the *Wright*, was one, and the old *Lexington* and the *Concord* the others. Behind him, scarcely visible on the horizon, was the naval train, the base force with its repair ships and oilers, minesweepers and hospital ship.

To starboard and port he could see the smoke of the torpedo-boat-destroyer screen, a tight cordon against a surprise submarine attack.

Yes, here was the Atlantic battle force, bound to be outnumbered in all types of vessels, and particularly so in the battle force, six battleships against nine. They were ready and trained, these battleships of the line and battle cruisers. The wood had been ripped from the steel decks to prevent flying splinters; the chain rails and stanchions were down; it needed only the call, "battle stations" to swivel the huge guns on a target.

But the problem was—and a strange one—should the fleet fight or take refuge in Chesapeake Bay behind the mine fields and huge coast defence guns? Miles knew what he'd do. "I'd run for it and to hell with popular clamor," he muttered.

To shake his mind from the unpleasant thoughts, he turned again to Spike's letter. But it did not comfort him much.

> **I was rotten-egged last night, and in staid Boston of all places. At the order of the powers-that-be in the press censorship I went up there to broadcast from the Copley-Plaza. I broadcast in the huge ballroom so that the big-wigs could seat maybe five hundred people to watch me.**
>
> **The idea was that I should talk technically about why things were being done the way they were. I had to explain that due to public clamor, the**

Pacific fleet had been dangerously reduced and had to retreat onto Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and surrender the initiative to the Japs. I had to explain that the Atlantic fleet might not be able to fight because, though it had reduced the Pacific fleet's superiority, it wasn't as big nor as strong as the enemy coalition fleet.

And—this between you and me—I had to begin laying the groundwork for what must come—suspension of civil rights, declaration of a state of emergency, and the adjournment of Congress with all its powers passed into the hands of the president.

MILES paused a moment to stare out at the tossing ships; then he went back to his reading.

Boy, I used to think I was popular when the fan mail came in bushel baskets in the old days. But evidently I wasn't popular last night. There was a bunch of Irishmen there to razz me. They started calling, "What about our babies and wives?" And "What about the Connell family?" (You remember that was the family in South Boston that was wiped out by a bomb last week. Six kids, the father and mother. One of the Italian Savoia-Marchetti planes the Italians must have sent from their hidden fleet.)

Well, I couldn't be brutal, but I had to say that war was no longer a war between armies but between peoples; and there had to be civilian casualties. I said that while the death of the Connell family was to be pitied, it was not going to affect the outcome of the war in any way.

The Irishman came back, "We want the fleet to fight, and we want airplanes to guard us. That's what you government guys are supposed to do."

I was sort of sore myself, and I told him if we dissiptated our air force to protect every hamlet in the United States, there'd be none left to fight the main enemy air fleet when it comes. And my own Irish rising, I said it was men like him who had caused our fleet to be separated, and why the hell didn't he leave the fighting orders to the men who were doing the fighting? I said he was talking loud here, but why didn't he get into the army himself? This was a fool statement as since the draft law passed there is no volunteer enlistment and all the units are selected.

But it was the signal. This debate, mind you, was going on before an open microphone, as the idea was to convince not only Boston but the rest of the country that this mass hysteria must cease.

Well, the microphone certainly heard something then it had never heard before; it heard the squashing of a rotten egg that hit me as square on the chest as if the fellow who threw it had fired a rifle. Then came a deluge of them.

Only at that moment did I realize what had happened: these men were propagandists of Hannibal's Steel Fists sent to the meeting to create panic.

I only had a water pitcher, a gavel and a glass handy. But I did some damage with them by simply climbing down off the platform with the pitcher in one hand and the glass and gavel in the other and picking out these birds. I laid around me right smartly until the cops came to bust up the affair.

I tell you this only that you may see how Hannibal is managing to disrupt our effort at war. Of course, the semi-dictatorship that the president has established will enable the president to ignore such protests from now on (unless there is a revolt) which I doubt, though it might come if we begin to lose the war.

Well, enough of me. Kay Carstairs is with us in Washington. She was prisoner of Hannibal, but escaped and has given valuable information to Farnham. Incidentally, Farnham is proving to be a powerful leader. He has a genius for organization. And, by the way, I think he is in love with Kay. More competition for you and me and O'Hara and a half dozen others in the same condition.

This letter is to get your opinion of the fighting possibilities in the Atlantic. I've been reading Janes' *Fighting Ships of the World*, and you are outnumbered and outgunned. But Dunning is a cagy admiral, and he knows more about handling naval air war than anybody we've got.

Miles read the big scrawled signature. He thought about Kay for a moment, but then as twilight fell he saw that the wake of the *Concord* ahead was veering to port. The fleet was turning. Instantly all else was swept from his mind.

As he turned back to the ward room he saw sailors dashing about to get the planes above decks. What did this mean?

ON BOARD the *New York*, where he raised his flag, Rear Admiral Dunning paced back and forth in his spacious quarters in the stern of the battleship. He had given the order for all ships to turn six points to port. And on his face was the realization of the importance of the order.

Dunning's teeth bit hard on the stem of an empty pipe. He knew now what Lord Jellicoe must have felt that afternoon at Jutland in 1915 when Von Scheer launched his torpedo boat attack. What Jellicoe must have felt when he saw his own fleet outmaneuvered and outshot. Jellicoe, who as had often been said, was the only man in the world who could have lost the World War in a single afternoon.

Could Dunning lose this war now on the basis of the decision he must make when he located the Italo-German fleet? Should he turn away, avoid battle, take refuge in Chesapeake Bay under coast defense guns?

That was what the German fleet had done in 1914, gone behind Heligoland, and thus surrendered the supremacy of the seas to England. But the fact that the German fleet was there behind its mine fields—"A fleet in being"—had prevented England from landing an expeditionary force on German soil and taking the German armies in the rear.

If he retreated now, the Italo-German fleet could range the coast, shelling and creating a reign of terror. But if the Germans and the Italians intended to move troops, they would not dare put transports to sea as long as he, Dunning, could dart out and sink the supply ships. But what would the American people say? With Boston and New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, Charleston and Savannah already seeing spooks by night. Already yelling for the Navy to do something.

The people whose protests had already weakened the Pacific fleet without strengthening his enough—in their frenzy they would brand him a coward.

But suppose he offered battle now, and steamed in for broadsides. He was outgunned. He had not sufficient planes to retain command of the air. Suppose his fighters, his bombers, his spotters were shot down. Blindly he'd have to retreat while the enemy, locating him by their planes, blew his fleet to destruction.

On the other hand, if by surprise he could get command of the air, the ship odds now against him would not mean so much. It would be the enemy who were blind and he could see. He knew his gunnery records and in maneuvering he had the reputation of being wily, clever and daring. He stared out at the squat gray warships that steamed in perfect formation.

It all depended, he told himself, on whether he could gain command of the air. Suppose he risked an attack. In case the air attack failed, would there still be time to break off the battle and save the fleet? How many "flying deck" cruisers had the enemy? How many fighting and bombing planes could they muster? He could only guess at this; his guess based on peacetime Intelligence reports.

His mind turned to another angle. Suppose he could draw off, pretend to flee, and pull the enemy fleet in pursuit until he was close enough to call upon shore airdromes for air reinforcements enough to insure his command of the air.

His mouth twitched. He could see it all plainly, presuming he had the air power. The first contact; the destruction of enemy aircraft carriers, the dispersal of the enemy planes; his destroyers laying a smoke screen behind which he could maneuver to cross the enemy's T. His deadly broadsides bringing the odds rapidly down until he could boldly strive for victory.

A door opened behind him and a fleet aide hurried in. His face was bright, his eyes sparkling.

"They've located the enemy fleet, sir."

Admiral Dunning removed his pipe. He

frowned. In his fleet, even in excitement, men did not talk so vaguely.

"Who are 'they?'" he rapped. "Who found the fleet?"

"Gregson, sir, reconnaissance pilot of Admiral Nixon's flagship. The information was blinkered to us. Gregson is on his way. The enemy is only one hundred and fifty miles away. Here's the position, sir."

He gave Admiral Dunning the latitude and longitude. South of the Grand Banks, steaming fifteen knots south by southeast. And there was the total of the enemy battleships sighted. Dunning scanned the figures closely.

Twenty Class A cruisers. Nine battleships which did not include the so-called "pocket battleships" of the German *Deutschland* type. There were three of these, powerful, terrible engines of war. Forty destroyers grouped with the fleet in a screen. Probably thirty more elsewhere.

Four aircraft carriers; total of fighting, bombing and torpedo planes carried estimated at six hundred and eighty.

Nearly one hundred and fifty fighting planes, Dunning thought—more than he could muster.

Rapidly he counted the rest, the sloops, the submarines, the torpedo boats, the minelayers. But he knew the answer long before he reached the end. He was outgunned thirty-five percent, by huge sixteen-inch weapons that would throw more than a ton of shell. The enemy was steaming south by south east. He could still avoid them if he wished.

Dunning knew that the moment of high decision had come. He could fight or run, but he had to do one or the other quickly.

Always, as he pondered, he was aware of the one unknown factor in modern naval warfare; the use of the airplane as a weapon of offense. He himself had been at loggerheads with higher officers over its efficacy. Not that he belonged to the foolish school who believed airplanes would sink battleships. But in blinding the enemy, disrupting its destroyer screen, attacking its submarines—he pulled his thoughts back to the specific problem.

Should he fight or run?

He sent for Gregson, the pilot who had discovered the enemy fleet, questioned him exhaustively. Then, when he was done with gathering facts, when he had digested the material, when he had checked his line of retreat, he made his decision. He would risk an air encounter, a surprise attack on the enemy aircraft carriers. If he succeeded in gaining air control he would risk full naval action. If the air attack failed, he would break off and retreat.

He gave the order, "Turn six points to port—all ships."

And ordered away his carriers under escort for a dawn surprise attack.

CHAPTER XI

THE ENEMY GUNS

LIEUTENANT BURTON MILES met the dawn at fifteen thousand feet. As flight commander, he flew at the point of a wedge-shaped V of Curtis fighting Hawks. Behind him, ahead of him, on both sides of him flew other wedges. Three hundred and twenty planes in all. The order read, "Your mission is to escort bombers to bomb and destroy flying decks of enemy aircraft carriers. You will then engage enemy fighting planes and destroy them."

That was the mission of Miles' squadron. Other echelons of fighting planes were held in reserve to escort and protect the torpedo planes. These last, each carrying from one to three Whitehead torpedoes, would make a mass attack on the enemy's main fleet. What would result was still unknown. That is to say, modern warfare had not yet tested whether a plane, flying low and straight and slowly to launch a torpedo, could survive destruction long enough to get its missles launched.

There were other aircraft in reserve to drive off any enemy bombers who might wriggle through to bomb the flying decks of the American aircraft carriers. Miles was thinking of this last possibility as he looked down at the gray, ridged sea. He

was flying a land plane. He had fuel supply for three hours. When that was exhausted, (and if he had not been shot down) where would he land if the aircraft carriers had no decks?

There was nothing but the vast sea in which he would instantly swamp, and after that, if he was not stunned and drowned, he would float in his life preserver and hope to be picked up. He weighed it all coolly; he had thought of the risks long ago.

Watching the squadron leader's pennons, he turned his mind to the probabilities of victory. Miles was no fool; he had made a stiff study of naval tactics and he was aware that today's battle would make naval history; victory or defeat, the tactics, displayed, the use of each naval weapon would be closely studied by admirals for years to come. Questions of aircraft value in naval conflict that had been hotly argued for years would be answered now. Could a naval bomber disable a battleship or cruiser sufficiently to take its broadsides out of the final smash of sixteen-inch guns?

He knew Dunning had made a life study of aircraft as an auxiliary weapon of maneuver and offense. Miles had known that since he had studied under Dunning at the naval college. He winced to remember that, studying how a clever commander would toss in his air force at the precise moment, he had thought of it as a sort of chess problem. Not as a combat in which men would die.

The mist deepened into clouds that hid the earth from his view, and he could only follow in his position and watch the compass and wait. At two hundred and thirty miles an hour, the wait would not be long. He looked at his guns, felt at the toggles of his light bombs, and did a dozen other jobs of checking. He thought, as many a man before him had thought, that the waiting in wartime was the most intolerable suffering. The chill of the high altitude struck through him.

Then, on a sudden, the signal came. He never knew what had caused it; he was only aware that the air suddenly swarmed with planes. The thing he had visualized, imagined, was here. And all the things he had promised himself he would do, he did not do.

All he could see was a flight of planes with Iron Crosses on their wings, and at the signal he waggled his wings, threw over the stick and then out, and the Hawk turned on her right wing, nosed down, and with the throttle wide open he dove a thousand feet.

He had picked his target, a green plane, at the moment doing a half-roll. At a hundred yards Miles tripped his guns. Four Brownings, their fire converging at the rate of twenty-four hundred bullets a minute. Two mounted on the wings, two firing through the propeller. At the speed he was going he was past his target before he saw the effects of the fire. He only knew that his flight formation was broken up, and signaled, each man for himself. Making a pivot turn, he nosed up at a gray undercarriage centered between two Iron Crosses that hung almost over his head.

He knew he had shot down this plane —but it was the last he knew of the fight. He saw his tracer stream rake the gray plane, breaking the propeller first. The motor of the German caught fire and as Miles leveled off, he saw the pilot spring outward and go hurtling down, pulling frantically at the parachute strapped to him.

MILES saw no more than that. He didn't even see the enemy plane that must have curved in on his tail. He only knew a few bright sparks flashed past his head. The cyclone motor ahead of him sent back a blast of black smoke and then a sheet of fire. A few sparks spattered off his guns. He turned, felt his head and found he had no goggles and hardly any helmet. His hand must have reached out to the throttle because the flames continued but the motor did not explode.

He kept saying to himself, "I'd better bail out."

There were no more bullets flying past

him. Within him was the sudden urge to take his ship down. Below he could see other planes massing and milling, and he should take his plane through them. The fire-wall was keeping the flames away from his legs. He could go down a little way anyway.

He nosed the ship steeply until the controls were sensitive, aware now of a dreadful numbness in one side of his head and a great lethargy that made him want to close his eyes just for a moment. He must have shut them, for when he looked again, the water was plainly in sight and there were no planes around.

Indeed, there was nothing in sight save the battle ships below that were drawn up in severe lines, the bow of each following in the wake of the other. Possibly this was the fleet; he could sit down and be picked up.

The flames were hotter, eating at the wings so swiftly that the whole plane would be blazing in a few seconds. No chance of side-slipping in now.

He unbuckled his safety belt. It was time to shove off. The altitude must be, he thought, about eight thousand, maybe a little more. The altimeter was no good —the instrument board was useless.

He climbed up against the wind pull and tensed his feet against the side of the cockpit. He jumped up and out in a jack-knife dive. As he went out and away from the plane he suddenly thought, "I've been shot down. I'm out of it. I'm—"

His right hand had caught the rip-cord grip, and as he suddenly found himself on his belly looking *down* at the sky, he pulled it. The chute made him do a quick flop, jerking him upright with a speed that snapped his neck against his shoulders.

He was now in a soft, complete silence, swaying at the end of the cordage, being blown, he noticed, in the same direction the ships were moving down there. He stared at them.

The truth finally dawned on him. "They're not American ships."

Memory of the days in college, studying silhouette recognition, flowed easily back. The *Cavour* and her type, Italian battleships; the *Von Scheer*—she's a thirty-six thousand tonner—sixteen inch guns. Hard hitter. German.

But what were they all doing here? Smoke and dashing destroyers, and tiny little chips which must be those torpedo boats—forty-mile-an-hour motor boats of the Italians, carrying two torpedoes.

His eyes got heavy, but he fought off his weariness. He'd have to be ready when he got down to the water or drown under the smother of his chute. No sense in being drowned under a chute and cordage. He'd better find his knife and cut loose about fifteen or twenty feet above and be ready to swim.

He had out his knife and got the blade open. He looked above, but the sweep of the chute blotted out what was going on. He could see wreckage dotting the water below. Fifteen or twenty planes. He wasn't the only one shot down.

Shot down! The words cleared his mind abruptly. He who was never to be shot down, who was to rage across the skies behind four blazing guns and clear all before him. He had been shot down in his first combat.

The sea rose rapidly now to receive him. The utter silence of height was gone. He could hear dull rumbling and feel a sort of concussion.

The big battlewagons were at it now—this time for keeps. He looked down. The water was less than a hundred feet below. He got a grip on the cordage with his left hand and slashed his harness. Careful now. He had seemed to be floating for so long and now he was falling fast. The wind sent him skimming over the waves. A swell, larger than the others, was forming ahead. He let go with a swing that threw him to the right. He tried to hit the water feet first but the swing sent him sprawling. He struck almost on his back.

His life jacket brought him bobbing to the surface. The wind had pulled the chute along, was still dragging it, so he was clear. And for a moment he was

strangely relaxed. The chill water hadn't struck through his padded suit; only his hands and face had felt the iciness of it. So he told himself he was down and he was alive. After the first shock of the water he looked up.

Perhaps sixty planes or so were in sight under the clouds, milling around, apparently senselessly. The rest of the fight was out of sight. How was it going?

Then suddenly he realized the expedition had failed. Its purpose had been to destroy the enemy aircraft carriers. But the American planes had never reached their objective. Even here, rising and falling on the waves, he could see the enemy aircraft carriers, faint gray shapes moving in the distance. And moving fast, as he could see.

He could hear the concussion of guns, but whether it meant cruiser skirmishes or actual battleship broadsides he could not tell. He thought to himself grimly that the fate of the battle settled his own future. If Dunning won he would be picked up; if the Americans lost . . .

AT TEN o'clock Admiral Dunning knew his attempt to command the air had failed. Outnumbered nearly two to one, his attack planes had not only been unable to break through the enemy screen but, worse yet, had failed to hold a sudden bombing attack launched on a long flank turn that crippled the flying decks of his own *Curtis* and *Concord*. Nor had he expected from the Italians the bold maneuver that cost him the *Lexington*. Five of the tiny torpedo boats of the Italians—merely motorboats with terrific engine power—had swept in apparently from nowhere. The first two, traveling close to sixty miles an hour, struck the *Lexington's* steel torpedo nets and the resulting explosions tore them to bits. The other three, charging straight in, never launched torpedoes. They simply struck the thin-skinned hull of the *Lexington* and the war-head torpedoes did the rest.

Every man aboard the Italian mosquito ships was blown to bits. A hole forty feet in diameter was torn in the *Lexington* at the water line. She was down by the head in ten minutes and sank at four o'clock.

Dunning kept his spotters aloft until the last, and it was well he did. For, harried by air attack, trying to retreat, he found that the enemy had the legs of him. The enemy cruisers swept around his flank and engaged Admiral Hood's scouting squadron. He had no choice now but to turn and fight, for destruction at the enemy's choosing lay ahead.

He fought as a wolf in a trap might fight; desperately, cunningly. And by a ship's right-about, quickly executed in the face of odds, he outmaneuvered the coalition fleet and actually crossed the enemy's T. He brought his broadsides to bear, first on the *Von Scheer*. The American gunnery had never been higher. Three salvos brought his guns on the target at twenty-six thousand yards and with no dispersion the third salvo was home.

Seventy-two enormous steel tubes, each throwing a ton of armor-piercing steel, blasted in explosions so terrific that the vast American steel fortresses rolled to the gun recoil. Over the horizon, where the spotting plane was now fighting desperately against death, the huge shells soared. The *Von Scheer's* bow and quarter vanished in a cloud of smoke and flame. The low-hung gray vessel shuddered, stood still, heaved upward as if in agony. When the brown smoke had vanished, the man-of-war was half-submerged, drifting dangerously in the path of sister ships.

But to cross the T Admiral Dunning had to turn ninety degrees and this to the north. Then his spotting planes were shot down. Blind, he had to turn without even a slight mist to protect him. And in turning to run, he had to face the broadsides of the main coalition fleet.

His cruisers were beaten in detail by the *Deutschland* and her sister battle cruisers. His own broadsides were no longer on the target. The enemy's marksmanship was as excellent as his had been.

First the *Utah* heeled out of line, her protective blisters pierced by shell. Then

under the impact of two hundred thousand tons of shells, the *Wyoming* seemed to melt away.

The *New Mexico* was disabled by six waterline shots, and as she yawned in the sea, alone and abandoned save by her crew, a dashing torpedo-boat-attack left her sinking. From now on what had been a battle became a rout. Dunning had no recourse but to run. But the *Cavour,* the *Roma,* the *Von Hindenberg* and the *Mayence* had the speed of him. They came into range at 2 P. M. with spotters up and beyond AA reach. The *New York* was last to feel the enemy's fury.

But come it did. Dunning had known it was coming, and he left the plotting room in the bowels of the *New York.* Some inner urge dragged him to the tiny quarterdeck to meet his death.

The enemy ships lay below the horizon. The *New York's* sleek powder-grimed guns were no use now. He had OBS officers and they had fired four broadsides but without knowledge as to the results. Dunning ordered the sea cocks opened and the *New York* abandoned by the crew.

He chose to stay aboard. No fault of his that the vessels had sunk, that men had died. But the blame would fall upon him. He was old, and he was suddenly tired and the thought of being a prisoner or coming into New York as the man who had lost the war sickened him.

The *New York* was abandoned under a broadside impact that wrecked three boats and smashed her port blisters so that she heeled until her guns nosed into the water.

She was hulled by five o'clock. By a miracle the blast of steel spared Dunning. He stood with his unfilled pipe clinched between his lips. And as the *New York* turned turtle, he went under with her.

Save for a few submarines and a minelayer, the entire American Atlantic fleet was destroyed. The minelayer was caught at dawn by a fast cruiser and blown to bits without being able to fire a decent return shot. The American submarines escaped a circling destroyer net.

Thirty thousand men died that day, and the Atlantic Ocean was commanded by the enemy. The United States could offer no sea defense worthy of the name. . . .

Lieutenant Burton Miles saw the *New York* turn turtle. In the late afternoon of that day, carried on the long swell of the waves, he saw the war lost. The enemy fleet went on and he was alone on the ocean. He floated there a while, his teeth chattering, too cold even to think. But at last with struggling movement he got out his automatic pistol and looked at it. Then, swiftly, he put the muzzle to his temple and pulled the trigger once—twice—without result. But the third shell was good.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEN IN GREEN

THE announcer's voice cracked; he paused a second, swallowed hard and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, we interrupt this broadcast of the Goodies variety show, to permit your friend and mine, the ever popular Spike Brenn, to bring you important news of the war."

Spike let his eyes sweep the circle of suddenly silent radio artists. He looked beyond them to where perhaps half a house of spectators watched. Then he nodded to the announcer and stepped to the microphone. He wet his lips, forced himself to speak distinctly—even slowly.

"Friends," he said, "you must prepare yourselves for bad news; you will need all the courage in you to bear what I have to say.

"The American Atlantic Scouting Fleet has been defeated. More, it has been, except for fifteen submarines, completely destroyed. The battle took place day before yesterday at dawn and by dusk the American flag had disappeared from the sea and the sun.

"To those of you who had sons aboard the battleships, I can only say that there still exists hope that many were picked

up by enemy vessels and are now being held as prisoners of war. Yours may be among them, so do not lose all hope yet. Others—many—too many, Gold help us" —his voice cracked but he got control immediately—"have given their lives for the nation, for democracy, for you. May God have mercy on their souls and may He receive them as heroes who died for the liberty of our people.

"Few details of the battle are known, as the submarine flotilla from whence comes our information retreated early from the main conflict and can tell us little save that enemy destroyers pursued them as far as Nantucket Lightship. Intercepted enemy radio messages announce their complete victory.

"In this hour of our distress, I ask you to have courage and to hope. The Japanese fleet is being held beyond the Hawaiians. The country is mobilizing swiftly, and despite this setback, ultimate victory must rest with American arms which have never known final surrender and defeat."

He ceased to speak and stepped back from the microphone. He had other news, an intercepted radio that meant but one thing: invasion of America. But this he could not tell nor would have told had he been able to. He went back to his office intending to call Farnham. More and more he was coming to depend on Farnham in these times. As he entered Kay came to him.

"You should go and rest," she said. "You're—you look badly, Spike."

"Rest," he said, looking at the telephone. "I wonder if I'll ever rest again." He leaned back, waiting for his call to go through.

"How are the people going to take it?" he muttered. "How badly have they been poisoned by the Steel Fists?"

He was thinking of the sullen opposition of the Steel Fists. Already, since the president had forbidden open meeting, there had been conflicts between them and the police, conflicts in which the police had not always come off best. There was, Spike knew, propaganda secretly put out by the Steel Fists; how far had its defeatist tone undermined the American will to resist?

His fan correspondence, scores of letters and telegrams each day, gave him some idea, and he groaned as he read it.

Here was a telegram from Akron, Ohio.

MY BOY WAS ON THE NEW YORK STOP YOU BUTCHERS HAVE MURDERED HIM STOP LET THIS SLAUGHTER CEASE AT ONCE.

Another envelope contained a "throw-around" sheet, cheaply printed.

The intrenched rich are murdering your sons to protect themselves. You can stop this war by refusing to fight, by refusing to support it with your money. The oligarchy of America must fall. Are you going to fight the wars of the rich? Are you going on starving without work, without hope to support a regime that slaughters your youth? A New Era will dawn for America if you will demand peace. The Italians and the Germans do not make war on the American people; they make war on the leaders who would keep you in slave subjection. They come to help you, and not with any thought of conquest. Refuse to fight. THE STEEL FISTS.

Spike swore and hurled the paper on his desk. What could the future hold for a country besieged from without, torn within.

As for the inarticulate majority, the people of America who write no letters and do not express themselves other than to their friends, a curious state of mind came into being. A strange silence that was broken only by sudden savage outbursts such as occurred in Indianapolis. There a man who had been found lurking around the airport where a squadron of military planes had landed, was seized and charged with espionage. The police were taking him to jail pending an inquiry when the gathering crowd, at first curious, suddenly went berserk. The man was seized and hung to a lamppost.

There were four other such outbursts. It was hysteria and the action of people squirming in the grip of intolerable

suspense. But for the most part they bore the suspense silently. Even the newspapers were subdued; the *Sphere* broke the rules of its front page in reporting the defeat of the Battle of the Grand Banks.

"For two centuries," said this newspaper, "Americans have lived in the richness of plenty. Not since 1812 have we been invaded; nor have our people been called upon to show those traits of courage, and of endurance that made this nation great.

"But we must reveal our courage now; we must sacrifice, we must stand on our feet with our backs to the wall and fight now to the last to save for our posterity the great heritage that was handed to us."

It was the first hint that there would be invasion. Spike wondered where the information came from. He made his noon broadcast and prepared to catch the three o'clock plane for Washington to investigate.

IN A penthouse atop the Crystal Building's thirty-seven stories, John Hannibal listened to Spike's noon broadcast. Since Spike had become a government propagandist, he could be depended upon to reveal the government attitude. The government was jittery; that was plain.

Dorsey came in accompanied by the Council of Eight. Their eyes were eager.

"It's come," said Dorsey, holding out a decoded telegram. Hannibal took it, read it at a glance.

TRANSPORTS SAILING TONIGHT AT MIDNIGHT STOP WE SHALL HARASS COAST AS ORDERED

Hannibal smiled harshly. Now that the final moment had come, he felt no exaltation. It was as if something foreseen, inevitable, unstoppable, had come to pass. His blazing blue eyes studied the eight faces ranged in front of him. The men who had carried out his every order. They spoke of patriotism but he knew what drove them—personal greed and ambition. Just as greed and ambition drove Italy and Germany to play his game.

"Your sectors are ready?" he asked the eight men.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

Hannibal nodded. He had known the fact; he wanted to watch their expressions.

"Send the order," he said.

Dorsey ran to the next room where a powerful short wave radio had been set up. "Send Code order six," he yelled.

Hannibal said to the Council of Eight. "You have been rehearsed in the plan. You know every detail that must be accomplished in the next forty-eight hours. You are now Lictors, each supreme in your sector with the authority delegated to you by me." He paused. "I need not add that we rise or fall together; that five years of planning depend on what you do in the next forty-eight hours."

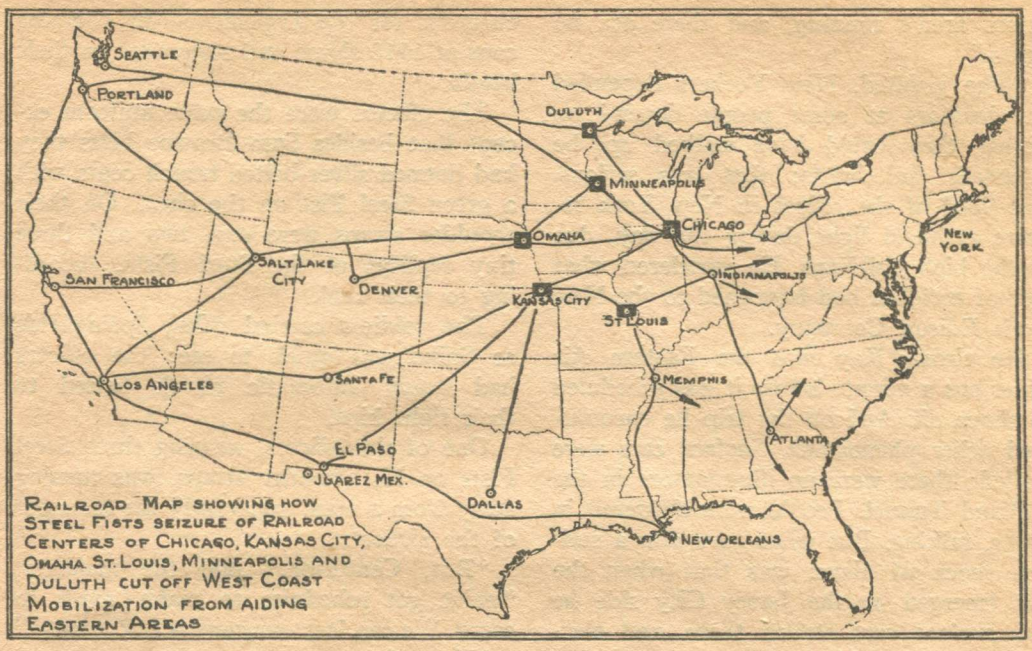
They stiffened to attention, slapped clenched right fist over their hearts.

"You can depend on us, Seneschal," said one.

Hannibal relaxed and shook hands with each one. "Your planes are waiting. So I won't hold you. Use the short wave and the 'A' code for all communications."

They were gone, then, and Hannibal was alone. He sat down, aware now for the first time, of a sense of helplessness. He had planned for six years; he had tested every thread of the woof; he had carried the reins of authority. But now that authority had passed to others. Like a general who has committed his army to battle, he could no longer change one single fact. He could do nothing but sit back and wait for success or failure to come. Some World War general—he thought it was Bullard—in commenting on this sense of helplessness, after his division was committed to battle, declared that he used to play solitaire to keep from brooding and worrying until the first reports came in. Hannibal took out a deck of cards and laid them out. It wouldn't be long now.

Yet he could not forebear an occasional glance at the wall map of the United States above his head. On the map thirty-four key cities were ringed. On the map



RAILROAD MAP SHOWING HOW STEEL FISTS SEIZURE OF RAILROAD CENTERS OF CHICAGO, KANSAS CITY, OMAHA ST. LOUIS, MINNEAPOLIS AND DULUTH CUT OFF WEST COAST MOBILIZATION FROM AIDING EASTERN AREAS

the communications system of the country was sketched in with blue pencil. Everything depended upon swift, unhesitating action. Would such action take place? In his preoccupation he played a spade jack on a club queen. He gave up and went in to talk to his son Stephen.

It was exactly 1:20 P. M.

AT TWO o'clock Spike said, "We'll save time by taking the subway to the Penn station. Hurry up, darling."

He seized Kay's suitcase and they went down to the curb and took a taxicab to Fiftieth Street where there was a kiosk to the West Side subway. Getting out, Spike noticed a lot of people standing around, but since this is a phenomenon encountered in New York at almost any time of the day or night, he paid no attention. His huge body elbowed a passage through for himself and Kay and he reached the platform. A five-car local train stood there, dark. Spike thrust a quarter through the opening in the change window.

"Five nickels, please," he said.

The subway employee thrust the quarter back. "You'd better try somewhere else, brother. The power's off. The trains ain't running."

"Power off," Spike repeated. "That's impossible."

He had, years ago as a reporter, made a study of New York's problem of supplying electricity; because the city lived on electric power. And with underground conduits and secondary hookups, he knew that it was impossible for the subway system to be without power, save in a brief interval when a wreck or other accident happened, and even then, the power was only off in a particular segment. But he had no time to argue the point.

It took forty-five minutes to reach the Newark airport and he wanted to make the three o'clock plane. He hurried back to the street and found a taxicab.

"Eastern Air Lines office and step on it," he ordered.

He saw nothing untoward on the trip downtown save the unusual number of people milling around. But Kay, listening during a traffic stall, said, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"The electricity is off. Those people can't get back to work because the ele-

vators aren't running, and there are no lights."

Spike grunted. New Yorkers depended on elevators as some people depend on trains; they could have walked up, he reflected. But lights; that was serious. One-third of the offices in New York require artificial light during the day, due to the high buildings. He wondered what sort of accident had happened to the New York Edison Company.

He thrust Kay into the Eastern Air Lines bus a minute before it was scheduled to shove off. And on the trip he encountered other phenomena. Surface cars were stalled; there were no illuminators in the Holland Tunnel. People were clustered in knots, talking. But what gave him a sudden shock of alarm was that when the bus emerged on the Jersey City side he saw surface cars stalled there, and electric signs, that blink their messages day and night, dark and dirty-looking.

"I can understand maybe there was an accident in New York," he muttered. "But why is Jersey City tied up, too?"

The bus driver surmised there had been one hell of an accident somewhere. A passenger said darkly, "Probably some damned Italian or German spy sabotaging."

Kay and Spike exchanged glances. They arrived at the airport and went in for the weigh-in and ticket-check. As they entered Spike saw the new uniforms. He reached out a hand and stopped Kay.

"Look!" he muttered.

THE room held fifty or more men in uniforms of a type that neither she nor Spike had ever seen before. These men wore dark olive green breeches and green wrapped leggins; green jersey sweaters of the turtle neck variety. On the chest of the sweater, over the heart, was a large silver Steel Fist. These were the privates.

The non-commissioned officers wore V chevrons of silver on each arm, one for lance-corporal, two for corporal, three for sergeant and a silver diamond under the chevrons for top-sergeant. Silver overseas caps of 1918 shape and style were on their heads.

The officers wore the same uniform except that besides Sam Browne belts they had donned silver-belted trench coats with a green Steel Fist on the chest. On their shoulder straps were one, two and three tiny replicas of the Steel Fists, according to their rank.

The soldiers carried rifles, Springfields as Spike was quick to see; the officers had heavy automatic pistols belted to their right hips.

One of the officers, wearing three Steel Fists on his shoulder straps, was turning away from a man, apparently the manager of the airport.

"But, Centurion," said the manager, "we've got schedules to make, mails to carry. We can lose our contract. You've—"

"You give me any more argument," said the Centurion, "and I'll throw you in the can. I'm running this place, and no plane takes off. Get that?" He turned to face the groups of passengers who had huddled where Spike and Kay stood.

"You people might just as well go home and sit," he said. "The Steel Fists have taken over this country and we're running it. No planes leave today." He turned to what was apparently a first sergeant. "Decurion, clear this place. Drive all these people out."

A U.S. Army major, standing not five paces from Spike, had been getting redder and redder. Now, as a private came at him with rifle at port, he sprang forward.

"Damn you for a traitorous swine," he said, "do you realize this country is at war?"

"Now, shut up, play-soldier," said the Centurion, "or I'll get rough."

"Rough! Damn you, I'll see you shot."

"Carter," said the Centurion, "take this out and pour a little Mickey Finn into it."

A squad rushed the major and by the time they had him out the door he was nearly naked. Gun butts had laid red bruises on his back.

Spike felt Kay trembling violently.

Outside as he sought a conveyance back to New York, Kay whispered, "What does it mean, Spike?"

"It means," he said quietly, "that Hannibal has worked out the only way he could get power in this country. With the nation at war in the east and the west, he has begun a revolt and seized communications and key centers. God help us all now."

CHAPTER XIII

NEW ERA

WHEN men later were able to piece together what had happened on that historic day of October 21st, it was amazing to see how simple Hannibal's plan was and how brilliantly it was executed. In New York, for example, fifty thousand uniformed Steel Fists were in motion to pre-arranged objectives by two P. M. The first and biggest raid was on the plants of the New York Edison Company.

Policemen, seeing the marching men in odd uniforms, put in a call to headquarters in Centre Street. But there were no reserves to come. They were already out on other emergencies. After all, there are only twenty-six thousand police in New York.

The Steel Fists formed with military precision. The policemen, used to disorderly mobs of New York, were aghast at the swift efficiency of the formations. They were more amazed at the automatic rifles and musette bags of extra clips. To each company, one cop later said, were attached two light machine guns in teams, a loader and a gunner.

A motor truck without license drew up close to a Steel Fist officer wearing a silver overseas cap with a star, and received an order. Hastily a squad of Steel Fists leaped at the truck and before the policemen's eyes, six heavy duty Browning machine guns were unloaded and two other squads of men fell upon them and began assembling them for use.

Over all, then, suddenly, came the yell, "First battalion—power houses!"

It had been rehearsed, that move, by men who must have studied every inch of the vast edifice in which was generated the power that kept New York alight and moving.

The heavy tramp of feet, running at the double quick, resounded through the streets. Another battalion appeared, and out of nowhere came a fleet of fifty trucks into which these men piled at a sharp order.

The man in the silver overseas cap went into the control room of the electric company. He had an automatic pistol in his hand which he waved to emphasize his orders.

"Pull the main controls," he ordered.

The chief engineer stared at him, gaping. "But those shut off every volt of power in the city," he protested.

"Pull the controls," repeated the officer. His hand steadied and the gun muzzle stared into the engineer's stomach. The engineer gulped; his face slowly turned green. He looked beyond the officer and saw a dozen men with automatic rifles. He looked at his assistants and they seemed men turned to stone.

The officer with the silver cap fired his pistol. The wind of the bullet whickered past the engineer's head. "I won't miss again," said the officer.

The engineer shivered once. "Off controls," he said huskily, and started pulling the great switches.

The subways stopped. The electrified railroads to Harmon stopped. The elevators shooting up and down within the gigantic skyscrapers stopped. Electric lights blinked out and surface cars stalled where they were. Motion picture theaters went dark; refrigeration plants, upon which New York depended for its main reserve of foodstuffs, began to grow warm and soon the food within would begin to rot. Newspaper presses ceased to turn. Broadcasting stations were burked as if a gigantic hand had squeezed the throats of the singers and entertainers within Radio City.

Short wave length amateur broadcasters could not dispatch one word. Telephones went dead.

In private homes and apartments starvation loomed. The electric ranges did not cook, and the gas company, dependent upon electricity to push the cooking gas through the vast pipes by pressure, could no longer furnish gas. There was no fire, no heat.

In New York, at that moment, a man could not ride, he could not cook, he could not eat. He could not drink water because the great electric pumps that supplied the pressure did not function. In the area of greater Manhattan, embracing a circle with a diameter of twenty miles, a population of six million people was suddenly as helpless as if stranded on a desert island without food or water.

IN THE central telegraph control offices a company of Steel Fists took complete authority. No messages went out. In the telephone exchange, no telephone call was completed. A company of Steel Fists invaded the National Broadcasting Company's offices in Radio City. Another occupied the Columbia Broadcasting offices. Over in Newark a third company of Steel Fists dynamited the plant of the Bamberger Broadcasting Service. As for the minor broadcasting plants in New York, these were smashed beyond repair by still other companies.

Police reserves hastily summoned were greeted by a hail of rifle and machine gun fire that swept the streets clear of them in five minutes. A police river boat patrol was dispatched to Governor's Island where two thousand troops made up the headquarters of the Second Corps Area comprising the First and Second regular divisions.

The boat was sunk halfway across the river by machine guns equipped to fire fifty calibre or half-inch slugs. More of the same machine guns were trained on the East River at this point so that any sally by the military from Governor's Island could be resisted. From somewhere, probably only John Hannibal actually knew where, three one-pounder rapid-fire guns were emplaced together with a German-type trench mortar that could lob flaming thermite shells on any vessel dispatched from Governor's Island.

At five o'clock as the gray day was drawing to a close, a battalion of Steel Fists accompanying a group of officers wearing silver overseas caps and silver trench coats strode into the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria on Park Avenue.

Even as they entered, military runners from the outlying Steel Fists battalions began to race up with reports. John Hannibal's chief of staff and his G-2 and G-3 received the messages. John Hannibal himself listened, but paid little heed. Dorsey would handle these details. Hannibal must plan the events to come.

He turned to General Von Schlieffen. "Send a runner to Miklas in the NBC. Also one to Powers at the electric plant. I want electric power turned on for one hour. I'll broadcast a message in that time."

"Aye, aye, Seneschal," snapped the staff general.

The runners were dispatched. Dorsey said to the manager of the hotel, "The American Steel Fists have taken this hotel for headquarters. You will immediately evacuate all your guests and all your personnel, including yourself. You have precisely twenty minutes to do it in to save yourself grief."

That night Spike tried to rent a car to drive him and Kay to Washington. The garage proprietor shrugged. "I can rent you the car. But they ain't no gasoline, guy, and no way to get any. My pumps is dry and these here Steel Fists have stopped the tank cars from coming around."

No trains were running. After the electricity went out the Pennsylvania and New York Central, electrified, tried to bring in steam engines to move trains. The Steel Fists took possession of the yards and the stations. And did the same in Hoboken and Jersey City.

Spike heard one harassed, outraged railroad official cry, "You fools! Do you want a panic and starvation? New York only has seventy-two hours reserve of food."

"Shut your face and leave that worry to us," said the Steel Fist.

Elsewhere in the nation, though of course Spike could only guess at it, the same situation existed. From Seattle and Portland to New Orleans and Birmingham; from Minneapolis and Chicago to Detroit and Boston, the Steel Fists seemed to spring, armed and uniformed, from the earth. In thirty-four key cities they seized communications, transportation — authority. There were deaths, hundreds of them. But a mobile, disciplined and armed force, acting on a pre-conceived plan, overbore all sporadic confused attempts to resist.

The seizure of the railroad centers cut the nation to bits. The northwest and the west were isolated from southwest and the south. The east and the northeast were entirely cut off. The mobilized army corps around San Francisco and Los Angeles managed to stop complete surrender of the local authority. But no railroads were running and they could not get east to prevent the uprising there.

On the night of October 29th, the United States was a paralyzed, inert mass of one hundred and twenty millions of people controlled and dominated by eight hundred thousand unemployed, savage, bitter men. Hannibal reigned supreme.

SPIKE and Kay were in their rooms at the Metropolis Hotel when the lights suddenly flashed on. They stared at one another. In the cold dark city it had seemed that the lights would never glow again. At the same moment a crackling came out of the wall radio, hooked up to a central control downstairs.

Kay said, "What on earth—"

"Hush!" said Spike, walking to the wall loudspeaker.

"John Hannibal," Spike said, as a voice spoke.

"Men and women," came John Hannibal's voice over the radio, "those of you who had your radio tuned in when the power was cut off, please notify your neighbors to tune in on WEAF. I will allow exactly ten minutes for this purpose. Listen in, then, because there will be news for every one of great importance."

The radio went dead.

In the faint light Kay stared at Spike. "What does it mean?"

Spike shrugged. "The occupation and control of a city of six million requires some manipulation. We will probably hear in a few minutes how he intends to maintain control."

At the end of ten minutes to the second the radio crackled again and then came John Hannibal's voice.

"Men and women of metropolitan New York," he said, "listen carefully to what I am about to say, because your lives and your future depend upon it. By now you have some realization of discomfort; but you do not know what can happen to you unless you obey implicitly what orders I am about to give. Let me tell you of what may befall.

"Do you know that in the warehouses of New York there is only reserve food supplies for seventy-two hours? That if trains cease to bring food supplies into New York, you will feel hunger? Recall in your own minds the discomfort and inconveniences caused by a heavy snowfall. When your milk doesn't come? When the corner grocery store has no fresh foods, only canned ones?

"I control the railroad entrances and exits to New York. I control the electricity. I can deprive you of water, the lack of which will bring hardship in less than seventy-two hours. I can prevent you from going to work. By running trains out of New York and permitting none to come in, I can force you to migrate elsewhere. I can depopulate this city in four days time. Or starve you to death.

"Do you understand that? Now, listen to me carefully. I have no intention of bringing hardship to you. But I do intend to have your immediate and final obedience to the totalitarian state which I now, for the first time, proclaim to exist in the United States with myself, John Hannibal, as its head, its leader, its Seneschal.

"You have been preyed upon by the

top and the bottom, the rich and the poor. You have worked hard for nothing, you have not even the guarantee of security in your old age. The resources which you, as Americans have inherited from ancestors, are being dissipated, stolen and wasted by inefficient stupidity upon the part of men who pretend to be your leaders, congressmen and government officials, who are not fit to handle the smallest fraction of the power you so carelessly entrusted to them. Over them, dominating them, are the rich and the incompetent whose greed has made you slaves.

"This country has been failing, not only abroad, but at home. Particularly in this country we are seeing our West converted to a desert; we are seeing men and women suffer privation because the system of distribution of national wealth has failed. Failed because of the greedy stupidities at the top, and the envious hatred of the bottom, that ignorant, dreaming riff-raff who call themselves Communists.

"The capitalistic system in this country has failed. The Communists offer impractical theories and dreams that cannot ever reach fruition. What is needed is a strong, resolute head with practical aims, and complete and final authority to adjust this country so that any competent man may have work to do, and he shall gain from that work an abundant living and insurance of security in his old age. The nation's resources must be conserved. The staggering cost of inefficient government foisted upon *you* must be abolished.

"Listen to me and go forward to new heights.

"Here is my program. The abolishment of stupid costly state governments which merely inflict their costs upon you. The abolishment of county governments which are archaic and belong no more in our scheme of things.

"In place I submit a central, positive government which maintains control of industry and agriculture, the two hands that make wealth. We abolish the mighty rich; we abolish the envious greedy dreamers who recruit from the lazy and the incompetent. My government shall be of the middle class; the people who produce wealth and need a firm government to prevent that wealth from being wasted or stolen.

"So intrenched has been the oligarchy of the rich that it has taken a war to shake their hold. Even now, the armed forces would crush me at their command if I did not control the national communications system.

"But I have called upon the Steel Fist governments of Germany and Italy to aid me. They are sending troops, not to make war but to help me establish a New Era for all Americans. When my government has been approved by you in plebescite, the armed forces of Italy and Germany will withdraw.

"And I say to you now, and to the world, that all who oppose the landing of the Italian and German allies and their aid to the Steel Fists are branded enemies of the New Era state and shall be dealt with as traitors and be tried for their lives by my courts.

"I offer you hope, a new life, a freedom from the burden of taxation that has bowed you down. I offer you opportunity and work, and a just share of the wealth your hands create. I offer peace and tranquility and a new and greater nation which shall forge to new heights of security and peace for us all.

"Ponder this message. Stay in your homes. Tomorrow I shall give you light and water. The trains will run in and food will be had at no increase in price. Those caught trying to profiteer during this emergency will be shot without recourse to trial. Martial law prevails but only long enough to establish the new government.

"That is all for now. I shall address you later from time to time when I think you should be acquainted with the problems that I am meeting and effacing."

THE voice ceased to speak. Spike and Kay had insensibly taken hold of each other's hands while they listened to the

charming, sincere voice that brought, somehow, a tremendous conviction to the words they had just heard spoken.

"He can't do it," cried Kay suddenly. "It's incredible. Impossible. What of Washington? Of the president? The Army? The man is insane—utterly mad!"

"He has charm and persuasion," said Spike. "He has the country in his grip—with invasion threatened. A lot of people besides his own will believe in him."

"But not enough. Out of all the millions—"

Spike shrugged wearily. "History is full of stories of the disciplined efficient few who have conquered a nation. Take Franco's march through three-quarters of Spain. Take Napoleon's whiff of grape shot against the Parisians."

He paused. Then: "Don't you see? This man has planned. He knows just what to do and how to do it. He's opposed by mere bulk. The army can't even get mobilized against a foreign enemy without great loss of time. And every twenty-four hours will concentrate this man's hold."

He turned toward the window. "He's recruited behind him *youth*. Youth who came into a depression world to find no place for them, no work. Youth with an empty belly will listen even to this insanity if it promises food, work, a future."

He broke off sharply. Kay gasped. The rapping at the door resounded again.

"Open in the name of the New Era."

Spike's hand went to his gun. A gun roared outside and the lock on the door flew to bits. A boot kicked the door open. A man in the silvery trench coat of a Steel Fist officer entered. Behind him were several men.

The officer dangled a heavy automatic pistol by his side.

"Are you Spike Brenn?" he asked. His sullen eyes shifted to Kay.

"You know I am or you wouldn't be here."

"Smart guy," sneered the officer. His eyes were still on Kay. He licked his lips and then turned to Spike.

"You're under protective arrest," he grinned. "Come along easy and it will only be detection camp. Resist and I'll be delighted to shoot you."

The Steel Fists came into the room behind their leader. Spike was unarmed.

"Shall we give him a Mickey Finn?" asked the corporal.

"No. Handcuff him. Enemy of the State."

Spike looked at Kay. He was thinking, "It's happened and I can't stop it."

The corporal clicked handcuffs on his wrists.

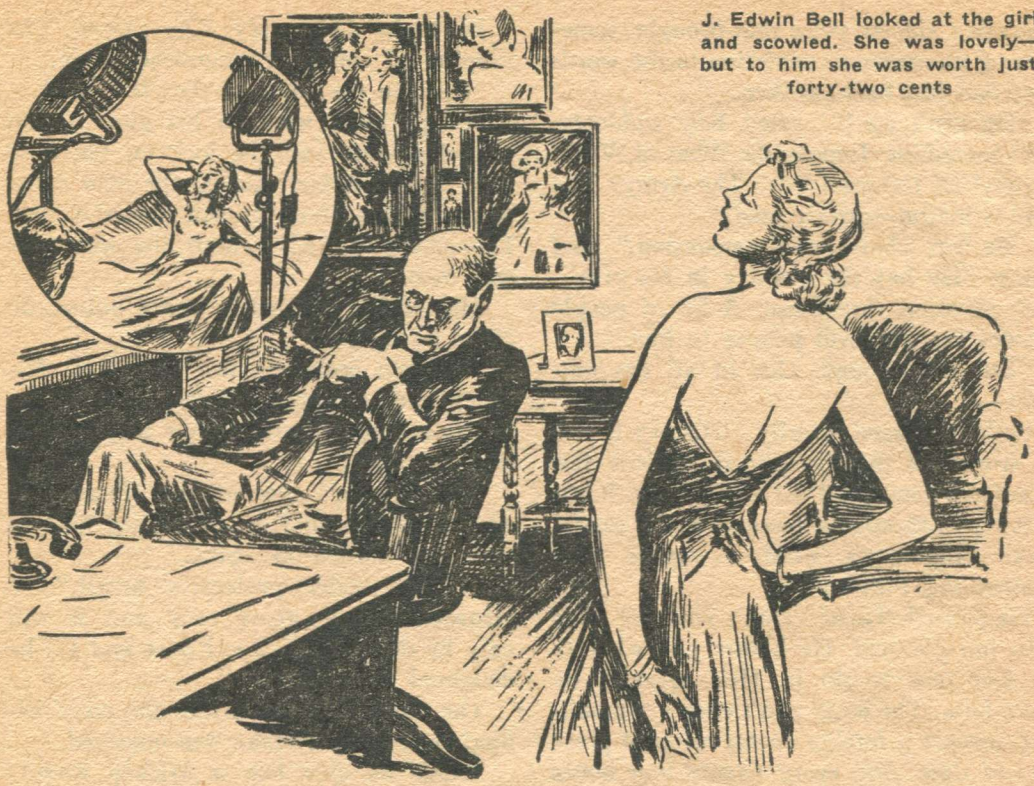
TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Readin', Writin' and Blackmetic

THERE is no more significant symptom of this age than what is happening to blackboards. It is revolutionary. You may not have heard that next fall the students in New York high schools are going to be writing on *white* blackboards with *black* chalk. There hasn't been such a radical movement in education since the horsewhip was banned from the school room.

The point is that the white blackboard (that is, the whiteboard) is supposed to be easier on the children's eyes. You may believe that, of course, if you want to. Or you may be convinced that this white blackboard-black chalk business is the sinister work of an undercover group which is plotting to overthrow the Finest Traditions of American Life. Before this year is over plenty of people are going to be shouting: Let the whiteboard go back where it came from; this is a Democracy.

—*Charles Dorman*



J. Edwin Bell looked at the girl and scowled. She was lovely—but to him she was worth just forty-two cents

Cowboys on the Cuff

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Venus de Malibu," "Racket in Blondes," etc.

Take a gander at Hollywood, folks—where creampuff cowhands can't look at a horse without wincing, and dizzy blondes are just little mothers at heart

"NO!" snapped J. Edwin Bell. "I ain't got a job in the movies for you yet!"

He glared through his monocle at the girl who had just rushed into his office.

Although, in fact, most men would have been glad to see an eyeful like Miss Lila LeRoy rush into their offices! The girl who faced Mr. Bell was pretty and blond and shapely. At the moment—and the moment was ten A.M. Hollywood time—Miss LeRoy somewhat surprisingly wore an evening gown. It was one of those very modern evening gowns, without shoulder straps or other visible means of support. Apparently it only stayed on because it fitted too tightly to fall off.

In the slanguage of Hollywood, Miss LeRoy was a lens-load, an oomph-gal, and a smackeroo.

But, likewise in Hollywood patter, J. Edwin Bell was a flesh-broker, a cuticle-vendor, a peddler of hams—in other words, a cinema agent. He got employment in the studios for his clients, and charged ten percent commission on their salaries.

To him, Lila LeRoy was only another client. And her assessed valuation amounted to exactly ten percent of nothing at all. She had signed one of his long term, ironclad contracts. But she had never

acted in front of a camera. Her theatrical experience consisted of six months in the ticket booth of her hometown movie house. It would be a minor miracle if Lila LeRoy ever got one single day's work as a film extra.

But she didn't know it. She said, "Why, Mr. Bell. A job's what I wanted to talk to you about! I tried to phone, but the girl said you were in conference—"

"Yeah! You phoned me yesterday. And the day before. And every day for a month!" The flesh-broker spoke coldly. "Say, don't you realize I got more important worries than landing you in the flicker racket?"

This was true. Landing Lila LeRoy in the movies didn't worry Mr. Bell a bit. Even the most beautiful and oomph-ful of extras starts at $4.50 per day, which would be a forty-five cent commission. And J. Edwin Bell was too smart a guy to waste his time chasing forty-five cent rainbows.

The girl's big blue eyes darkened. "Well!" she exclaimed. "If you feel that way about it, why did you bother to sign me to a contract?"

Mr. Bell could have told her. He had safely filed away hundreds of such long-term, ironclad contracts, all signed by beginners like herself.

For Hollywood is a very cockeyed town. It gets that way from watching the roller-coaster of life, which shoots some people to fame overnight and drops others to obscurity just as fast. Today's punk may be tomorrow's producer. The million-dollar-kid star of yesteryear is lucky to get a job as bit player today, and the lowliest extra sometimes turns out to be another Robert Taylor or Deanna Durbin.

These contracts cost J. Edwin Bell nothing, except his promise to exert "due diligence" in the unknown's behalf—a promise which he forgot as soon as the papers were signed. Perhaps someday the miracle would happen, a star be born among these hundreds. In which case, Mr. Bell would pop into court and diligently collect his ten percent.

In short, he looked on Lila LeRoy as a kind of free ticket on the Irish Sweepstakes. She wasn't worth bothering with, now. Probably never would be. But maybe, if she stood in line long enough, she'd get one of those $4.50 jobs.

Then—a 1000-to-one shot—a director might give her a few lines to speak.

After that—the odds being almost 1,000,000-to-one against it—she might click in a big way.

Whereupon, J. Edwin Bell would dust off the girl's contract, which had enough hooks in its various clauses to outfit a tuna schooner. But all that was in the future. The time to think about a Sweepstakes ticket, of course, is after it turns out to be a winner.

Now, breathtakingly, he realized this girl *was* the winning ticket!

"Anyway," Lila LeRoy was saying, "I've already got a job. I'm going to play opposite Buck Taylor in his next picture!"

J. EDWIN BELL gasped. His lank, slightly stooped form shot out of its chair. He bent over the desk and stared at the blonde.

Seen thus, Mr. Bell made a striking figure. From the neck down, he was sartorially perfect—clad in Bond Street clothes. But the neck itself was scrawny, and outthrust. J. Edwin's monocle was attached to a peculiarly beaked face, and a few silvery hairs were slicked across his practically naked skull.

At the best of times, Mr. Bell bore considerable resemblance to an old, bald vulture. At this time, as he bent over the desk, he looked like a vulture that had just espied a particularly toothsome morsel of prey. And was going to pounce on it.

"W-what?" he gulped. "You actually been hired by Mogul Pictures to play in them horse operas?"

Miss Le Roy smiled. "Well, not exactly hired," she confessed. "You see, my money ran out and I had to take a job in a—a kind of night club. Buck Traylor came in last night, and he promised to get me the part in his next picture."

"Oh!" said J. Edwin Bell, and his

monocled gaze chilled. "Buck was drunk, huh?"

To millions of Americans, Buck Traylor was an epic figure whose piebald bronc and blazing six-guns were tops in cinema entertainment. But in Hollywood, the Cowboy Star had lately gained fame for dunking his tonsils in champagne, cognac, fine old Scotch—or anything else he could lay his hands on. He would then prove that the old West still lives by shooting out shop windows along Sunset Boulevard, and leaping from the runningboard of his car in efforts to bulldog traffic policemen.

"Listen!" said Mr Bell. "When that saddle-bum's on a binge, he don't know a leading lady from a lamp-post! He probably thought you was Shirley Temple. Besides, no matter what he promised you last night, he won't remember it this morning!'

Miss LeRoy shook her blond head. A tender glow brightened her blue orbs. She said softly, "You've got Buck all wrong, Mr. Bell! He was telling me all about himself last night. Do you know *why* he gets drunk, Mr. Bell?"

"Sure!" sneered the flesh broker. "Because he laps up a barrel of booze at a sitting!"

The girl ignored J. Edwin's sneer.

"Buck is a thwarted man," she announced. "He really wants to be a cowboy, and they won't let him be. As soon as he jumps on a horse, he has to ride off behind a mesquite bush, or whatever it is. Then his double changes places with him. All the best parts of those movies—the riding and roping and sliding down cliffs—is done by the double. Buck is sensitive about it, poor fellow. They won't let him risk his valuable neck doing those stunts—and so he gets drunk and does them, anyway. That's the psychology of it."

The psychology of it didn't interest Mr. Bell. He waggled a skinny hand at the girl. "Okay, so he wants to be a cowboy! I still say that don't mean he's going to make a cowgirl out of you!"

"But it does so mean it," Miss LeRoy insisted. "I left Buck at the place I work —the Pacific Bar—only half an hour ago. That's why I came here to get you. I want you to meet Buck and—"

"Wait a minute!" cried the flesh-broker. "You mean he still hasn't sobe—changed his mind?"

"Of course he hasn't!"

"Hot dog!" breathed J. Edwin Bell.

He yanked a sheet of foolscap from his desk, thrust that into the pocket of his English-tailored coat. Clapping a derby onto his narrow skull, he seized the girl's arm. "Come on!"

They plunged out onto the sidewalk. "Taxi!"

J. Edwin Bell folded his elegantly attired self against the cushions of the cab beside the girl. He rolled down the window to let the warm California breeze caress his brow. His monocle caught a vagrant beam of sunshine and reflected it brightly.

He was a happy man.

Love makes some guys that way. Others are icky over swing music or the beauties of Nature. There are connoisseurs who can go blissfully nuts staring at an old master's canvas. J. Edwin Bell was a connoisseur of chiseling. His affairs were always colored with larceny, for he found perennial joy in bilking his fellow man.

IN HOLLYWOOD, they said that graft was where you found J. Edwin Bell. They also said that he doublecrossed everyone he met. But Hollywood is a hasty town, given to snap judgments. In full justice to Mr. Bell, it should be mentioned that he didn't *always* doublecross his clients; sometimes he triple-crossed 'em.

He was happy now, but not on account of Miss Lila LeRoy. In the first place, he knew perfectly well that Buck Traylor could not sign the young woman to a contract. Traylor only worked for Mogul, and his promise meant nothing unless endorsed by his producer.

In the second place, J. Edwin Bell also knew this producer. He had dealt with Gus Lennox in the past, and Gus was not in the business of signing up leading ladies who hadn't even passed a screen test.

And in the third place, Lila LeRoy wasn't really worth bothering with. The box office appeal of a dame in Western pictures is practically nil. Lovers of horse opera do not lay their dough on the line in order to witness close-ups of feminine beauty. They want six-guns, fast horses, bad men, and bloody battles—the dame was just there to meet Buck Traylor in the first reel, misunderstand him in the second, and be kissed in the fade-out.

For such a simple role, J. Edwin Bell figured, two hundred a week would be tops in pay—making his commission twenty bucks.

And he didn't take long to figure on it. The flesh-broker's thoughts barely touched first, second, and third bases—and then slid triumphantly into home plate.

Buck Traylor! Why, believe it or not, the horse opera hero drew more fan mail than Clark Gable! Mr. Bell had heard that from a reliable source, and likewise he had heard that Buck Traylor was holding out for two grand a week on his next contract. Traylor wasn't one of those dime-a-dozen, quickie-Western goons—cowboys on the cuff, Bell called them.

Mental arithmetic informed the flesh broker that ten percent of *that* would be two hundred bucks. He calculated Buck should work at least forty weeks a year—why, it was like finding dough growing on bushes!

And all he had to do was push one of those long-term, ironclad contracts in front of the sagebrush hombre! Because if Buck was drunk enough to promise Lila LeRoy a job in pictures, he'd also be too drunk to know what *he* was signing.

Of course, legally speaking, an intoxicated man couldn't sign such papers at all. But J. Edwin knew an easy answer. All he had to do was pre-date the agreement a few days.

From these happy dreams, the agent was jarred awake by an elbow nudging his ribs.

"Snap out of it, Mr. Bell," smiled Lila LeRoy. "This is it—the Pacific Bar."

The flesh-broker dived hastily to the sidewalk. But not so hastily that he failed to wait while the cabbie made change from his dollar-bill. Mr. Bell could and did take it in large cash sums; but when he came to dishing it out, he closed up like a National bank on Sundays. He clung to a dime as an abalone clings to its native rock, and would give a tip as quickly as he'd cut off his right hand.

Pocketing every nickel of his change, then, J. Edwin Bell turned toward the Pacific Bar. As Miss LeRoy had said, this was only a kind of a night club—and not the kind you would expect to find a movie star in. The building was small and dark and frowsy. It looked like the sort of joint a sailor might patronize, provided the sailor did not mind being shanghaied onto a whaling vessel while drunk. Such was its external appearance, and the view on the inside was much the same, but worse.

Mr. Bell dived inside, and flung his monocled stare around the dingy, gloom-infested interior. The place seemed to be deserted, except for a guy polishing glasses behind the bar. The only way you could tell this bartender was a very tough guy was by taking a hinge at him.

But from a curtained booth at the side of the room came a mournful ditty. The voice was plaintive, tenor, and cracked. It was also monotonous, owing to the fact that the ditty consisted exclusively of the following stanza:

> Oh, gimme a horse that I can ri-udh,
> Oh, gimme a horse that I can ri-udh,
> Oh, gimme a horse that I can ri-udh,
> Oh, gimme a horse . . .

"That's him," said Lila LeRoy. "That's Buck. You see, he really wants to be a cowboy and ride a horse."

Mr. Bell's skinny hand shot out and swept aside the curtains. His monocled gaze investigated the contents of the booth. It contained numerous small glasses, an array of bottles, and a very drunken and red-haired young man clad in a rumpled Tux.

"Hullo, Traylor," said Mr. Bell.

The hero of horse opera fixed his glassy

grey eyes on the agent. He shuddered. "Wooo-bll-rr!" he cried. "Buzzards! Go 'way!"

AND then, apparently under the delusion that the cameras were grinding, the red-haired young man folded onto the floor. He scooped up a handful of sawdust from the floor and ejaculated, "Sand!" Then beginning to creep toward the bar on hands and knees:

"Tarnation!" he declaimed. "I'll make thet waterhole yet, afore the buzzard picks my bones!"

J. Edwin Bell's lips stretched in a grin. This, he told himself, was going to be easy!

Miss LeRoy's blue eyes softened tenderly. She bent over and touched Buck's shoulder gently.

"Get up, Buck!" she pleaded. "Don't you remember me?"

"Sure!" Buck Traylor said. "Yore the boo'ful Injun princess, Rain-in-the-Face."

Miss LeRoy's coral lips tightened. "I am *not* Rain-in-the-Face! I'm your new leading lady!"

The film star clambered to his feet and bowed unsteadily. "Pleased to metcha!"

J. Edwin Bell backed his prey into the booth. "She's not your leading lady yet," he pointed out, and whipped the contract from his pocket. "You got to sign this first!"

He spread the contract on the table and pushed his fountain pen into Buck Traylor's limp fingers.

"Go ahead, Buck!" urged Miss LeRoy. "Sign it!"

The two thousand dollar a week cowhand shook his head. "I cain't," he muttered.

"Sign it!" hissed J. Edwin Bell.

"I cain't," repeated the hero of horse opera. "I'm a pore, uneddicated cowboy. I was raised by Injuns. I cain't read er write!"

Miss LeRoy shook her blond head sadly. "Poor boy, it's what he *wants* to be. Can't you just see the psychology?"

The flesh broker's optic glittered behind its monocle. "I'll show you some psychology!" he growled. "After all, the guy's an actor! I know how to handle him!"

He pushed his head into the booth.

"Hey, mister!" cried J. Edwin Bell. "Ain't you Buck Traylor? Mister, can I have your autograph?"

Buck Traylor jerked erect. His gray eyes became amiable, and almost intelligent. His fingers closed on the pen.

"'S pleasure!" he announced.

Mr. Bell's bony forefinger guided the pen point to the dotted line. "Right here," he wheedled. "Just sign on the menu!"

For a moment, the only sound was the scratching of the pen.

Then,

"Hot ziggety!" ejaculated the flesh broker. He seized the foolscap, breathed gently on the wet black scrawl.

Abruptly, his lank jaw fell. "Hell!" cried J. Edwin Bell. His lips were ashy.

"Why," wailed Lila LeRoy, "what's wrong?"

"Look at this! Just look at it!" Mr. Bell's finger quivered under the dotted line. The wet, inky scrawl might have passed for a Chinese laundry mark, or for the tracks left by an inebriated hen. But certainly, and never, could this scrawl ever be indentified as Buck Traylor's legal signature.

"Why"—and Mr. Bell's voice was justly indignant—"this saddle-bug's too stewed to write his own name!"

Lila LeRoy's blue gaze wavered. She wrung her slim hands in distress. "Oh! Whatever can we *do?"*

"We got to get him out of this booze palace!" Mr. Bell growled. "We got to sober him up—slightly." His hands clutched Buck Traylor's arm.

A voice behind the flesh broker jarred, "That's what *you* think!"

J. EDWIN BELL did not have to turn around. Powerful fingers closed on the agent's scrawny neck, and did all the turning that was necessary. In fact, the fingers sent Bell spinning like a top.

Like a whirling dervish, Mr. Bell twirled and whirled across the floor until he

crashed painfully against the bar. His monocle flew to the end of its black silk cord—and bounced off the bartender's chest.

A large red fist, broken-knuckled from long service inside padded gloves, waved under J. Edwin's beaked nose.

"Listen, dope!" the bartender grated. "You ain't taking that mug nowhere—until you settle his score!"

The flesh-broker weaved like an animated pretzel as he ducked and dodged the threatening fist. He stared unhappily at a battered, threatening face framed between cauliflower ears. Here, clearly, was a guy who knew how to Influence People without Winning Friends.

J. Edwin Bell chattered, "How—how much?"

"A hunnert an' four bucks!"

Incredulous sounds shivered on Mr. Bell's pale lips. "G-great s-snakes! What's he been drinking—pearl juice?"

"It ain't what he's been drinking!" the bartender retorted. "It's what he was setting up f'r the crowd last night."

The agent groaned. "I won't—I mean, I can't pay it!"

"Buddy, yuh don't hafta. All I gotta do is call a cop. I guess the guy's cufflinks alone must be worth that kinda dough."

"No, no. Don't call an officer!" J. Edwin Bell pleaded. Any cop would identify Buck Traylor. A friendly cop would escort the star home; an unfriendly one would escort him to the jailhouse. Either way, he'd be out of reach until thoroughly sobered up.

Slowly, Mr. Bell reached for his wallet. Under normal circumstances, raising a hundred and four bucks in cash from him would have been an engineering feat, about as easy as hoisting the *Lusitania's* treasure from the bottom of the sea. But now he thought about the ten percent of Buck Traylor's salary. Painfully, he doled the crisp treasury-notes into the barkeep's palm.

"Oke! Yuh want me to thrun him out for yuh?"

With skill born of experience, he trundled Buck Traylor through the side door onto the pavement.

"Good!" breathed J. Edwin Bell. "Now, I'll get a taxi!"

It developed, however, that Buck Traylor had his own ideas on the subject of transportation.

"Don't wanna taxi!" the red haired young man announced. "Just gimme a horse that I can ride! Oh, gimme a horse—!"

"Shut up!" snarled Mr. Bell. "You're going to ride in a cab, or else."

"It 'at so?" inquired the celluloid cowboy. Suddenly truculent, he seized Mr. Bell's throat. "I said, *gimme a horse!*"

He slammed J. Edwin to the sidewalk. Miss Lila LeRoy solicitously assisted the flesh broker to his feet. She whispered:

"There'll only be a fight if you try to put him in a cab now. Don't you think we'd better give in before he gets us all arrested?"

And her blue eyes significantly darted along the street.

"All right!" yielded Mr. Bell. "All right! All right!"

Somewhat dizzily, the flesh broker's lank form wobbled along the sidewalk until he fetched up at the mouth of the alley—and also, beside a rags-and-old-iron cart.

Mr. Bell lifted his monocled gaze to the bearded features of the cart-driver. "How much to use your horse for half an hour?"

The beard parted, showed grinning white teeth. "Ten dollars!'

"Ten—!" J. Edwin peered at the animal between the shafts of the cart. If horses could talk, this one could probably have given a first-hand account of the San Francisco earthquake. It also looked like a horse that had gone through numerous other earthquakes, as well as several pitched battles; and the mud of the Los Angeles flood still clung to its flanks. It was scarred and moth-eaten and spavined.

"You're crazy." Mr Bell protested. "That bone-pile ain't worth ten dollars to buy him outright!"

The cart-man might have been crazy, but he had sense enough to see that any-

one who could want this horse at all must need a horse very badly, indeed.

"Fifteen," he said.

Mr. Bell swallowed. "I—I heard you the first time!" Again, he produced his wallet. "Help me unhitch him—it."

THUS did the flesh-broker return to the Pacific Bar, his scrawny fingers clutching the bridle of a veritable horse; one might have said a very Methuselah among horses.

"Now, Buck!" exclaimed Lila LeRoy enthusiastically. "Look, the nice man has brought you a lovely horse. Climb on, that's a good boy!"

The film star's blank stare wandered in focusless fashion toward the cayuse.

"I'll take the one on this side," he decided. "You can ride the other, Princess."

He stumbled to the curb, leaped mightily, and by a miracle got onto the nag's swayed back. His riding form wasn't exactly perfect, but at least he had one leg on each side of the animal.

Mr. Bell grumbled, "Giddap!"

The horse, its ears flung back distrustfully, giddapped—but slowly. Straining at bridle, J. Edwin called:

"He don't lead so good, Lila! You better get behind and push!"

And she did.

The unique procession started along the street. In Hollywood, it takes a good deal of novelty to attract much attention. But the sight of J. Edwin Bell, complete in Bond Street garments and monocle, dragging an erstwhile horse down the high road lent a touch of the picturesque to the scene. The picture of a red-haired drunk perched atop this horse added to the incongruity; and then there was the luscious blonde in the nudist evening gown who brought up the rear of the pixilated procession, occasionally using her purse to swat the cayuse's moth-eaten rump.

People lined up along the sidewalks to watch. And to listen, for the sound effects were something. There were cries, "Giddy-up! Go on, you old horse! Get *up!*" in Miss LeRoy's silvery soprano. Buck Traylor supplied a tenor accompaniment:

> Git along, little doggies!
> Wyoming will be wore new home!

Buck's eyes were full of tears, for to him this was a very sad song.

J.Edwin Bell supplied the basso. His remarks, however were strictly sulphuric and not to be set to music. Generally speaking, Mr. Bell was busy tracing the horse and its rider to common but uncomplimentary ancestors.

Then, abruptly, Buck Traylor fell off the steed. He staggered to the curb, sat down, and buried his face in his hands. His shoulders shook, and he breathed sobbingly.

"Yeah!" voiced the flesh broker. "A crying jag!"

While Miss LeRoy exclaimed, "Look!"

She pointed, and Mr. Bell looked. His beady eyes focused on a sign overhanging the sidewalk. *Happy Health Reducing Parlors,* the sign said. *Gym and Turkish Bath. Where Refined Folks Meet and Melt.*

"A Turkish bath is just the thing," Mr. Bell nodded. "Help me carry him in."

J. Edwin and the blonde succeeded in hoisting the cowboy star up the steps and into the establishment. Whereupon, a bitter murmur ran through the crowd of disillusioned watchers:

"Cheap publicity gag! Why, it's just an advertising stunt for this joint!" The crowd broke up.

The street was empty half an hour later when Mr. Bell and Miss LeRoy reappeared. The flesh-broker looked a trifle wilted. In fact, he had just staggered out of the steam chamber. Sweat dotted J. Edwin's pallid face, and his costly Bond Street suit leaked clouds of vapor into the atmosphere. Throughly steamed, it clung to the agent's lank figure like badly hung wallpaper.

But Mr. Bell's beaked face wore a large and happy grin. In his hand he clutched the contract—and it was signed.

He turned to the girl. "Lila, you gotta take that horse back! Because I'm on my

way over to Mogul to see Gus Lennox!"

The blonde nodded. "Then I've practically got the job as Buck's leading lady?"

"Sure! You're going to be a leading lady!" assured J. Edwin Bell. But as he hastened along the sidewalk, he added a muttered reservation. "That is, leading the horse back!"

STILL steaming gently, the flesh-broker sped triumphantly across the Mogul Films lot and into the grandiose building which housed the executive offices. "I want to see Gus Lennox," he proclaimed. "And tell him I'm representing Buck Traylor."

It worked like magic. Aladdin rubbing his lamp didn't get quicker results. In a small trice, J. Edwin Bell was whisked through the gorgeous anterooms into the producer's gold-plated office. Mr. Bell waded ankle-deep through an Oriental rug until he reached the pearl-inlaid desk. It was that kind of an office—luxurious, sumptuous, ornate—but it contained one extremely cold and practical feature.

Gus Lennox.

Anyone looking at Gus Lennox instinctively thought of a peanut, for the producer was a little man, bald and brown and shriveled. But he was a peanut with a cast-iron shell. Many guys had found this out by trying to put the bite onto Gus Lennox.

Indeed, J. Edwin Bell had tried a few nibbles in the past. To date, the net result for him had been a severe toothache on each occasion.

But now, thought the flesh-broker, all that was changed. With Buck Traylor's contract, he held the whiphand over Gus Lennox. He decided to crack the whip.

"Hullo, Gus," said Mr. Bell, grinning. "I bet you're glad to find out another one of your stars has put himself under my management! Only Buck Traylor won't be your star at all, unless he gets a brand new two-thousand-dollar-a-week contract starting from right now!"

The little producer smiled. "It must be a genius you got, Bell," he stated, "for summing up a whole situation in such a few words. You hit all three nails right on the head!"

And Gus Lennox's smile became a jeering laugh.

"I *am* glad you're managing Traylor," he continued, "on account of Buck ain't going to be my star any more. Because I wouldn't give him a contract for two thousand dollars, or even for two cents!"

It will be seen that Gus Lennox also had a genius for summing up a whole situation in a few words. He had hit all three nails on the head—and driven them deeply into J. Edwin Bell's coffin.

"What?" wailed the flesh-broker. "You—you don't want to hire Buck again?"

Gus Lennox bobbed his brown, bald head emphatically. "If I don't make myself clear yet," he jarred, "Buck Traylor is through. From now on, that guy's theme song is *Empty Saddles*—and you can help him sing it. He's all washed up. He's out, and you can spell that f-i-r-e-d. Read this and weep!"

The producer snatched a paper from his desk and thrust it into Mr. Bell's limp fingers. J. Edwin had seen studio releases before, and he did not have to read this one.

In fact, he couldn't have read it anyway. The Oriental carpet seemed to be sinking under Mr. Bell's patent-leather-clad feet, and the office walls swam dizzily before his monocled stare.

"You—you can't!" gasped the flesh-broker. "You got block booking, ain't you? That means Mogul's gotta make cowboy pictures! Who're you gonna use for a star?"

"I got one," chuckled Gus Lennox. "I'm signing up Tim Yorel."

"Tim who?" blurted the agent. "Never heard of him. You can't get away with this! The public wants Buck Traylor. They won't stand for a substitute nobody even ever heard of!"

Gus Lennox shrugged.

"The public's been standing for Tim quite a while already," he retorted. "He's Buck's double, and he's been making

around half the footage of all them horse operas Buck was starred in."

Mr. Bell drew a long breath. "That don't prove he can act!"

"He don't have to act," Gus Lennox said simply. "He's a natural born, rarin', tearin', rooting-tooting son of a gun!"

Mr. Bell's thin lips tightened, and Mr. Bell's tone flowed acid.

"I bet the guy's a punk!" he sneered. "You got a floparoo on your hands. Inside of six months, you'll come crawling on all fours and beg me for Buck Traylor!"

Gus Lennox climbed to his feet. "Bell," he announced dangerously, "I was already tired of you before you came in, even! Now get out before I hit you with something colossal!"

"But—"

"It's going to be a pleasure," promised the producer. His hand closed on a large, gold-plated paperweight, and he started to circle the desk.

But the promise fell on an empty space where J. Edwin Bell had recently been. For Mr. Bell had thought of other matters which required his prompt and personal attention.

OUTSIDE the Mogul lot, a coolish breeze circulated through the flesh-broker's damp garments. J. Edwin shivered, and plunged his hands into his pockets. His fingers touched Buck Traylor's agency contract, and Mr. Bell groaned.

He had spent one hundred and fourteen dollars, plus cab fares, to find out that Gus Lennox didn't want to hire Buck.

It hurt.

But J. Edwin Bell could see the silver lining in a very dark cloud. He saw such a lining now, and his thin lips formed the single word:

"Yorel!"

Gus Lennox hadn't signed Tim Yorel to a contract yet—had only said he was going to.

Maybe Yorel hadn't learned about his good fortune yet. Or, if he knew about it, possibly he had been offered a merely nominal salary, such as a mere fifteen hundred dollars a week.

In either case—in any case—J. Edwin Bell felt sure that the rooting-tooting son of a gun needed a good smart agent. And Mr. Bell knew exactly the right man for the job.

He darted across the street to a drug-store and consulted a directory. Emerging, Mr. Bell waggled his finger into the passing traffic.

"Taxi!"

It was worth trying, anyway. J. Edwin was always willing to try to make two suckers grow where only one had been before. Maybe he could manage *both* Buck Traylor and Tim Yorel!

Presently the taxi pulled into the grounds of a modest rancho on the outskirts of North Hollywood. Mr. Bell got out, and counted forth the exact amount of his fare.

"You can wait for me," he said economically, "if you want to—on your own time."

He hurried up the cacti-bordered walk to the little ranch house.

A young man got up from a chair on the porch. He was large, and red haired, and faintly resembled Buck Traylor. He also resembled someone else, but J. Edwin Bell couldn't—at first glance—remember who.

"You're Tim Yorel?"

"That's right, pardner."

Mr. Bell's eye flew open behind the monocle. He wet his lips, and leaned forward to stare at the other. Tim Yorel wore a flannel shirt, open at the throat, and his legs were encased in riding breeches. But these details melted in J. Edwin's imagination. He seemed to see a suave young man in evening clothes with a moustache on his lip—

"Great snakes!" ejaculated the agent. "Yorel, hell! Why, you're Timothy Vandalier!"

The red-haired young man nodded. "I tried to break into the movies under that name a few years ago, yes. I was trying to play sophisticated parts then. I was

raised on a ranch, but I went to college in the East." He broke off suddenly. "Well, what can I do for you? Who are you anyway?"

J Edwin Bell laughed, and his laugh rasped like sandpaper on a blackboard.

"You know who I am!" said Mr. Bell. "You signed up with my agency under the name of Timothy Vandalier."

"That's right, I did," the red-haired young man admitted slowly. "But you never got me a job that I can remember about."

The flesh-broker grinned. "Read your contract again, Yorel—or whatever name you want to use! It doesn't say I have to get you a job. Or even try to. All I got to do is exert due diligence in your behalf!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I'm collecting!" J. Edwin Bell grated. "Ten percent of your salary from now on! Because I'm going to be mighty diligent looking after your interests, whether you know it or not!"

Tim Yorel's eyes darkened. "You'd do that?" he asked slowly. "Because five years ago I was green and broke and discouraged, so I'd sign anything in the hopes of getting a job? You'd step in now, and take a tenth of this money you've never lifted a finger to earn?"

Mr. Bell grinned. "Don't talk like a sap!" he sneered. "What do you expect? Of course I'm taking my cut."

"That's just what I *did* expect!" Tim Yorel remarked slowly. He crossed the porch with two strides, and gripped large fingers onto the agent's shoulder. "You're out of luck, Bell!"

"I—let go! I'll sue you!"

The red-haired young man didn't let go. He laughed unpleasantly.

"Try and sue!" he invited. "You broke that contract yourself, Bell!"

"I *what?*"

"Broke it," Tim Yorel nodded. "You haven't used 'due diligence' in my behalf. You told a producer I was a punk and a floparoo! You tried to talk him out of hiring me! Why, you haven't got a leg to stand on!"

Mr. Bell's thin lips gaped widely open. His eye was glassy behind the monocle.

"Try and sue!" Yorel repeated. "And listen to a sound track recording of what you told Mr. Lennox today!"

J. Edwin Bell shuddered. "I've been framed!" he cried. "Gus Lennox—and that Lila LeRoy—she was in it, too!"

"Of course she was," the red-haired young man agreed. "Spell LeRoy backward, and see what you get!"

Mr. Bell stood as if stunned. His lips worked silently.

"Never mind spelling it," came another voice. "You get me!"

J. Edwin's scrawny neck twisted until his vulturelike face was turned to the front door of the ranch house. He blinked at the young woman in the doorway. She was pretty and blond and shapely—but clad now in an attractive riding habit.

"My wife," stated Tim Yorel. "It was her idea, Bell. She figured you'd double-cross her and get Buck Traylor to sign one of those crooked agreements. And then you'd find out about me—and try to cut down on me to keep Traylor's job—and then, if you did, I wouldn't have to go on paying you ten percent of my life's blood for the next hundred years. And, boy, you did!"

Whereupon, Tim Yorel lifted J. Edwin Bell into the air. "Chiseler!" he growled, and flung Mr. Bell afar. So far that the flesh-broker cleared the porch rail, and landed forcibly in a plot of earth beside the walk.

There was a loud bawl of pain, and then a clattering of footfalls as the agent fled toward his cab.

Mrs. Yorel sighed. "Tim, darling! Now we've got to get busy and replant all those cacti!"

For the rear view of the departing J. Edwin Bell consisted largely of prickly pear foliage.

AGAIN the cab slid to a stop, this time in front of the *Happy Health Reducing Parlors*. Mr. Bell got out stiffly —there is not much clearance in a taxicab

for a passenger who prefers to ride standing up.

Therefore he groaned and wearily straightened his weary spine. Walking gingerly, as a man will when his trousers are full of prickly pear needles, he climbed the steps into the establishment.

A beefy chap in a white coat approached. "Well?"

"I left a man here to sober up," said Mr. Bell, and he smiled.

For he still had Buck Traylor under contract. He'd sober Buck up. He'd see to it that Buck learned to ride a horse so he wouldn't *need* a double.

And after that, he could get Traylor a star's job with Fox—or M-G-M—or Paramount. Sure, he could!

"Red-haired fellow," he added.

"Oh, him?" the beefy man said. "He's all right. Happy as a kid. Look-a-here!"

He threw open a door, and the flesh-broker stared. He saw a familiar, red-haired figure jouncing up and down on something that looked like a cross between a barrel and an animated saw-horse.

Mr. Bell gaped.

"Electric!" the attendant explained proudly. "It walks and canters and lopes and everything!"

In fact, Buck Traylor was crooning in a cheerful voice:

"Oh, I got a horse that I can ri-udh . . ."

"He—he's crazy!" Mr. Bell gasped.

"Nope," said the beefy man. "He's like Coolidge, see?"

J. Edwin's thin lips curled. "You're both crazy—huh? What about him?"

The other chuckled.

He spoke, and with his words J. Edwin Bell's hopes came crashing earthward! That wasn't a silver lining in the cloud, it was a steel straitjacket! Because Buck Traylor would never, never be the hero of another horse opera. . . .

"President Coolidge," the beefy man was saying, "had to ride an electric horse because real ones gave him asthma. Your friend's the same, only worse. He'll be oke as long as you never let him get near a horse—but if he gets close enough to smell one, he's going to keel over like he did today. Twenty-five bucks, mister, is our charge!"

The Never-Ever Land

A CERTAIN Doctor Lauge Koch has just completed a bit of exploring of the most unusual and valuable kind. He has discovered that the Fata Morgana Islands do not exist. For some time scientists have been insisting that there is a mysterious group of islands in the Arctic, located between Spitzbergen and Peary Land. This territory they called the Fata Morgana Islands. But Doctor Koch flew out that way in a plane, and he states conclusively that there is no land there at all.

Probably it doesn't make much difference about the Fata Morgana Islands; the principle of Doctor Koch's exploring is the important thing. We need more explorers who will discover that places ain't.

The map is complicated enough now, and it's time that men of Doctor Koch's caliber debunked it. As a matter of fact, this unusual type of explorer could clear up a lot of difficulties. The more discriminating among you are perfectly free to make up your own list of places that it would be nicer if they were not. Just send the lists to Doctor Koch, and he will guarantee to discover that they do not exist. Geography at last amounts to something.

—*Emil Capper*


MEN of
MODERN
MARCO POLO
HOWARD RINEHART ENLISTED IN THE U.S. NAVY AT 17 AS A WIRELESS EXPERT. HIS FIRST ADVENTURE WAS AN ESCAPE FROM THE WRECK OF THE U.S.S. LANCASTER WHEN SHE SANK IN HAMPTON ROADS. DISCHARGED IN 1906, HE SPENT THE NEXT SIX YEARS ERECTING WIRELESS STATIONS IN BRAZIL, MOSTLY IN JUNGLE TOWNS.
WHILE INSTALLING WIRELESS ON A SHIP IN THE HARBOR OF RIO, HE WAS CAUGHT IN THE NAVAL REVOLUTION OF 1910. COMPLETING THE INSTALLATION IN THE LINE OF FIRE FROM BOTH SIDES, RINEHART MADE HISTORY BY REPORTING A BATTLE BY WIRELESS DIRECTLY FROM THE SCENE OF ACTION. THE FIRST TIME IT HAD EVER BEEN DONE!
LATER, ON HIS OWN, HE MADE A TRIP DOWN THE RIO ARAGUAYA AND UP THE RIO DAS MORTEZ WHERE HE DISCOVERED AN ENORMOUSLY RICH PLACER DEPOSIT OF GOLD AND DIAMONDS. WITH A FRYING PAN HE WASHED OUT 60 POUNDS OF GOLD AND A THOUSAND CARATS OF DIAMONDS!
HE HURRIED BACK TO THE U.S. WITH INTENTIONS OF ORGANIZING AN EXPEDITION BUT WAS SIDETRACKED BY THE LURE OF FLYING AND DURING THE NEXT THREE YEARS GAVE EXHIBITION FLIGHTS OVER THE COUNTRY. THIS PROVED ANOTHER BONANZA.
ON THE RIO DAS MORTEZ (FROM A PHOTO)

DARING

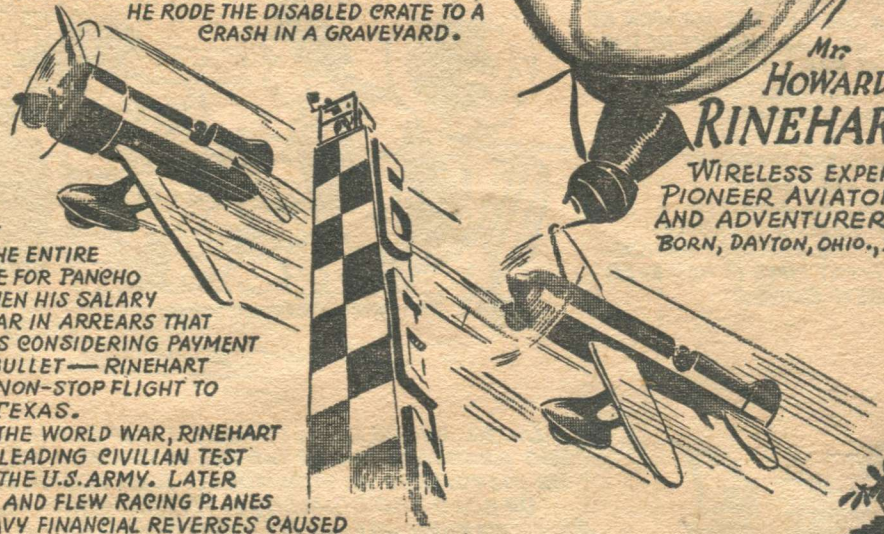
by STOOKIE ALLEN

IN 1913, RINEHART NEARLY LOST HIS LIFE WHILE FLYING. A STRUT BROKE, KNOCKING HIM UNCONSCIOUS AND OUT OF THE PLANE. BUT AS HE WAS FALLING THE MACHINE DIVED ON ITS BACK AND ACTUALLY SCOOPED THE PILOT OUT OF THIN AIR! ENTANGLED IN THE WIRES, HE RODE THE DISABLED CRATE TO A CRASH IN A GRAVEYARD.

Mr. HOWARD RINEHART

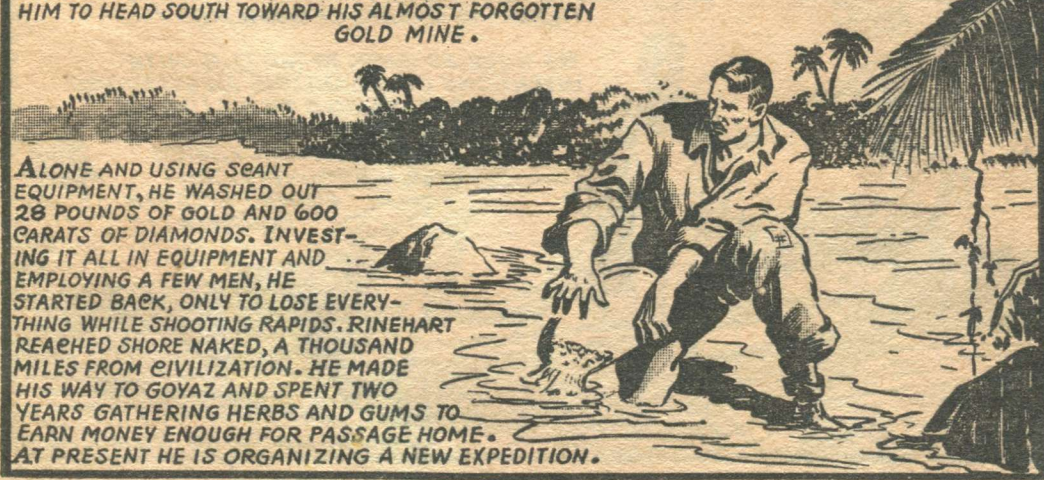
WIRELESS EXPERT, PIONEER AVIATOR AND ADVENTURER.

BORN, DAYTON, OHIO., 1885



IN 1915 HE WAS THE ENTIRE AIR FORCE FOR PANCHO VILLA. WHEN HIS SALARY WAS SO FAR IN ARREARS THAT VILLA WAS CONSIDERING PAYMENT WITH A BULLET — RINEHART MADE A NON-STOP FLIGHT TO TEXAS.

DURING THE WORLD WAR, RINEHART WAS THE LEADING CIVILIAN TEST PILOT OF THE U.S. ARMY. LATER HE BUILT AND FLEW RACING PLANES UNTIL HEAVY FINANCIAL REVERSES CAUSED HIM TO HEAD SOUTH TOWARD HIS ALMOST FORGOTTEN GOLD MINE.



ALONE AND USING SCANT EQUIPMENT, HE WASHED OUT 28 POUNDS OF GOLD AND 600 CARATS OF DIAMONDS. INVESTING IT ALL IN EQUIPMENT AND EMPLOYING A FEW MEN, HE STARTED BACK, ONLY TO LOSE EVERYTHING WHILE SHOOTING RAPIDS. RINEHART REACHED SHORE NAKED, A THOUSAND MILES FROM CIVILIZATION. HE MADE HIS WAY TO GOYAZ AND SPENT TWO YEARS GATHERING HERBS AND GUMS TO EARN MONEY ENOUGH FOR PASSAGE HOME. AT PRESENT HE IS ORGANIZING A NEW EXPEDITION.

Coming Soon: Ross Allen—Alligator Cowboy

"Whoops," screamed the evil bird. "Set 'em up in the other alley."

Lo, the Poor Indian

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

Author of "Happy Landing," "The Clan of Kirk," etc.

Corporal Dorgan had just one life to give for his country—but keeping tabs on the post's copper-skinned champ would sorely tax the whole nine of an indestructible cat

I

THE first sergeant, who had been vaccinated with vinegar when young, looked up as Corporal Dorgan came into the orderly room. Corporal Pinky Kew followed. The first sergeant's gaze brightened with anticipation—from the way Lieutenant Sylvester had spoken no good was brewing for Junior-corporals Dorgan and Kew.

"Charge of Quarters said we was wanted," Luke Dorgan said briefly. "Well, here we are."

"In trouble again, huh?" the first sergeant inquired in a pleased voice. "Well, well!"

"We ain't in no trouble," Luke told him sourly.

"No? Well, you will be pretty quick. Trot in there an' report to the lootenant."

Lieutenant Sylvester was sitting with his feet on the desk and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth while he thought dark and bitter thoughts.

A week ago he had been sitting pretty, he reflected morosely. His regimental boxing team had been headed straight for the divisional championship and he had been the fair-haired boy as far as the colonel was concerned.

All that was changed now.

His best lightweight had broken his hand in training, his middleweight was in the hospital with the measles and

last night the rest of his stable had taken up the prone position on the canvas with a discouraging regularity.

And, just to top it all off, Percy Fairbrother had indulged himself in another fight with the M. P.s and was now languishing in the guardhouse.

PERCY FAIRBROTHER was the Indian heavyweight and Lieutenant Sylvester's pride and joy. He had been grooming Percy to knock the ears off Butch Dulligan, the Engineer who had reigned unmolested as king of the division heavyweights for the last three years—and last night, instead of fighting, Percy had been in jail.

The colonel's words had been caustic and to the point when he had interviewed Lieutenant Sylvester half an hour ago in his office.

"You have this Chief Horsefeathers, or whatever his name is, in that ring with Dulligan next Friday night or else, young man! You understand?"

"Yessir," Lieutenant Sylvester had said with a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. Keeping Percy Fairbrother out of trouble was like bailing out the ocean with a thimble.

Luke said: "Sir, Corporals Dorgan an' Kew reportin' as ordered."

Lieutenant Sylvester looked at them morosely as he stabbed out his cigarette in an ashtray. Good-looking soldiers, he thought. Fresh, carefree faces—well, they wouldn't be like that long. Once *he* had been carefree.

"I have never believed in making corporals into nursemaids," he said, half to himself. "Well, I've never believed in smoking in a powder factory either. Still, the thing has to be done."

"Yessir," Luke told him.

Lieutenant Sylvester fixed him with a cold eye. He said: "Private Fairbrother will be released from the guardhouse at two this afternoon. The two of you will take charge of him. Until he climbs in the ring with Butch Dulligan next Friday night your main mission is life is going to be to see that he keeps out of jail and associated entanglements. Is that clear?"

"Yessir."

"You'll eat with him and you'll tuck him into his downy little cot at night. You'll trot along with him when he does his road work in the mornings and you'll accompany him to the training ring in the afternoons. In short, you're going to become bosom companions of his—and God have mercy on your souls!"

"Yessir."

"And most particularly will you see to it that he doesn't have any more of these friendly little jousts with the military police? Because, if he lands in the guardhouse again between now and next Friday night, his two little pals will land in there right alongside him."

"Yessir."

"That's all," Lieutenant Sylvester said, waving his hands pessimistically. "I haven't a doubt in the world as to how this thing is going to end but I've done the best I could with the tools I've got to work with."

"Sir," Pinky Kew began in a cheerful voice, "I an'—"

He subsided as Luke kicked him on the ankle. Lieutenant Sylvester didn't notice. He went on morosely—as though he spoke to himself.

"Allah knows that I am a poor man with a wife and ten small children to support but if the noble redskin should—mind you, I say *should*—manage to win next Friday night there'll be ten dollars and a three-day pass for the two of you. Now, get out!"

PINKY KEW whistled cheerily as he and Luke Dorgan went down the porch of the barracks and entered the squadroom. Pinky Kew was a simple and untroubled soul.

"Ten bucks *an'* a three-day pass," he said. "Baby! An' no duty all week except to trail Lo around! I an' you must live right, Luke!"

Luke told him sourly: "You ain't gonna see no ten bucks. You ain't gonna see no three-day pass, either. Come next Friday

night they'll have cut your stripes away, an' mine likewise, an' the two of us will be on the inside lookin' out. Trouble hangs around that Indian like flies hang around a mess hall."

Pinky Kew stretched himself out on his bunk and put his arms under his head and thought of all the pleasant ways there were to spend ten dollars.

There was that little waitress down at the Green Dragon, for instance. Pinky was troubled with no apprehensions concerning the future.

"Lo ain't a bad guy," he observed, "just a little careless, maybe. I an' he is buddies an' he won't give us no more trouble than a little lamb, Luke."

"What you mean—Lo?"

"That's what I call him," Pinky explained. "I got it out of a book—he don't like bein' called Percy."

Luke grunted skeptically. "I didn't know you could read."

"Sure I read fine. This was a poetry book an' there was a poem that went something like:

Lo, the poor Indian,
With un-something mind,
Wears a feather derby
An' nothing much behind.

"Of course Percy don't wear no feather derby, Luke. That's just part of the poem, see?"

"It's a hell of a poem," Luke told him morosely.

Pinky Kew was not embarrassed. He smiled at the ceiling while he allowed his thoughts to wander back to that little waitress down on Waikiki.

His mood became more mellow. "Hey, Luke!" he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I have just figured how I an' you can make some more money!"

"How?" Luke asked in a dangerously calm voice.

"We'll bet on Lo to knock this Butch Dulligan for a row of ash buckets next Friday night."

Luke kicked viciously.

It hurt his toes but it filled his soul with a deep and satisfying peace. Presently he rolled over and went to sleep.

AT TWO o'clock Corporals Dorgan and Kew reported to the sergeant of the guard. That worthy read the release order, which Luke presented to him, and then spat.

"The Injun, huh? Well, you're welcome to him. I don't reckon that they're figurin' on takin' him out an' shootin' him, are they?"

"Naw," Luke told him.

"I suppose not," the sergeant murmured apathetically. "You'll find him in the bull pen. He was breakin' up a bunk when I looked at him last."

"He mad?"

"Just playful," the sergeant said. "That's his third bunk today. The supply sergeant is goin' to be upset when he comes around, I expect."

Percy Fairbrother came out onto the porch of the guardhouse with the corporal of the guard behind him. He was a big man with rangy shoulders and a placid and moon-shaped face. Now he stood looking down at Pinky Kew with the adoring gaze of an overgrown pup.

"How you be, Lo?" Pinky asked cheerfully.

"How," grunted Private Fairbrother.

"Well, he can talk. That's something," Luke observed pessimistically. He turned to Pinky Kew. "All right, Little Bright Eyes, you can get busy an' explain to your chum that you an' I are goin' to be pals of him for the next week. Make it strong!"

IT WAS Monday morning and there was still a half an hour before first call for reveille. A chill, gray morning. The squadroom was still dim and shadowy when Luke opened his eyes.

"Hey," a voice was saying in his ear. "Hey, you wakum up, huh?"

It was Private Fairbrother and Luke swore and tried to burrow deeper into his blankets. It was no use. Private Fairbrother peeled those blankets away as his ancestors

had used to peel birch bark away from a tree.

"You wakum up. Catchum roadwork this morning!"

Luke remembered then. "Aw, go get Pinky," he said sleepily. "You don't need two of us to watch you run."

He sat up, shivering. A half a dozen bunks away he could see Pinky Kew sleeping peacefully, his mouth open while he made sawing sounds through his nose. A pretty foul sight at a quarter to five in the morning, Luke thought sourly.

"Go on an' get *him*," he repeated.

"Huh?"

Private Fairbrother shook his head and there was a sort of pleased worship in his eyes as he looked across to where Pinky lay.

The whole business sickened Luke.

"Better him catchum sleep," Private Fairbrother said. "Him plenty tired. No good him gettum up before reveille. You come, huh?"

Luke said, suddenly angry: "Listen, you thimble-witted heathen, if you think that I'm goin' out there an' watch you run at this time of day while that cuckoo sleeps you got another think comin'! *See?*"

"You come," said Private Fairbrother with a pleasant but firm note in his voice "Catchum clothes, huh?"

They came out onto the athletic field some ten minutes later and Luke sat on a bleacher seat while he fumbled for a cigarette. Private Fairbrother shook his head disapprovingly.

"You catchum run too, huh?"

"Not much," Luke told him sourly. "I'm no athalete. I'm just a dumb corporal fit for nothin' except to wet nurse a trouble merchant around."

The pleasant but firm note had come back into Private Fairbrother's voice. "Heap fine you catchum run. Makum feel plenty good! You bet!"

He might as well, at that, Luke thought. A couple of laps around the track would warm him up some.

"Get goin'," he said grudgingly.

PRIVATE FAIRBROTHER set out at an easy trot and Luke followed at his heels. He began to feel better. After a minute he got up on his toes and sprinted a little. Private Fairbrother continued at his easy jog and, after a minute, Luke slowed to allow him to catch up.

Maybe the Indian was a good heavyweight but he wasn't much of a runner, Luke thought with a faintly superior satisfaction. He slowed still more, waiting for the other to come abreast of him. Then he noticed suddenly that the sound of the other's shoes on the cinders had died away.

Luke stopped and looked back; swore with feeling. Private Fairbrother had turned into the bridle path which led into the hills and he was a hundred yards away now, mounting a little rise at a gentle trot.

"Hey!" Luke yelled after him. "You come back here, you copper-colored idiot! Where in hell do you think you're goin'?"

Private Fairbrother waved a hand cheerfully and disappeared into the *lantana* as Luke swore again. That bridle path swung around the reservation and crossed the main road a few miles farther on. Once on that road Private Fairbrother would catch a ride into Honolulu and trouble would begin to pile up about Corporal Dorgan's head in earnest.

There was nothing to do, Luke thought grimly, but to catch him before he got to that main road. He set out, running in sober earnest and Lieutenant Sylvester's warnings were unpleasantly clear in his mind.

He topped the rise and saw Private Fairbrother a good two hundred yards ahead of him and running easily. Luke opened the throttle wide on the down grade and closed the gap to seventy-five yards. Then another hill lifted in front of him and he was hard put to hold his gain. A blister was beginning to rub on his left heel.

Private Fairbrother looked back over his shoulder.

"You catchum fine warm-up, huh?"

The words drifted back to fill Luke with a fine fury

He sprinted viciously, turning over in his mind the things which he would presently do to the regiment's red heavyweight hope. His breath was becoming labored and sweat was popping out onto his forehead.

He ran harder.

The seventy-five yards stayed seventy-five yards.

Luke understood, then, and black rage boiled over in him. The Indian was increasing his own pace also—matching it to that of his pursuer. He would, Luke thought with a sudden grimness, run that monkey down if he had to chase him twice around the island!

They climbed another hill and went down into another hollow. It was broad daylight now. Luke's lungs felt as though someone had emptied a feather pillow into them; he had a blister on his right heel now.

Private Fairbrother looked back and waved his hand—a chummy sort of a wave. Luke gritted his teeth and ran on.

The path steepened and, looking ahead through bloodshot eyes, Luke saw that it climbed for a quarter of a mile to the crest of a hill. He would catch the Indian on this slope, he decided grimly. Run the red son down! His feet were red hot balls of fire and his undershirt was dripping. The sun was beginning to come up, casting slanting shadows through the cactus and *lantana* on either side of him.

He put everything he had into it because he knew, suddenly, that he wasn't going any further than the top of that hill ahead. There was a buzzing in his ears as he gulped air into his lungs and started a fresh sprint. He was gaining a little—he had worn the Indian out. In spite of his discomfort he felt a faint glow of pride.

He staggered out onto the hill's top and there were dazzling red streaks in front of his eyes. His breath was coming in gasping sobs and he knew that he was going to lie down and be very sick in just a moment now. That faint triumph persisted though—he had run the Indian off his feet. Ahead of him Private Fairbrother had stopped; was kneeling in the middle of the trail with his head down.

"I—uh—uh—did—it!" Luke gasped.

He wobbled across the dozen remaining yards and Private Fairbrother looked up at him placidly. Dimly Luke knew that there was something wrong with this picture but he couldn't tell exactly what it was. Then he saw that, instead of kneeling there in exhaustion, the Indian had been tying his shoelace.

"I—uh—got—yuh. You're gonna—uh—come back—uh—with—me—yuh red—uh—trouble—uh—merchant!"

Private Fairbrother looked faintly puzzled. Then he stood up and hitched at his trousers. He reached over and patted Luke affectionately on the shoulder.

"Indian catchum fine warm-up," he said. "Now Indian catchum fine run. Goobye."

He went down the hill at a long, loping run which gobbled up the yards as a chicken gobbles up a worm. For a moment Luke swayed there, looking. Then he went quietly across the trail and was sick beneath a *lantana* bush.

II

IT WAS a quarter after eleven when Luke limped back to barracks. He was sore in body but sorer in mind. By this time the Indian was undoubtedly loose in Honlulu and it was only a matter of time before he would be into trouble. The first sergeant was standin' on the porch and he brightened when he saw Luke.

"Hah," he said cheerfully, "it's my little pal, Corporal Dorgan, ain't it?"

Luke scowled and said nothing.

"Been out on an all-night bender, too. Looks like the name of Corporal Dorgan is gonna figure prominent on the crime sheet today. Absent at reveille—absent at drill—reportin' to barracks in a condition prejudical to good military order an' discipline. Yes indeedy, quite a splash on the crime sheet!"

"Hah!" said Luke. A simple expression but he put feeling into it.

He went on down to the bath house and sat with his feet under the shower. They looked as though a sausage grinder had been chewing on them. There was considerable truth in what the first sergeant had said, he reflected morosely. He had missed a half a dozen formations and he had lost the Indian besides. Lieutenant Sylvester was going to be upset.

Presently he got up and went on back to the squadroom carrying his shoes in his hand.

Pinky Kew, his hair nicely combed, lay on his bunk while he looked at the pictures in a magazine. There was a cool and comfortable air about him and Luke's bitterness suddenly crystallized as he looked. He walked forward slowly.

Pinky Kew looked up. "How yuh be, Luke?" he inquired. "You look all wet—been out gettin' some exercise, huh?"

Luke put one of his shoes down with a careful deliberation; he took the other firmly by the toe and walked on until he was standing over Pinky.

The latter was absorbed in the magazine.

"Well, I read in a book once that exercise was good for a feller."

"Oh, you did?" Luke asked softly.

He lifted the shoe and shifted himself a little. He wanted to get his weight into this.

Then a placid and remembered voice spoke in his ear.

"No hittum Pinky, huh? Pinky heap nice feller!"

Luke turned slowly. It was Private Fairbrother. His hair, likewise, was neatly parted and he had a cool and bathed look. Luke had a sudden recurrence of that nausea which had assailed him up on the hill.

"Awww!" he said.

He went over and lay down on his bunk. He wished, for a moment, that the Indian had gone to town. The guardhouse would be a welcome and pleasant haven compared to what was ahead.

ON Thursday morning Pinky Kew came out of the orderly room with a pleased look on his face. Luke was standing on the porch and Pinky went toward him.

"Hey," Pinky said, "I got good news."

Luke eyed him sourly. "They ain't shippin' you back to the States, are they? That'd be good news to me."

"Better than that, chum. I got permission for the three of us tuh go into town tonight."

"What?"

"Sure," Pinky said in a placid voice. "I just been in tuh see the lootenant an' he says it's okay."

"Well, of all the pea-brained dimwits I ever saw you're it!" Luke howled. "Here I work my way into a straitjacket tryin' tuh keep this Hiawatha of yours out of trouble an' what do *you* do? You fix it up so he can go to town! What a hell of a fine fixer you are! I suppose you've told him about it, too?"

"Why. I though you'd like it, Luke," Pinky said in an aggrieved voice.

"Arragh!" Luke pulled back his foot. Then he stopped suddenly and looked over his shoulder. The company street was empty. His toe landed with a solid thud.

"Ouch! What you want tuh kick me for, Luke?"

"You hunt up that simple son of the plains an' tell him that the trip is off. Understand?"

"Aw, I couldn't do that, Luke," Pinky said earnestly. "Lo would be disappointed. Besides, I already got the passes all signed an' everything."

Luke fastened the fingers of his right hand in the back of Pinky Kew's collar and turned him about. He kicked twice, hard, and then propelled the other ahead of him down the porch.

"Simple," he said in an overwrought voice, "you an' I are goin' over back of the wash house for a little conference. Childish pranks are childish pranks but I don't give some of the best days of my life to seein' that Private Percy Fair-

brother is present an' accounted for on Friday night just to have you throw a monkey wrench into the works at the last minute. March!"

Comprehension crawled slowly across Pinky's face. "You mean yuh don't want to go tuh town tonight?"

"I mean just that," Luke told him.

"But wait a minute, Luke! We got tuh go to town!"

"What do you mean—we got tuh go?"

Pinky Kew pulled his hat down over his ears and stared out into the sunshine. When he spoke his voice was a little embarrassed.

"Well, yuh see it's like this—Lo don't care whether he licks Butch Dulligan or not. He's just sort of indifferent about the whole thing, see? Win, lose or draw—it's all the same to Lo."

"It's all the same to me, too," Luke told him caustically. "All I give a damn about is seein' that he gets in that ring so that I can stay out of the guardhouse."

Pinky Kew looked pained. "Yuh don't want no ten bucks?"

"I want my freedom worse. All right! All right! Why have we got tuh take this baby earthquake to town?"

"Well," Pinky began with a faint apology in his voice, "I sort of been buildin' Lo up for this fight. There's a little gal down on Waikiki that Lo is sort of sweet on, see? So I been tellin' him that Butch is tryin' tuh cut him out with her—Katie, her name is. Make him jealous, sort of. Then, when he gets in the ring with Butch tomorrow night, he'll be mad an' knock him for a row of smokehouses."

"Smart," Luke sneered. "So you take him downtown an' the M. P.s get him an' he never gets in the ring with Butch at all. Yes indeedy, smart!"

Pinky said earnestly: "Naw, yuh got it all wrong, Luke. Look, I got everything fixed fine. Butch is takin' Katie to a dance down at the Tavern. We just go in there for a minute an' Lo sees Butch dancin' with her—then we bring him right back to the post."

"Nope," Luke said with finality, "win, lose or draw—it's all the same to me just so long as I got that pest ready to deliver to the lootenant at the ringside at eight o'clock. The trip to town is out!"

"He'll lose tomorrow sure as hell, Luke," Pinky said desperately. "Lo's too good-natured."

"Let him lose!"

PINKY KEW sighed deeply and wiped away a little trickle of perspiration which had gathered on his brow. He had a feeling that Luke was going to be upset by what he was about to relate.

"He can't lose, Luke," he said. "Yuh see, I—we got a little bet on him."

Luke had been turning away; now he stopped and looked at Pinky with narrowed eyes.

He walked forward a step and gathered a handful of Pinky's shirt and his voice was ominous.

"We got a little bet! What you mean—we got a little bet?"

Pinky's embarrassment increased. "Well, I figured that Lo was a sure thing tuh win this fight—not knowin' about him bein' kind-hearted then. So I fixed up a little bet, I an' you pickin' the Indian tuh win tomorrow night."

"How much did you bet?" The ominous note deepened in Luke's voice.

"Next month's pay. Yuh ain't mad, are yuh, Luke?"

"My next month's pay, too?"

"Well," Pinky Kew mumbled as he tried to inch away, "I wouldn't have wanted tuh win no money unless you won some, too—I an' you bein' pals an' all. I was keepin' it as a sort of surprise, Luke."

Luke's voice was dangerous. "I've put up with a hell of a lot from you, first an' last," he said, "but, chum, this tears it! I'm through! Of all the fiddle-pated idiots that it's been my bad luck tuh fall in with you're out in front by as far as from here to there! Now you just toddle around an' welsh on them bets before I tear yuh to pieces! Jump!"

"Luke," Pinky interrupted desperately, "I can't welsh them bets! They're airtight —I made 'em with the first sergeant!"

A baseball bat leaned against the wall and Luke reached for it—was just swinging it up.

Then someone took it gently but firmly out of his fingers.

"You no hittum Pinky, huh? Pinky heap nice feller!"

III

THE Kailua Tavern was located in a grove of palms off Kalakaua Street. Cars already filled the parking place as the three of them went down the cinder path which led to the doors of the sprawling building. An M. P., standing in the shadows, glanced keenly at them as they passed and Luke's heart sank. The M. P. said nothing and they went on.

There was a square dance floor with the orchestra on a little platform at the other end of the room. Booths along the walls provided semi-privacy for those who wanted it. Luke bought three tickets and led the way to one of these booths.

A half a dozen couples danced slowly—most of the men were sailors, Luke noted. He glanced swiftly along the line of booths and was relieved when he failed to see any sign of Butch Dulligan. Maybe this thing could be pulled out of the fire yet. They sat down in a booth and a Portuguese waiter thrust his head through the curtains.

"You weesh thee dreenk?"

"Naw," Luke told him sourly. "We don't want no drink. We're waitin' for somebody, see?"

The waiter shrugged his shoulders and pulled the corners of his mouth down. "Ah," he said, "to seet een thee booth you mus' buy thee dreenk, eh?"

"Okay, Ali Baba," Luke snarled at him. "A bottle of ginger ale an' then get your head out from between them curtains before I hang something on it."

Pinky Kew said earnestly to Private Fairbrother: "This Dulligan, see? He's a big ape what ain't got no chivalry. My girl friend told me that Katie wouldn't no more think of goin' out with him than she would think of jumpin' off the Aloha Tower. Not Katie!"

"Heap fine!" agreed Private Fairbrother.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Pinky Kew said with sudden gloom. "Like I told you, this Butch ain't got no chivalry in him. He's a big gorilla. My girl friend told me that what Katie is afraid of is that he'll make her come to a dance with him sometime. That's what's been troublin' her!"

Private Fairbrother digested this bit of news thoughtfully and Pinky was encouraged. It seemed to him that he could detect the trace of a frown on the Indian's usually placid face.

The Portuguese came back with a bottle of ginger ale and three glasses on a tray and Luke spun a coin at him. The orchestra had started a fresh number and the six couples took the floor again. Two soldiers came in and sat in a booth across the way—one of them was Red McDougall, Luke saw. Red McDougall owed him five dollars and this looked like a good time to collect.

Luke glanced at Pinky Kew and the Indian. Pinky was deep in his story of the distressing lack of chivalry which marked the activities of Butch Dulligan and Private Fairbrother was listening interestedly. It would be safe enough to leave them for a minute.

A GREEN parrot, behind the soft drink bar, cocked an eye at Luke as he walked across the floor. He screeched above the music: "Hallo, Dogface!"

Luke was feeling better when he returned. He had caught Red McDougall red-handed while the latter was paying for a round of drinks and had extracted three dollars from him. Since Luke had mentally kissed the five goodbye long ago he was now three dollars to the good, he reflected.

He pulled aside the curtains of the booth and then stopped, sniffing sus-

piciously. A pungent, sweetish odor greeted him and Pinky Kew's face was a shade too innocent as he looked up. The ginger-ale bottle was empty.

"Hello, Luke," Pinky said in a cheerful voice. "I an' Lo, here, was just beginnin' to get worried about yuh. Wasn't we, Lo?"

Luke sniffed again. "Gin!" he said. "Aw, I could cut your simple throat!"

"What say?" Pinky asked brightly.

"You're the kind that lights matches an' drops them into the gas tank tuh see if it's empty," Luke said in a nasty voice. He jerked his head toward Private Fairbrother. "Just draggin' him down here at all is about as safe as truckin' nitroglycerine! But that don't bother you, does it? Oh, no! You have tuh feed him gin just to be good an' sure that the fireworks are brilliant enough! I've a good notion tuh bend that bottle over your simple head!"

"Aw, shucks, Luke! We—"

"Give me that bottle, you blight!"

Pinky sighed and handed across a flat bottle still half full and Luke thrust it into his pocket. Private Fairbrother was staring out through the curtains with a moody preoccupation. More couples were arriving.

The Portuguese waiter, wearing the parrot on his shoulder, thrust his head into the booth.

"You weesh to buy thee dreenk?"

"No!"

"I theenk maybe better you buy thee dreenk, eh?"

"You get out of here an' stay out!" Luke's voice was dangerous.

"Hah," the waiter said, unmoved, "you make thee noise an' I call thee poleece, eh? Sure!"

The parrot leered at Luke. "Hallo, Dogface," it said. "Arrk! Take your hand off my leg!"

The waiter left and Luke made up his mind swiftly. He didn't like the melancholy look that had come into Private Fairbrother's eye.

"Come on," he said curtly to Pinky, "we're gettin' outa here an' back to the post. There's no tellin' what this guinea is likely to do now that he's outside a quarter of a pint of gin."

"Aw, he'll be all right," Pinky Kew protested. "He's just sad because this Butch ain't no gentleman. Let's stick around."

"Not a chance." Luke dropped a heavy hand on the Indian's shoulder. "On your feet, Pain-in-the-Neck. We're startin' home."

PRIVATE FAIRBROTHER arose docilely and allowed Luke to lead him from the booth. Pinky Kew followed. The Portuguese waiter padded up with a fresh bottle of ginger ale on a tray and the parrot on his shoulder.

"Feefty cent, please," he said nastily.

"Out of my way, Stupid," Luke told him. "Out of my way before I run yuh down!"

The faraway look had deepened in Private Fairbrother's eyes. He began to croon in a low voice and stamped his feet up and down in time to the music. That worried Luke a little. He grabbed the Indian's arm and started toward the door with him but the Portuguese barred his way.

"You pay thee feefty cent or I call thee poleece, eh? Yess!"

"Hallo, Dogface," the parrot chimed in pleasantly. "Have a drink! Merry Christmas. Go to hell."

Private Fairbrother crooned louder. He placed a hand on the waiter's chest and pushed—not a hard push for Private Fairbrother—but the Portuguese suddenly trotted backward and fell into the booth.

There was a jangle of breaking glass and the music stopped in the middle of a bar. People were beginning to look around. The Portuguese was sitting under the table with the green curtains festooned around his neck while his voice lifted shrilly.

"Poleece! Help! Murder!"

A pretty mess, Luke thought bitterly. He spun around to head Private Fairbrother toward the back door but he was too late. Pinky Kew's gin and the chivalry

of Butch Dulligan had been to much for the Great White Father's ward.

"Catchum war dance," he muttered.

He moved out into the center of the floor and the dancers broke away in front of him. He shuffled a little and then moved in a slow circle, lifting his feet high and putting them down hard.

"Wahoo," he announced. "Wahoo!"

"Well, would you look!" Pinky Kew said happily in Luke's ear. "I guess we're pretty lucky, Luke. There's Butch an' Katie comin' in now."

Luke groaned as he saw that Pinky was right.

Butch Dulligan, with a pretty girl on his arm, stood just inside the door blinking uncertainly at what they saw going on. Private Fairbrother completed his circle, still moving slowly and lifting his feet high. Then he saw the two of them and stopped, peering from beneath a lifted palm. A certain purposefulness spread across his face.

Luke acted.

THE light switch was a dozen feet away but he reached it in a jump and the Japanese lanterns died suddenly. He swung back and drove himself forward and heard the Indian grunt as he took a shoulder under the ribs. The two of them went down but Luke was up again with his fingers twisted in the other's collar.

"Come on, you!" he whispered harshly.

"Catchum scalp!"

Necessity lent strength to Luke's arm. Whistles and hoarse shouts at the front of the Tavern warned him that the M. P.s had arrived as he trotted his ward toward the back door. The two of them stumbled out into the night.

"Run!" Luke grunted.

They ran. Private Fairbrother muttered at Luke's shoulder: "Stealum girl! Me go back—catchum scalp!"

"You stop an' I'll cut your throat!" Luke promised him hoarsely. "Run, damn you!"

Bedlam was erupting out of the Tavern behind them as they dodged through the coconut trees. Then something hooked Luke's ankles. He jackknifed prettily through the air to land on his head while a Fourth of July with trimmings exploded in front of his eyes.

He sat up presently and leaned his back against the trunk of a coconut palm and, as soon as he could think, his thoughts were dark and bitter.

His fingers touched something smooth in the grass and he found that it was the half pint of gin which he had taken from Pinky.

Well, he reflected, he couldn't be in any more trouble than he was already.

He said: "Honk-honk!" and drained it —tossed the bottle away.

IT WAS ten minutes later when he finally eased himself to his feet and turned in the direction of Ala Moana Road. He saw the dim figure of a man standing in the shadows and was a little cheered. Maybe it was the Indian. If it was he still might be able to get him back to the post in time to avoid trouble.

The fall and the gin had made things a little fuzzy in front of Luke's eyes but, after peering for a moment, he decided that it was Private Fairbrother, all right. He moved forward with a cautious tread and was about to speak when the man bent suddenly to pick something out of the grass. The temptation was too much. Luke took two swift steps and kicked.

The man sprawled forward on his face and said: "Oomph!" It was a matter of seconds before Luke realized that that was not the voice of Private Percy Fairbrother.

The man rolled over and a little light fell across his face—it was the ugliest face that Luke had ever seen on an M.P. He tried to run but his legs were paralyzed so that he stood there making impotent sounds while the M.P. got to his feet.

"So!" the M.P. snarled. "A funny boy, huh? An' in uniform, too! I'll funny yuh!"

Luke found his voice. "Hey, wait a minute! There's been a mistake!"

"There ain't no mistake about what's

goin' tuh happen from now on, chum," the M.P. told him nastily.

"You can't—"

"Can't, huh? Watch me, buddy!"

The M.P. started toward the street and Luke went with him—mainly because the M.P.'s hand was twisted tight in his collar. A station wagon waited there at the curb and a second M.P. climbed down as the approached.

"Yuh got one of 'em, Joe?" he asked in a tough voice.

"Yeah. A tough guy. I ought tuh wear him down some with a club before we take him back."

"Why don't yuh? We got tuh wait for Jim an' it would help tuh pass the time away."

"That's right, ain't it? Wait a minute though. Here comes Jim now an' he wouldn't want tuh miss it."

A third M.P. joined the group and the three of them ranged themselves about Luke in a little circle. The latter felt chilly all at once. This might get unpleasant fast.

"I get him first," Joe was saying. "He sneaked up an' tried tuh kick me for a gool back there by the Tavern."

"Naw," one of the others said decisively, "yuh know the rule—share an' share alike. I'll count three and we'll all clout him together."

"Listen," Luke said in a desperate voice, "be reasonable! I ain't done nothing except try tuh get this damned Indian back tuh Fort Wilkerson so he can fight Butch Dulligan tomorrow night!"

The one called Joe suddenly straightened. "Huh?" he demanded. "What's that?"

LUKE explained rapidly and in words of one syllable. He felt a lessening of the tension about him and he enlarged upon the reasons why he must get Private Fairbrother back to barracks—what Private Fairbrother was going to do to Butch Dulligan on the morrow.

"Sa-ay," Joe said thoughtfully, "that must be the Injun that worked Corporal Snider over about a week ago."

Luke's heart sank again. He had forgotten the poor terms that Private Fairbrother was on with M.P.s in general. Well, life was like that.

Jim said: "Yeah," also thoughtfully. "An' Corporal Snider is still wearin' a shiner an' walks hitched somewhat to portside. You're this redskin's chaperon, huh?"

He might as well get it over with, Luke thought morosely. "Well—" he began.

"Sa-ay!" There was enthusiasm in the M.P.'s voice. "I'd like tuh shake that feller by the hand! An' yuh say he's gonna knock Butch Dulligan's ears off tomorrow? I'll be there!"

"I wouldn't miss it!" Joe chimed in.

Luke felt dazed. His knees were suddenly weak beneath him and he sat down on the running board of the station wagon.

Jim was saying: "An' you're this Injun's manager, huh? Well, I fought Butch Dulligan myself two years ago an' there ain't nothin' that I would rather watch than to see him get his teeth crammed down his nasty throat!"

"I was in the station when they brought Corporal Snider in," another M.P. interrupted dreamily. "Was he a mess! An' not an hour before he had been bawlin' me out because I lose a button off my uniform."

"This Corporal Snider is meaner than a barrel full of horned toads," Joe explained to Luke.

The M.P. who had arrived last spoke up. "If this Injun is wanderin' around loose we'd better help round him up—we wouldn't want nothin' to happen to him. Climb up into the wagon, chum. We'll hunt him up for yuh."

Luke sank limply into one of the seats.

They found Private Fairbrother sitting on the curb in Kalakaua Avenue. A fat flower-lady sat on either side of him and guided his fingers as he strung flowers onto a string. In the faint light of a street lamp Luke saw that he wore a wreath of flowers on his black hair.

Luke sighed. He was about to take up the white man's burden again.

THE M.P.s escorted the two of them to the Fort Wilkerson bus. As Luke was about to climb aboard the one called Joe placed a hand on his arm—a heavy hand.

"Chum," he said with a glint in his eye, "I ain't used tuh gettin' kicked for no gools. If this Injun beats Butch Dulligan tomorrow night we forget all about it. If he don't I'll see yuh next time yuh come to town!"

A pleasant sentiment, Luke thought sourly.

The bus was nearly empty. A painted and powdered lady, of uncertain age, sat in one of the middle seats. Another lady, wearing a shapeless skirt and a shawl which hid her face, sat farther to the front.

Four soldiers talked noisily in the front. A fat civilian climbed aboard, looked for a moment and then strolled back to take a seat beside the powdered lady. The bus driver dimmed the overhead light and they rolled away from the curb.

Private Fairbrother had sunk into his melancholy again and the sight of him reminded Luke of the M. P.'s parting words. A pretty kettle of fish, he reflected. Either the Indian won tomorrow night or the pleasures of Honolulu were closed to one Corporal Dorgan from now on. He remembered Pinky Kew's strategy, then—it might work.

"Pretty tough," Luke said sympathetically, "havin' a big gorilla, like Butch Dulligan, cut yuh out. I bet he's back there dancin' with Katie right now."

"Humph!" Private Fairbrother said.

"What somebody ought tuh do is beat that ape up good sometime. Then maybe he'd learn not tuh go around forcin' his attentions on nice girls like Katie." Luke shook his head sadly. "It ain't likely though. This Butch is tough."

"Humph!"

Private Fairbrother's apathy was undented, Luke saw. He sought desperately for an expedient. Then a happy thought struck him and he leaned forward and slapped the Indian on the shoulder.

"Why didn't I think of it?" he cried in simulated happy surprise. "By golly! You can lick this Butch! Then Katie will be hangin' around your neck she'll be so grateful! That's it!"

A spark lighted up in Private Fairbrother's eyes. "Me catchum Katie?"

"Absolutely! You'll have tuh shove her away!"

Private Fairbrother digested this bit of information for some minutes. Then he stood up. Faint alarm crossed Luke's face as he grabbed at the other's arm.

"Hey! Where yuh goin'?"

"Go back to Honolulu—run heap fast. Catchum Butch. Pullum scalp off."

"No, no!" Luke told him desperately. "You got it all wrong! Tomorrow night, see? Tomorrow night you beat him up!"

A sudden diversion near the center of the bus attracted his attention for a momen. The old lady with the shawl seemed to be in pain. She rose suddenly to her feet; then sat down again.

A shrill voice said clearly: "Take your hand off my knee, loafer!"

THE fat civilian straightened guiltily. Then he left his seat by the painted lady and went across the aisle to sit and stare thoughtfully out of the window. The bus stopped and the light snapped on as the driver turned to peer coldly from behind his screen.

"What goes on back there?" he demanded in a looking-for-trouble-are-you voice.

There was a deep silence. The driver stared suspiciously for a moment and then snapped the light to dim again and turned back to his wheel. Funny, Luke thought; he had heard that shrill voice somewhere before.

Private Fairbrother was muttering again.

"Gettum off truck. Run heap fast—run all night, maybe. Catchum scalp."

"Tomorrow night," Luke assured him soothingly. "You won't have to run. Butch Dulligan is comin' out to the post, see? He'll be right there an' you can knock his ears off."

The shrill voice lifted again. Bitterly, Luke remembered where he had heard it before, now.

"Arrrk! Take your hand off my knee, you cad! I'm a nice girl!"

The bus stopped with an angry squeal of brakes and the light popped on again. The driver left his wheel to bounce back into the aisle.

"All right! Who done it?" The fat man shivered and pressed his face closer to the window. "Speak up!"

"Hallo, Fishface!"

The driver started as thought someone had driven a pin into him from the rear. He turned. The old lady with the shawl got up suddenly and started toward the door. She wore leather-faced leggins and government-issue shoes beneath her shapeless skirt, Luke noted morosely. He was not surprised.

The driver reached out a big hand and plucked the shawl away. It was Pinky Kew. He had a black eye and the head of a green parrot thrust itself out of the sagging front of his dress.

The parrot said: "Lousy ride! Perfectly lousy!"

Things happened suddenly. The bus driver had Pinky by the collar and the slack of his dress and was trotting him down the aisle toward the door. Private Fairbrother roused himself out of his lethargy.

"Pinky!" he said happily. "You nice feller, Pinky!"

BEFORE Luke could get his hands on him he moved forward and smote the bus driver on the back of the neck. The other soldiers, who had been sitting up front, joined in and things became confused for a moment. Then, presently, Luke and his two companions were sitting in the road watching the tail light of the bus grow dim in the distance.

After a little Luke picked himself up. "A perfect day," he murmured resignedly. "Absolutely perfect an' now all we got tuh do is walk the seventeen miles back tuh barracks."

"Yuh ain't mad, are yuh, Luke?" Pinky Kew's voice was plaintive.

"Mad?" Luke spoke in a dangerously calm voice. "Not mad, Pinky—just disappointed is all."

"By golly, I thought maybe you'd be mad at me."

"An' why would I be mad at *you?*" Luke's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Well," Pinky explained. "Yuh take back there at the Tavern. I guess I sort of lost my head when them lights went out. I went out the side door an' hid so the M. P.s wouldn't find me. I knew you wouldn't want that, Luke."

"Go on," Luke told him sweetly.

"Well, after a while the noise sort of quieted down. There was some clothes hangin' on a line so I put them on an' snuck down to the bus station."

"An' that damned parrot followed yuh, I suppose?"

Pinky Kew was a little abashed. "Yuh know, that sort of is a funny thing. I was ridin' along in the bus, dozin' a little, an' then all of a sudden I find that he is inside my shirt. It sure was funny!"

"Yeah, funny!" Luke's voice was bitter. "In addition to the rest of the grief you've got us into you have to go an' steal a parrot! I could cut your throat!"

"Aw," Pinky said plaintively, "you're goin' tuh like him. He's a cute feller."

He held the parrot up and the bird leaned forward and nipped a piece out of Luke's hand. Then he cocked a fishy eye in the moonlight and said:

"Hallo, Dogface. Gimme a kiss!"

It was too much! Luke kicked and Pinky Kew's pained outcry was music to his ears. Then a hand descended heavily on Luke's shoulder.

"Pinky nice feller. You no hurtum."

A red haze dropped in front of Luke's eyes. He flailed out at the bulky shape of the Indian; rushed and the two of them thudded together. They swayed for a moment; then toppled over and rolled together down the gentle slope of the bank.

There was an irrigation ditch at the bottom with two feet of water in it.

IV

RING attendants were busy changing the corners for the main event—sprinkling rosin over wet spots and generally looking important. Bedlam rocked the big crowd which jammed the arena to the rafters. The main event—Butch Dulligan of the Engineers versus Private Percy Fairbrother of the Bobcats—was coming up and that was the fight they had been waiting for.

"You're sure he's in the dressing room and ready?" Lieutenant Sylvester asked Corporal Dorgan for the fifth time.

Luke said: "Yessir. Corporal Kew's with him—he's got his hands taped and all."

"Fine! Fine! I'll not forget this, Corporal!"

A voice said at Luke's shoulder, then: "Hey, Luke, where's Lo?"

Luke was conscious of a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he turned. Pinky Kew stood there, immaculate in starched khaki and with an unconcerned look on his face.

"For the love of Peter an' the Seven Cherubims! I left yuh to look after him! You tell me he's gone again an' I'll kill yuh right where yuh stand!"

Pinky edged away and there was an apprehensive note in his voice. "I left him just for a minute tuh go an' get a drink of water. By golly, a man gets thirsty sometimes, Luke."

Luke's foot was swinging back and there was black despair in his heart. Then, suddenly, a fresh burst of applause lifted the roof and he stopped, his eyes sticking out a little. There, striding majestically alone down the center aisle, was Private Percy Fairbrother clad in the scarlet fighting trunks of the Bobcats.

THEY ushered him carefully into the ring. They led him from corner to corner while the tiered seats rocked with noise. They sat him down on a stool and clustered about him with solicitous care while they waited for Butch Dulligan to put in his appearance.

Private Fairbrother's face was calm and untroubled. He rested his arms along the ring ropes and stretched out comfortably while he beamed up at Pinky Kew.

"Uh!" he said. "Feel heap good!"

The crowd was beginning to rock back and forth, chanting: "Dulligan! We want Dulligan!"

The champion was taking his own good time about coming, Luke thought as he bent over Private Fairbrother. The announcer had already climbed into the ring and was leaning against a far ring post while he stared fixedly at the fingernails of his left hand. A handler, wearing a white jersey with *Engineers* across the front of it, came down the aisle and consulted with the Engineer coach. The coach got up and they went back up the aisle.

Private Fairbrother inquired: "Katie likum me fine, huh?"

"You bet!" Luke told him enthusiastically. "She'll be right around your neck!"

The minutes ticked by and the big arena was in a howling uproar now. Luke didn't notice. He, too, felt good. Ten dollars plus the month's pay he would win plus a three-day pass and the freedom of Honolulu. Oh boy!

His reverie was broken by the sight of the Engineer coach who, accompanied by a half a dozen white jerseys came out of the door of the dressing rooms and walked slowly down the aisle. The lot of them talked earnestly among themselves. When they got to the ring the coach beckoned to Lieutenant Sylvester, the referee and the announcer. They all huddled together and indulged in more talk.

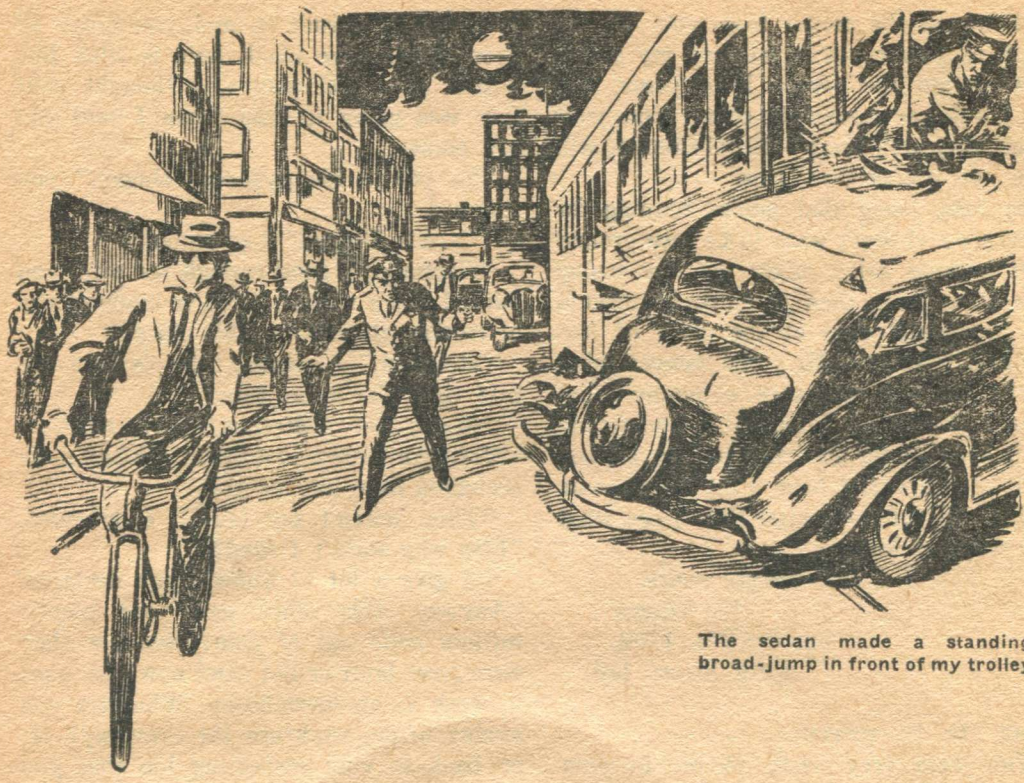
"Hey," Luke said softly, "something's wrong. Where in hell's Butch Dulligan?"

Private Fairbrother looked up with a bright interest and beamed happily.

"Him not come," he said.

"What!"

"Him not come. Me catchum in dressing room little bit ago. Knockum cookoo. Katie like, huh?"



The sedan made a standing broad-jump in front of my trolley

It Happened Like This

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Now About Last Night," "Red Pennant Flying," etc.

Being the further adventures of Patrick Dugan, the pride of the Centre City street car line, who never does the wrong thing at the right time

DEAR MYRTLE:

I tried to become a detective but all I did was put myself in jail and lose my job as inspector for the trolley company.

I guess folks did right when they called me Slaphappy Dugan, because I never seem able to do anything right, except the only right thing I ever did was falling for you. And I kind of muddled that too, I guess, because you'll probably never have anything to do with me again.

So all I can say is, that if I was you I'd think mighty careful before I handcuffed myself for life to a swell-headed flatfoot like Bill O'Conner.

Resignedly yours,
Pat Dugan.

DEAR DISTRICT-ATTORNEY O'TOOLE:

Isn't there some law that if a guy turns State's evidence he gets off light? Well, I want to turn State's evidence against myself (I'm not confessing, just turning) about the dead man you'll find at the bottom of the cellar steps at 125 Westmore Drive.

If you are at all interested and would like to talk to me you'll find me in Cell Number 13 in the Fifth Street Jail. I'm

just around the corner from you, what I mean is, you're not in jail and my cell is just around the corner from yours, but the jail is just around the corner from your office. Any cop, except Bill O'Conner, will give you proper directions.

In case, being that you're running for governor and don't want to be seen around jails because folks might get the wrong ides about you, then you can go around the block and stop at the office of Mr. Michael Flaherty. He's the lawyer what works for the insurance company what insures the trolley company. I understand he is running for governor too, so I guess both of you would have a lot in common, and he will tell you better than I can what you want to know.

Informingly yours,
Pat Dugan
Suspect No. 1300,
Fifth Street Jail.

DEAR MR. FLAHERTY:

You were very nasty to me in your office in the insurance company building late yesterday morning. You remember I came there and asked for a job as one of the detectives, or investigators, for the insurance company because I thought it was kind of unnatural that the trolley company was having so many accidents being that I was no longer a motorman, but was just an inspector now.

I thought these accidents ought to be looked into being that so much money was being lost because of your poor defense in the court cases. I really didn't mean anything personal, but you see I was afraid the trolley company might go on the rocks because it couldn't get any insurance if things went on the way they were, and then I'd be out of a job and wouldn't get to marry my gal Myrtle, and that would be terrible.

I guess you've never met a gal like Myrtle or you would have understood why I wanted to help. But all you did was stare at me with them flounder eyes of yours, though where I got the idea of flounder I don't know. A flounder's kind of a flat fish, isn't it, and you bulge all over. Even your black hair is slick like a fish, or a seal maybe. I thought your face was going to bust when I told you my name.

"So you're Slappyhappy Dugan," you snapped.

"Patrick Dugan," I corrected.

"Slaphappy's good enough for me," you barked like a walrus. "You've made plenty of trouble already for this office."

"Hold on," I yelped, "this is only the first time I've been here."

"Makes no difference," you retorted. "When you were a motorman you had more accidents than anyone else."

"They weren't my fault," I defended. "Else why wasn't I fired?"

I'd give a lot to know," you declared. "Anyway, this office gave out plenty settling suits out of court, whether they were your fault or not. And now you want to work as an investigator. What are you aiming to do, bankrupt the company? Go on back to your inspecting job that you got last month when you showed the stockholders in your own inimitable way just how good the streamliners were and saved the company an important franchise. Be satisfied with that job, Dugan, don't expect more. There's a limit to gratitude."

"Yeah," I said, "there is. I'm grateful for my promotion, but, as you say, there's a limit. I got to get to marry Myrtle, so I can't stand by and see my job fading away like it's going to if you don't start putting the skids under the fake accident gang like the D. A. hints you should."

I GUESS I shoudn't of mentioned the D. A., being that he's running for governor like you are, because you ballooned out of your swivel chair and I started to look for the nearest exit.

"That's campaign dirty work," you roared, Mr. Flaherty. And you raved to me like you was at a political rally until I started to get thirsty waiting for the free beer. You raved how you'd shown the D. A. proof there wasn't any such thing as a fake accident gang working

in Centre City. You pounded your desk about the Index Bureau, the secret agency set up by insurance companies all over the country, whose six offices are known only to insurance men and which ain't listed in the telephone books or even on the directory boards of the buildings.

"Dugan," you howled, "that talk of fake accidents is just mud slinging from the D. A.'s office. Every time there's an accident, good, bad, honest, phony, or whatnot we've got to send the complete details to the Index Bureau. If there was a gang working this town, the Bureau would find it out from their past records, even if the gang and its doctors used different names.

"Now you get out of here, and don't let me hear anymore talk about a fake gang coming from you. And another thing, just you remember, that under no circumstances are you to touch the controls of a trolley."

I stood up then.

"Okay, okay," I growled. "But I still think the company's going on the rocks if something ain't done."

You didn't say anything because your tongue seemed all tangled up in your teeth. I went to the door and turned.

"I'll let you know just how good that Index Bureau is if I run across anything phony," I said.

You groaned. "They should have fired you and they made you an inspector. Dugan," you barked, "stick to your inspecting, or you'll be involving the company in libel and slander suits. That's not advice, it's a warning."

"I ain't done anything yet," I reminded you.

"But anticipation is killing me," you jibed. "Remember what I said, Dugan, or you'll never get to marry your Myrtle. I promise you that."

Well, Flaherty, I tried to remember it, but well, it all happened like this:

I WENT downstairs, planning to get on a crosstown car and do a little inspecting. You shouldn't have given me so many things to remember, Flaherty, because I was trying to think of them all at once, and every time I do any thinking it means trouble. It was no different this time. I was thinking and stepping out from the curb in front of a parked car when I saw the rear bumper of another car scissoring in to snip my legs.

I guess I became a bit impetuous in what I yelled at the driver of the car what was backing in because the driver, a tall skinny guy, started to get out and I didn't like the way his long arms were swinging. Anyway I saw at a glance he had a longer reach than I did so I apologized quickly.

But the apology was wasted breath, he didn't even hear it because his long legs were stilting him out toward a crosstown car that was just grinding to a stop. I got on after him, being careful not to attract his attention or jostle him. It seemed kind of funny that a guy should park his car and then get on a trolley, but I thought no more about it when I looked at Tim Moore, the pilot of the trolley.

"What's ailing you?" I asked him. "Your eyelids are at half-mast?"

He moaned and looked around into the car. "Hey, fare please," he called to someone. He looked at me and moaned again.

"My stomach's trying to be a contortionist. Guess my breakfast is trying to break me fast . . . hey you, tall and skinny, pay your fare . . . I'm glad you got on, Dugan. Will you finish my run for me while I go see a doc?"

I stared at him, and I was seeing you, Flaherty.

"I got strict orders," I said, "not to run a trolley, but that's highly prejudiced if you ask me. But I tell you what we do. You stop at the next corner and I'll run into a phone and have a relief man start out from the carbarn and meet us."

That was my plan, Flaherty, but it didn't work out just right. The bloated cop on duty at the next corner was Bill O'Conner, the fugitive from Ireland and Ellis Island what's always trying to alienate the affec-

tions of my Myrtle. He was in even an uglier mood than usual. It seems some guy had parked and locked his car at the curb opposite the pedestrian safety-isle, and traffic couldn't get through except by going outside the isle and running along the car tracks.

O'Connor was trying to push the parked auto when I got off the trolley, but he couldn't budge it.

"Keep trying," I suggested, "maybe it will shrink that beer keg under your belt. Too bad though there's nothing that will reduce the girth of your head."

He stopped pushing and faced around, and when he saw me his fat red face began to clench.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he snapped. "Interferin' with an officer in the course of his duty. Maybe this jaloppy is yours now," he said hopefully, reaching for his book. "Only the likes of a nitwit like you would be parkin' it here."

"And," I boomeranged, "only a dumb flatfoot like yourself would let it happen in the first place, you impeder of traffic."

"Mind your lip," he shouted, starting for me and I faded back to the trolley as a crowd began to sprout on the sidewalk.

"I've a mind to run you in," O'Connor barked, thinking up all the charges he could. "Creatin' unnecessary noise, creatin' a disturbance, general nuisance, showin' disrespect for the law and . . ."

I STOPPED him by remarking: "I saw the sergeant up the street," and O'Connor got a scared look because the sergeant would want to know what he had been doing off his post so the auto could be parked there. I guess it was kind of a mistake to mention the sergeant I hadn't even seen because it made O'Connor anxious to clear up the traffic jam before the sergeant arrived.

I looked at Tim Moore, slouching in the motorman's seat and still calling to the tall skinny guy to pay his fare.

"Wait for me, I'll only be a minute or two," I said.

"Listen to him now, will you," O'Connor shouted to no one in particular. "'Wait,' he says. *Wait?*" O'Connor bellowed, and two horses a block away flattened their ears and started to bolt. "Wait?" he boomed. "And be blockin' up traffic in this public thoroughfare? Be on your way with that trolley. The traffic's got to be goin' around that safety-isle." He glanced to see if the sergeant was coming.

"The way you yell," I declared, "the police don't need a radio, they should keep you at headquarters to yell out the orders. Listen, O'Connor, Tim Moore's too sick to run a trolley. I got to get a relief man for him."

But you see, Flaherty, O'Connor's got a one-track mind.

"You can run a car, can't you?"

"No," I said, thinking of your orders.

"That's perjury," accused O'Connor. "I ought to run you in, but my duty I'll be forgettin' to let you run the car the devil out of here."

"And I'm not going to do it," I declared, remembering your warning, Flaherty, about taking the controls of a trolley. "But I'll give you a break, O'Connor," I offered. "Tim can run the car across the intersection and wait there for me."

"Yeah?" he said like he was cracking a nut with his teeth. "And just how, would you mind explainin,' is traffic goin' to get by the trolley over there with cars parked all along the street? On your way, keep moving, before I run you in."

Well, Flaherty, horns were tooting and he was going to give me a ticket if something wasn't done. And some guy yelled from a taxi way behind the trolley that he had an important appointment and if he didn't keep it he'd lose plenty of dough and sue the trolley company and I knew you didn't want that to happen and it was all very bewildering for a moment. So I climbed back in the trolley and shoved aside the skinny guy who was standing near Tim Moore who was, I could see, now too sick to run a trolley.

"You get out and go to that doctor's office over there over the undertaker's," I said, and I slipped into the seat.

I didn't want O'Connor to be giving me a ticket and I didn't want the guy back in the taxi to think he had reasons to start suing, so I sprinted the streamlined trolley the hello out of there, and then it happened, Flaherty. It wasn't my fault, as you can see, being that O'Connor had forced me into it just because of a parked car, but it happened like this:

The skinny guy was taking a long time fumbling for his fare but I was real patient about it, being as I said before he had a longer reach than mine. I glanced up at him as he fumbled and he was staring ahead like you do when you're looking for something that should be there but ain't.

"Gimme change out of this," he snapped, miraculously finding a five-dollar bill in a pocket he'd explored at least ten times. He shoved the bill at me and grabbed hold of the white pole beside the motorman's seat.

YOU know, Flaherty, there's a lot of phony money floating around and a motorman can't be too careful, being that if he takes anything phony he's got to make it good with the company out of his own dough; and I couldn't afford that because I need every cent for when I get to marry my Myrtle. So I took the five-spot and spread it out, keeping one eye on it and one on the street ahead. And just as I did that, a sedan parked by the curb made a standing broad-jump right in front of the trolley.

I blasted the air on the brakes and . . . then I was kissing Abraham Lincoln's picture on the bill and there was clamor like the battle of Gettysburg had started again. From the looks of the sedan—it was kind of moulded around the front of the trolley—it wasn't hard to guess that the soldiers of some foreign country would be using it to shoot at the soldiers of some other foreign country. The driver and the couple of people in the car with him were hollering like the whole thing was *my* fault.

Right away I began smelling a rat, and I thought of you. What I mean is, I was thinking of that little talk I'd had with you about a fake accident gang. The driver, whose left arm was broken, was yelling that he had signaled what he was going to do, and I knew Boulder Dam well he hadn't. I found it hard to argue with him though, being that his arm was broken and I couldn't use my hands to impress my arguments, but I kind of waved them like I was shadow-boxing and I noticed I was still holding the five-spot.

That clinched it for me that the accident was a phony. The skinny guy taking so long to pay his fare, and then looking ahead and grabbing the pole just as he handed me a big bill which I would be sure to look at real close. Maybe I was wrong about him, maybe not, but I remember you saying something about libel and slander suits, so I decided I'd better be careful. Besides he was a big guy too.

Well, I looked around and I spotted him walking kind of fast down the street.

"Hey," I yelled, holding up the bill like I wanted to give is back to him. He didn't hear me, so I started after him. Flaherty, I hope you ain't going to be like other people and be ready to think the wrong thing of me like what happened when I started after Skinny.

I was running when I heard the crowd behind me screaming and there was a louder and ominous bellow right behind me. I glanced back and . . . well, can't you guess? It was more trouble. It was flat-foot Bill O'Connor charging after me like a big fat bull. I didn't mean that as a joke being that cops are called bulls. And it wasn't a joke as I could see by the Dracula look on his face.

"Stop, you hit-and-runner," he shouted.

Gee, that scared me, Flaherty. For the first time I began to realize I was in a hello of a spot. I'd broken orders by taking the controls of a trolley. I'd had a smash which everyone was going to say was my fault even though it wasn't. And I couldn't even prove it was a fake accident unless I could get the goods on Skinny, and I hadn't even caught him yet. And now I'd

only made things worse by making it look as though I was running away because the whole thing was my fault.

WELL, Flaherty, there was only one thing to do, keep running until I figured some way to clear myself. I knew it was useless to try to argue or explain to a guy like Bill O'Conner. And what I thought about him getting me into this mess because he'd left his post and let someone park a car where it shouldn't be parked would have made the devil blush. And what I said when I discovered that Skinny had disappeared completly would have gotten the devil demoted for being incompetent for his job.

O'Connor puffed after me under forced draft, but as you've gathered I had on quite a head of steam myself and I was gone ahead of the wind. But no sight of Skinny.

I began to get winded and worried and woeful. With the police after me like they would be, I began to see myself spending the rest of my life scurrying from hideout to hideout, peeking out of dark alleys to get a glimpse of Myrtle, just a glimpse because I wouldn't dare speak or write to her because the police would be watching her.

And there wouldn't be just the police looking for me, there'd be the fake accident gang because of what I knew and I began to see myself being caught by them and dumped out of a speeding car. It's at times like that, Flaherty, when I begin to wish I was as dumb and brainless as folks are always saying I am, then I wouldn't be thinking all those terrible things.

But thinking of Myrtle made me mad and I decided I had to do something to save myself for her. It's funny, ain't it, how love can either make a guy silly or killy, grovel like a puppy or grim as a bulldog.

I knew I couldn't go to you for help, Flaherty. You'd be wild about me not remembering all the things you told me and all you'd think about any way was that here was another accident. You're going to be wild anyway at what I thought of next. You see, I thought of the D. A.

He was always hinting about a fake accident gang and he would be glad to know what I had learned. If I got to him real quick before he knew the police were looking for me . . . but it's a good thing I did some fast thinking, Flaherty, because just then I remembered something else you'd told me and I decided it might not be such a good idea to go to the D. A. after all.

You told me you had proof you'd shown the D. A. that there was no fake accident gang, but the D. A. kept on hinting anyway in his campaign speeches in spite of the proof. But maybe, I thought, he has a reason.

I'd heard one of your speeches, Flaherty, on the radio one night when I couldn't get anything better and I remembered what you said about there being too much graft in this state, and especially in this city. It wasn't hard to believe, especially when the city hires guys like Bill O'Connor for policemen.

So why was the D. A. always hinting about a fake accident gang? Because maybe he's getting graft from the gang for covering them for you, and he's jittery about it, wondering if you're getting wise; so he hints, so that you in defending yourself will let him know just how much you do know, but you don't know anything. What I mean is, you don't know anything about such a gang because he's helped them cover themselves so perfectly, and when you show him the proof he knows he's safe.

Well, I couldn't go to you or the cops or the D. A., so that left the whole mess right on my lap and if I didn't get it off there would never again be room for Myrtle to sit on my lap. There might be only one chance left for me, and that chance would be mine if Skinny hadn't moved his car from where I'd seen him park it.

WELL, the car was there, Flaherty, and I stood in a doorway a long time looking at it, surrounding myself

with thousands of arguments why I shouldn't take the risk I was thinking of, until I got so shaky I had to get off my feet.

So I slipped into the back of Skinny's car and got under some blankets on the floor and waited for Skinny to come. My heart was beating out a rhumba and the veins in my temples danced in rhythm.

The blankets were scratchy, but they weren't the only things that made me itchy because every time someone walked close to the car I thought it was Skinny and I tried to flatten on the floor like a grease spot.

It was a long wait, and the car was hot, standing all closed up in the sun, and, well I guess I fell asleep. When I woke up it was dark and I was shivering all over, but I wasn't really. It was just that the car was moving.

Now was my chance to get Skinny. He'd have his hands on the wheel and I'd put my finger against the back of his neck and make him talk because he would think it was a gun.

So I took a deep breath and I thought my head was going to explode. I tried to bounce up, but I couldn't. My hands and feet had gotten numb, yeah, they'd gotten numb because they were bound with adhesive tape!

I was what the writers say chagrined. But where the hello the "grinned" part of it comes in, I don't know. That's the trouble with our language, it don't make sense. I certainly wasn't in a mood for grinning.

I heard Skinny laugh, and it was kind of a deathhouse laugh if you know what I mean. I hope not even Bill O'Connor ever has to hear anyone laugh at him like that.

"So you're awake eh?" Skinny said. "Thanks for snoring and letting me know you were there so I could tap you on the head and tape you."

I couldn't think of any comeback and besides it wouldn't have done any good. My mouth was taped too but it's a wonder that what I was thinking didn't burn that tape right off.

Lying there on the floor I could look up and out the window, and I saw a lighted billboard on top of a building with the smiling face of the D. A. and a line that said: "Vote for an Honest Man." The D. A. seemed to be looking down at me and laughing. I tried but couldn't loosen the adhesive tape.

Skinny drove into an alley behind a narrow building that reared like a big tombstone in the night and I heard him ask someone to give him a hand with me. The someone was a nurse.

Now when I mention nurse, Flaherty, don't start thinking of what you see on the Red Cross posters and all that goes with it, a cool hand on a fevered brow and that sort of stuff.

This nurse wasn't that kind. She had a hand that would freeze any patient to death. Her uniform was like armorplate and her eyes, they were automatic-blue, reminded me of the wrong end of a double-barreled shotgun. She had grayish hair that looked like steel wool and her voice was as pleasant as a fingernail scraping over a blackboard.

"What psychopathic ward did you raid to get that?" she asked, looking at me.

"It's the motorman from the trolley," growled Skinny, "or rather the inspector who got suspicious and chased me after the crash. He was trying to play detective. Here we've been hunting high and low for him and wondering if we'd better take it on the lam because he might have talked, and all the time he was asleep in the car."

"He still doesn't look awake," remarked the nightmare for patients coming out of the ether. She grabbed me with her long fingers and I waited for the claws to hook into me.

Flaherty, I know just how a mouse must feel when it's cornered by a cat.

THEY dragged me up some stairs into a brightly lighted room what was a doctor's office and dumped me on a cot and stood there staring at me. They ripped the adhesive from my mouth.

"Now talk," snapped Skinny.

I gulped a couple of times and got my voice down to a squeak.

"Your . . . five bucks is in my right-hand pocket," I suggested, hoping he would see I was a right guy.

He made such a quick grab for it he nearly cracked a couple of my ribs.

"Not up there," I groaned. "Down in the other pocket."

He hit me again. I guess he didn't want the dough anyway. "Quit stalling. Who else knows what you know?"

"Quite a few folks," I admitted, watching his fist. I had to tell the truth, Flaherty, he had a long reach that gave the fist plenty of ground to get moving fast.

"Who are they?" the nurse demanded.

"The people in the sedan," I said, "and you two, and . . . well, I was going to go to the D. A. but I thought it wiser not to being that he's your Chief, but I guess what I did wasn't so wise either. But Flaherty will get you," I shouted. "He knows I was going to try to get something. He'll . . ."

Skinny slammed me in the mouth. "Flaherty won't make any trouble," he growled at the nurse.

"Either he's doing a good job of playing dumb, or he *is* dumb," he muttered. "You can't tell me he was playing a lone hand in this."

"Sure I wasn't," I told them, hoping to get them scared. "Flaherty's in this with me, I tell you. Don't believe that hooey he gave the D. A. about the secret Index Bureau."

Skinny frowned at the nurse.

"What do you think?"

She moistened her lips like a cat licking its chops.

"You'd better phone the Chief," she said. "I'll see if I can get this imbecile to say something sensible while you're doing that."

So Skinny went to the phone in the next room and the nurse gave me her bedside smile, a kind of death-bed-side smile.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "you would be interested to know how we injure our victims for accidents. Of course, where it is going to be too painful, we inject novacaine, but unfortunately our supply of novacaine is exhausted, if you understand what I mean."

I was going to mention that any nearby dentist would have a supply but I didn't think she would be interested.

She picked up a heavy bag.

"Sand," she smiled. "It makes wonderful black-and-blue marks. And this is a surgeon's scalpel. It's usually used in operations but it's fine for making gashes. And these two blocks of wood . . . we place a hand on one and the elbow on the other and then strike the forearm with this hammer. The bone snaps quite easily. Those are just a few things for you to keep in mind."

To keep in mind, Flaherty. Good night, I couldn't get them out of my mind. The nurse picked up a shiny rough piece of metal like I saw Myrtle use once in the kitchen when she was shredding coconut.

"This," informed the nurse, "is a grater We use it for abrasions like this . . ."

And she made a motion with it over my cheek-bone and it felt like a million mosquitoes were having a picnic there.

"Shall we have another demonstration," suggested the nurse, "or will you talk?"

"I've told you what I . . ." This time it was the other cheek-bone. Then across my forehead. I'll bet that Mrs. Shylock took off more than a pound and I sweated off about fifty more.

SKINNY came back then. "The Chief will be here in a few minutes," he said. "He's been checking up and says this guy hasn't talked to anybody. We're to arrange an accident, a fatal accident for him down at the grade-crossing near the river. We'll change his clothes and put other identification on him so we can select some 'relatives' who will collect on his death."

I wrenched at the adhesive, Flaherty, but it just seemed to stick tighter. I thought of Myrtle, and believe me, I

would have been glad to see even Bill O'Connor come barging through the doorway. Skinny told the nurse to get some identification like a wallet and such out of the safe in the outer office.

"In the meantime," he said, "I'll change his clothes and then we'll rough him up a bit so no one can recognize him."

The nurse left and he began cutting my clothes off me. It got me sore the way he slashed that inspector's uniform I'd laid out good dough to get. And when I get sore, which ain't often, Flaherty, look out. I can take just so much and this ruining of a practically new uniform was the last straw that choked the camel.

I figured I'd have to take a desperate chance when he loosened my hands and feet to put the other clothes on me. So I tried to do some fast thinking when he dumped a suit on the floor and reached for the scalpel to cut the adhesive tape.

But there wasn't going to be any chance, Flaherty.

He got a gun out too and held it against me while he slashed the tape around my wrists. Then he stepped way back and covered me with the gun.

"Untie your feet," he ordered, "and get into those clothes."

Well, I felt like an undertaker getting ready to dress a live corpse when I reached for those clothes. A lot of people call me Slaphappy, dumb, but I wasn't dumb enough to think I could move fast and get across that room to jump Skinny before he could shoot me, but I had to do something, Flaherty.

I picked up the trousers and started to put a leg into them. I kind of lost my balance, standing on one foot, and swaying I hopped toward Skinny while I tugged to get my leg through the pants.

"Get back," he barked, and jabbed the gun toward me.

Gee, my heart kind of lost its own balance then and did some hopping around. I got my leg through and lifted the other one and lost my balance again.

"Get back," Skinny reminded me, and from the way he said it I knew it was the last time he was going to remind me. I couldn't do anything to spoil my last chance now so I did some frantic hopping and reeled away from him clear across the room.

I buckled the pants on and picked up the coat. I started to stab my arm out through the sleeve and then Skinny got wise to me.

"Get away from . . ." he began.

But he was too late. I plunged my arm through the sleeve and right out hard against the button of the light switch. I dropped to the floor and scrambled away as Skinny fired and made Swiss cheese of the darkness.

Then I got to my feet and stood as quiet as I could. There wasn't a sound in the darkness except the lingering rolling ring of the shots that kind of kept ebbing and flowing in my ears. I was right by the table and my hand rested on the hammer and I picked it up. Skinny, wherever he was, was standing quiet too.

"Skinny," the nurse called from somewhere outside a door. "Don't shoot. It's me."

THE next thing I knew there was a glare in my eyes as she snapped on the light again. Skinny and I were standing face to face, not more than two feet apart. Holy smoke, Flaherty, did that give me a jolt! And it must have been just as bad for Skinny too. Because he fired the gun when it wasn't anywhere near pointing toward me.

I saw the gun coming round toward me. I raised the hammer and swung it down toward Skinny's head. He ducked back over the table and the hammer missed his head and smashed on the arm he was accidentally bracing across the two blocks of wood. There was a snap and he went white and I thought he was going to swallow his lower lip. His knees started to buckle and he dropped the gun.

The nurse came across the room like a vulture and I swear she was flying. I grabbed the coconut grater with both hands and swung it toward her.

"Come on you she-devil," I yelled, "and I'll try to landscape your face into an angel's."

Well, Flaherty, she couldn't think of taking her own medicine. She went into reverse so fast her feet couldn't keep up with her. She twisted like a cat and lit on all fours and her hands and feet were going like she was trying to burrow into the floor.

Across the room I saw the door from the stairs start to swing open. I knew who it was, the Chief, the D. A. Skinny had said he was coming. There wasn't time for me to get Skinny's gun, so I charged across the room and rammed myself against the door. I only meant to get it closed and lock it, Flaherty. But I hit it so hard I guess I knocked the Chief backwards down the stairs.

That's what happened as I found out right away. I saw Skinny picking up the gun and I decided I had overstayed my visit. I yanked the door open and went down the stairs about six at a time. The Chief was lying in a bulky huddle at the bottom and his head was twisted like his neck had been made of rubber. His hat was crushed over his head and I couldn't see his face, but the hair on the back of his head was black.

And the D. A.'s hair is blonde!

The Chief *wasn't* the D. A. He must be someone you and me don't suspect. I'm sorry I can't give you any more description of him, Flaherty, but you can understand I was in kind of a hurry with Skinny probably coming after me with the gun. Anyway, I thought I'd get to the first cop and bring him back and everything would be cleared up.

But maybe by now you know what happened and how I'm in a worse hole than before, because before I even got to a cop a car squealed to a stop beside me and there was Bill O'Connor all dressed up for a date with my Myrtle. And he slugged me down to arrest me on the hit-and-run charge from the accident this morning.

Well, by the time I came to in jail I was kind of dazed and bewildered and numb about the head. I mean I was numb about the head from the way Bill O'Connor had slugged me, and my tongue was kind of flabby when I sat under a bright light and questions came jabbing at me from all directions. I guess I didn't get over what I was trying to tell them about what happened.

"He's still unconscious," someone said.

"He's just trying to alibi," someone else said.

"He's got hallucinations. Send him up to the psychopathic ward for observation," said another.

So I'm writing to you Flaherty, and to the D. A. too, and both of you can check up and get me out of this. But I'm beginning to have an uneasy feeling I'm doomed, because so much time has gone by that maybe Skinny and the nurse have taken it on the lam and the only things you're going to find are my clothes in that room and the body at the bottom of the steps. And the clothes are going to be evidence against me for murder, and what's worse, the hit-and-run charge will still stand.

Despondently, but truthfully yours,
Pat Dugan.

DEAR MYRTLE:

I wrote you that I tried to be a detective and only ended up in jail where you always said I'd end up.

Well, the D. A. came to my cell today and he had another guy with him. They asked me a bunch of questions about all that happened yesterday, but I wouldn't answer because I had the idea that maybe after all the D. A. was tied in with the fake accident gang anyway. Maybe that guy I killed last night was his sidekick who handled the dealings with the gang for him. The D. A. became very exasperated.

"Come on and talk," he barked. "We know the whole story and we only want your verification on it."

"Sure you know it," I retorted. "And Flaherty's out verifying it and soon you'll

be sitting in this cell instead of me. I haven't anything to say until Flaherty gets here."

"Flaherty can't see you," snapped the D. A.

I got that, all right.

"Oh," I said. "So that's how it is, eh? You're going to hold me incom-avocado, not let me have a chance to defend myself."

"Listen," barked the D. A., "I'd enjoy letting you see Flaherty and tell your story to his face in front of witnesses, but it can't be. You saw to that. Get this, Dugan, and get it straight. Flaherty's dead!"

"Dead?" And I didn't know whether it was me saying it or just the echo of the D. A.'s voice in that bare prison.

"Yes," said the D. A. "Don't you get it yet, Dugan? Flaherty was the head of the gang!"

Well, I couldn't think of anything to say then. The D.A. was looking at me in sort of a queer way, like he couldn't figure me out. I stared right back at him, though, even if I had made a big mistake about him.

"THAT'S right, Dugan," said the guy with the D. A. who turned out to be from the secret Index Bureau set up by the insurance companies. And he told me how after they had learned what I had done yesterday they had done some checking up and found out why the Index Bureau never got any evidence there was a gang working this town.

They found that Flaherty had never let anyone else but himself send in the reports of the accidents he knew were phony to the Index Bureau. And he always changed the names and descriptions of the "victims" and doctors in the cases so the Bureau, in the secret way it has, never got wise that anything was wrong.

The D. A. told me that the police in a town two hundred miles east of here had picked up the nurse and Skinny, who was a doc, and Skinny had confessed and caused the arrest of other members of the gang.

But there was one thing that puzzled me.

"How," I asked the D. A. "did you know all about this? I mean about what happened yesterday. I didn't tell you about it in the letter I sent you."

He shook his head like there was still something he couldn't believe.

"Dugan," he said, "I've heard of the reputation you have of always doing the wrong thing, but I never believed it until now. Man, you don't realize how close you came to being tried and probably convicted for murder. But you did the wrong thing again and saved yourself by putting the complete story in my hands. That's what is going to let you walk out of this cell a free man.

"That letter you wrote to Flaherty you put in the envelope addressed to me!"

That was all he said. I mean, he waited around for a minute or two afterward, still staring at me the queer way, and then the guy from the Index Bureau nudged him and they went out.

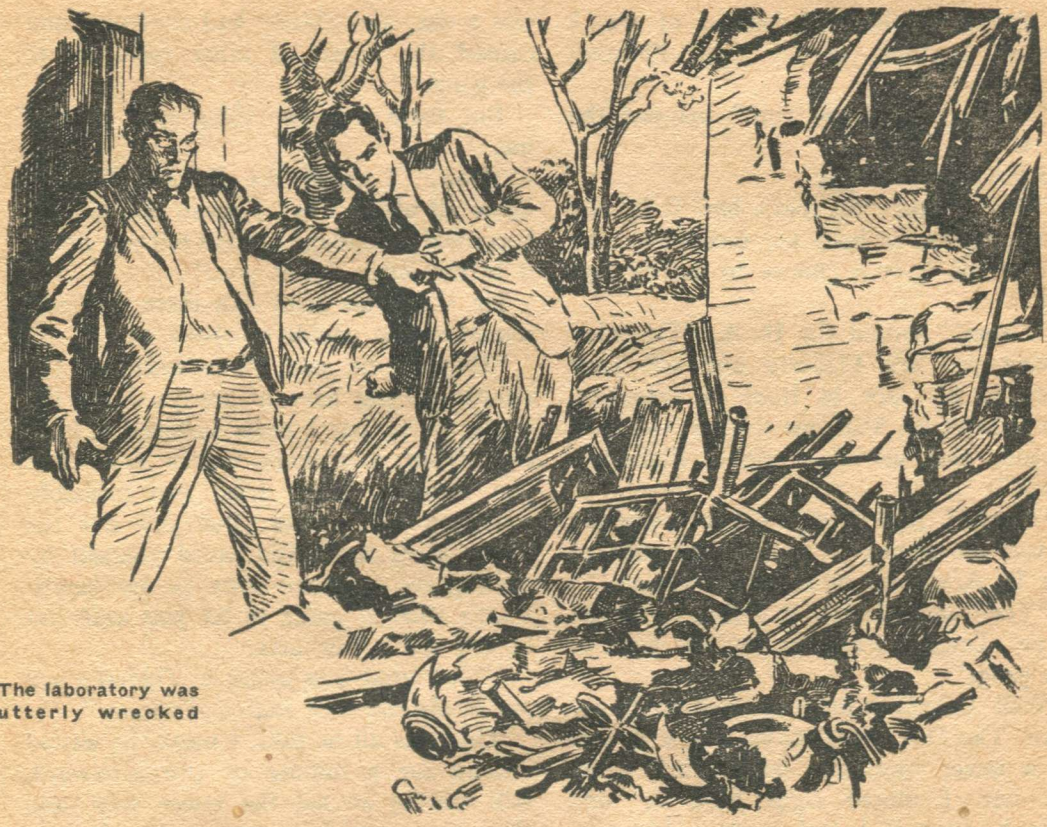
Well, Myrtle, I guess I can get to marry you after all. I've still got my job as inspector for the trolley company, and being that I saved the insurance company so much money by breaking up the fake accident gang, I guess I could get a job as investigator or something for them if I asked them for it. What do you think, should I ask them?

You'd better decide that.

You can give me your answer when I see you tonight, and you can also be thinking of a day when I can say to a man who wears a reversed collar, "Say the words and make her mine."

Anticipatingly yours,
Pat Dugan.

P. S. Just as I left the cell I ran into Bill O'Connor. And you can believe me that what happened to him when I ran into him certainly was not a fake accident.



The laboratory was utterly wrecked

Three Against the Stars

By ERIC NORTH

CHAPTER XXI

ZENITH OF THE DANGER

ON THE departure of Frobart and Dr. Ayre, with their melancholy burden, King went in search of Ruth. He found her gently resisting the morbid prophesying of Mrs. Puckett, who was now frankly in terror of her surroundings.

On King's entry the housekeeper appealed to him with tearful emphasis.

"I say that Miss Ruth oughtn't to be allowed to sleep 'ere, like she says she's going to, Mr. King. I wouldn't sleep 'ere, not in this place, not if you was to go down on your bended knees. Full of murdering ghosts and things. And the bad luck of it! Look what's 'appened to Fry. I shall dream of it if I live to be an 'undred."

Ruth said, with a pale smile: "Why, Mrs. Puckett, I shall be perfectly safe with father and Mr. King. And, besides, we shan't be sleeping here. We shall sleep in the daytime. At night we shall be wide awake all the time."

"What for?" Mrs. Puckett demanded, blinking.

"You know Dr. Montague is conducting certain scientific experiments," King said. "It is at night that he has to take his

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for July 2

observations, you see. As for ghosts— Now Mrs. Puckett, you surely don't believe that? Not really. Come now."

But the housekeeper's wits, dull enough at times, had been sharpened suspiciously by the events of the past few days.

"What 'appened to Daniel then, Mr. King? And us shifted over to your cottage at nights?"

King said, exchanging a look with Ruth: "Some experiments are rather dangerous, Mrs. Puckett. Science is a queer thing, especially when it touches matters which we do not properly understand. At times strange happenings occur. This is one of them. But depend upon it, everything will come out all right. It wasn't a ghost that took the cat. That is to say, if he hasn't just strayed away of his own accord. If Daniel was actually taken, it was by —well, the doctor has succeeded in hatching out a kind of germ life, in the laboratory, as you know. Some of them have got out of control for the time being. They can't bother us for long, because the outside temperatures will quickly kill them."

"It can't do it quick enough for me," Mrs. Puckett declared. It was evident, however, that she could make very little sense of what King had said. "I suppose it's all right. But I 'ates these queer goings on. They ain't Christian, begging your pardon."

"If you're really at all frightened," Ruth said, fully aware of the housekeeper's unswerving loyalty, "it might be better if you left us to manage ourselves for a little time, until things settled down comfortably again. We should miss you dreadfully, but it's hardly fair that you should be worried. If—"

Mrs. Puckett was at once all indignation and hurt.

"I wouldn't 'ear of such a thing. I'm surprised at you, Miss Ruth. Well, ghosts or no ghosts, it's time I got dinner for you. So far as I can see nobody's had much breakfast. Where's that young Joe? Ah! so there you are. Listening at the key-'ole, I'll be bound. Wood is what we want, and plenty of it. With Fry gone—"

"She's a staunch old dear," Ruth said, as she and King went out into the garden. "Rod, how will it all end? Now and then my courage deserts me. I know it's foolish of me, but in the last few hours the fear I've had has been—I can't explain. It's personal, if you know what I mean. Something is going to happen—to me. Something vile and horrible . . ."

"Nonsense!" King said sharply. But he could not avoid a sudden sick feeling. "How can anything happen to you, with all of us here together? Dearest, you're overwrought. I don't wonder at that. You're tired out. You must go back to the cottage after dinner and have a good sleep."

"Yes," Ruth said vaguely. "Perhaps you're right."

THE rain had ceased and the sun was shining bravely through a rift in the heavy clouds. King pointed to it.

"Of course I'm right. Why, look there, dear heart. That's the way the sun will presently shine through our own clouds. . . . It's practically impossible, according to your father, that the star-germs can survive Earth temperatures for much longer."

He felt her shake suddenly, and her clasp tighten. Seeking the cause, he saw that she was staring at the wet gravel of the path.

At the point of her boot almost, was a single clear-cut impression of a cloven hoof.

King had an instinctive feeling that it was newly made. It had not been there, he knew, more than a few minutes at most, because the rainwater was only now beginning to seep into the depressions it made.

King fought back the exclamation that rose to his lips. He pretended not to have seen the print, and drew her gently onward. Yet his heart was sick with loathing of that unseen presence.

Ruth said faintly: "Hadn't we better find Father? We must talk over what he wants to do. It's raining again, Rod."

King's face was grim. He came to an astonished realization of the fact that his own fear had miraculously and finally left him. He knew now only a consuming anger, a steadily growing determination to encounter the Satyr-biogen and destroy it.

How, he did not know. The occasion, he told himself, would point the way. If it cost him his own life he would remove the threat of this leering Satyr from the path of the woman he loved.

The whole menace of the creature, he believed, was directed at Ruth. It was for her, not for themselves, that they had most to care. In the recesses of his mind he heard again the bleating mirth which had accompanied their single glimpse of that goatlike horror, and his forehead was dampened with sweat. It took all his will power to thrust the vision from him.

Dr. Montague was self-absorbed and reticent, when they found him. He seemed to have aged under the shock of Fry's death, King thought. At the dinner table he sat in a brooding silence, devoid of appetite. When spoken to, he replied in curt monosyllables.

They left him presently to himself; Ruth to return to the cottage, to get what sleep she could in readiness for a night of watching. King to stretch himself upon the sofa in the dining room. He was worn out. Within a few moments he was sound asleep.

SOME hours later he wakened to see Dr. Montague pacing the room with short, nervous strides. It was approaching dusk, and already the light was fading. The wind had dropped; beyond the window King could see the motionless frescoe of treetops against the leaden background of the sky. A curious silence held. The air was oppressive with a sense of threat.

Seeing King awake Dr. Montague came abruptly to a standstill. His eyes were gleaming behind their glasses, and his scant hair was rumpled above the high dome of his forehead. He interlaced his thin fingers as he spoke.

"I was about to wake you, King. It's time we made our preparations for the night. . . . You sleep soundly."

King sat up yawning. "What makes you say that? Just now, particularly, I mean?"

"You heard nothing then? No echo through your dreaming of a sudden loud explosion?"

"Not a sound," King said with a puzzled frown. "I was dog-tired. I wasn't merely asleep. I was dead to the world. Was there an explosion?"

Montague gestured.

"Come and see for yourself."

The scientist led the way into the corridor and through the side door into the quadrangle. As he stepped into the open, King's eyes widened, and his mouth gaped.

"Holy Moses! What did that?"

Practically the whole of the right wall of the laboratory had collapsed outward, as though to the impetus of a terrific driving force from within. The ground was a litter of torn masonry and broken glass. The angle of the roof sagged, and a twisted beam was fallen midway along its length.

"The extraordinary part," Dr. Montague said calmly, "is that there is no suggestion of fire. Normally an explosion ignites. In this case, as you see, nothing of the kind has happened."

King said: "The Light-biogen."

"Beyond a doubt. The force concerned, King, was of a nature unknown to earth. Its disruptiveness, I believe, was due to mental energy. There was nothing physical about it, except its effects. In my opinion the Light-biogen sounded the note of the building—that is to say, the fundamental note it naturally gave out. If you remember, Cheron, the celebrated French bass, was able to break a drinking glass into fragments simply by singing into the glass its fundamental note. The Russian bass singer, Ivanoff, used to perform the same trick."

"But a whole building of brick!" King said incredulously.

"The difference is one of magnitude

only," Dr. Montague said, with quiet conviction. "The effect upon buildings—even upon human life itself—of violent concussions of the air, is well known. It is simply a matter—whether by design or chance—of attuning the note to the fundamental pitch of the building or person. I am one of those who think that the true explanation of the downfall of the walls of Jericho, at the blast of the trumpets, is to be found in the fact that Joshua had discovered the fundamental note of the masonry, and caused his buglers to sound it. As a scientific consequence the walls collapsed.

"These things happen by chance sometimes. At the rehearsal in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in 1852, of the music for the funeral ceremonies of the Duke of Wellington, during a note sung in unison by the huge choir, seven of the gas-glasses re-sounded the note and burst into fragments."

"You think the Light-biogen made use of this means to effect its escape from the laboratory?"

"I do," said the scientist. "It has, we may suppose, taken on some degree of materiality. Its development has been phenomenal, by comparison with the rest of the Biogens. Finding itself prevented by certain physical or material properties from making an escape, the Light-biogen would naturally resort to such midway means—by which I mean an action neither wholly material nor immaterial, but dependent upon both—as would be prompted by its profounder of the laws of natural philosophy. At least, that is my theory."

"Have you looked inside the laboratory?"

Dr. Montague shook his head.

"To many shadows at this hour. And that reminds me. It is high time we made our preparations for the darkness. Tonight, unless I am greatly mistaken, will see the zenith of the peril. To-night, King, will witness the age-old struggle between good and evil. There is a melting in my bones. . . ."

"Mine, too," King muttered.

CHAPTER XXII

PINPOINTS OF COLOR

HE LOOKED soberly at the lowering sky and shrugged his shoulders. It was, he thought, impossible to escape the threat with which the air was charged. The atmosphere was weird and unnatural, full of a parched, combustible feeling. The silence could be felt.

"Ruth?" King questioned, as they sought the sitting room.

"Joe has gone for her," Dr. Montague replied. "Mrs. Puckett will stay at the cottage, out of harm's way, I hope. Young Murgle, is to be one of us. He pleaded so hard to be let stay that I could not find it in my heart to disappoint him. He is terrified almost out of his wits, but has the courage of a consuming curiosity. Well, we should not lack for light tonight."

King saw that the scientist had been busy while he himself had been sleeping. At least a dozen lamps were ranged about the room, and fuel for the fire was piled high in a corner. On the table was a large tray containing food, and the couch was occupied with rugs and pillows.

"Hang it, you've done it all already," King exclaimed. "Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

Dr. Montague smiled. "Mrs. Puckett did most of it. I wanted you to rest. You'll probably have need of all your wits before morning dawns."

The door, King saw, had been wedged open to its full width. Confronting the opening, and some three feet within the room, were a number of tins arranged semi-circularly. Within each was a coil of thin wire. The tins were made fast to the floor and from each a loose lead trailed and vanished beneath the edge of the carpet.

"Magnesium wire," Dr. Montague explained. "I can ignite them in turn, as required, by means of the small battery on the ledge here, where I shall sit."

"You mean the door is to remain open?"

"All that I am able to see of these extraordinary phenomena, I certainly in-

tend to see," Dr. Montague said. "Open or shut, the door itself is no protection. Light is the only real safeguard. Light and the providence of God."

"The magnesium flares are for an emergency?" King suggested.

"Partly that. I intend to take a flashlight or two, if at all possible, and if my nerves hold. If these creatures are recordable, I shall need the intensity and actinic power of the light of the ignited magnesium."

King said nervously: "Isn't it time Ruth came? It's growing very dark."

"I think I hear young Murgle now," the scientist said. He began methodically to light the lamps. "Yes, here they are now. Will you put a match to the fire, King?"

King did so, and went then to meet the newcomers. He was a little alarmed at Ruth's pallor. Her manner, too, was unusual. Her eyes were vague and her voice was curiously sing-song.

"You shouldn't have come," King chided, settling her in a chair. "You don't look as if you'd rested at all."

She gave him a fleeting smile. "I'm quite well. I had to come, you see."

She put her hand to her head, as though suddenly confused. King watched her anxiously. His mouth had gone a little dry. Some alien quality seemed to have taken possession of her, and he found it unwelcome and disturbing.

"You mean you had to be with us?"

"Yes, Rod; of course. I couldn't keep away. It kept calling me to come—calling me. . . . What on earth am I saying? How foolish I must seem. I'm so tired though that I feel now and then as if I was walking and talking in my sleep."

King, wondering unhappily at the queerness of her manner, said: "You're overtired. Just close your eyes and relax. That's right."

JOE MURGLE had seated himself in the corner farthest from the open door, beyond which the gloom now steadily thickened. His mouth hung open and his eyes were wide. He was not at all sure now that his choice had been wise. He pictured Mrs. Puckett sitting comfortably and safely before the cheeriness of the cottage oven, and envy smote him. He looked apprehensively about him, and sighed robustly.

"Well, Joseph!" King said, with assumed lightness. "And so we're to have your company, eh? Put your hat down, my lad, unless you want to twist the brim clean off it. Had your tea?"

"Cri'! Yes, Mr. King, please. I mean. thank you. Mr. King. . . ."

King said: "Well, what is it?"

"Mr. King, I thought—I mean, Miss Ruth—"

"What about Miss Ruth?"

With a quick glance at the girl's unconscious profile, King came close to Joe. His voice fell automatically to a whisper. Something in Joe's face brought an added qualm to his uneasiness.

"What is it, Joe?"

"She's—funny. Saying funny things, Mr. King. Mrs. Puckett got all upset and didn't want her to go. But she would go."

"Funny things!" King echoed. He dropped to a chair by the youth's side. "What funny things has Miss Ruth been saying? Quietly, Joe. We mustn't wake her, must we?"

Joe said hoarsely: "*Funny* things, Mr. King. She kep' saying she had to go because it was calling her. And Mrs. Puckett said who's calling you, dearie, and Miss Ruth said I don't know."

King digested this, frowning heavily. "When was this, Joe?"

Joe gulped and said:

"When she woke up, Mr. King. She came out and looked at Mrs. Puckett and me, and said why can't you leave me alone? Why do you keep calling me? And then she got better and laughed and said I'm afraid I'm not very well. Don't take any notice of me. I think we had better go now, Joe, don't you. And I said yes, it is getting late."

"Miss Ruth didn't say what it was she thought was calling her, Joe?"

Young Murgle shook his head.

"No, Mr. King. Mrs. Puckett said the poor lamb she is still dreaming. But she wasn't dreaming, Mr. King. She was funny like."

Dr. Montague, busy with his camera apparatus, called suddenly to King. Beyond an affectionate nod at Ruth when she first entered, the scientist seemed not to have noticed her further. Certainly the strangeness of her manner had escaped him. He was, as King knew, almost solely concerned with his scientific enthusiasm.

"Yes," King answered.

He touched Ruth's hair lightly as he passed, with all his soul in his fingers. He thought her eyes flickered, but they remained closed. She seemed somehow drugged; but whether with weariness or something more to be feared, he did not know. It was as if she had been hypnotised.

"Listen," Dr. Montague said.

From the now completely darkened corridor came the faint humming sound that had characterised the assembling of the star-germs on the previous night. Now, as then, the sound filled King with an indescribable disgust. It was like the whispering of a concealed multitude of the unclean and venomous. It rose in volume like the whirr of a great spinning top, to die away into a throbbing silence.

"Not yet," Dr. Montague muttered. "The hour is too early. The things are but feeling their strength, as it might be. You saw nothing, King?"

"I fancied I saw pinpoints of color here and there, but there was nothing that had definite outline or shape."

His eyes were very bright.

Dr. Montague said: "Later on—if we come through this ordeal safely—you must read what myth and legend has to say of the noise we have just heard, King. You will find mention of it in Hesiod, and also in the Avesta, the sacred book of the ancient Persians. It is caused, these say, by the spinning of the Cross of Kronos ar Saturn. Kronos is identical with the Chaldean Ea."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SATYR

BEYOND that one demonstration of the Evil that lurked in the blackness beyond the circle of lamplight and firelight, nothing untoward occurred for some hours. The night held to an eerie quiet. Neither sight nor sound escaped it.

Ruth, King was delighted to find, had apparently shaken off her strange, drug-like obsession. Indeed, her manner had now gone to the other extreme. Her eyes were unusually bright and her cheeks were flushed feverishly. The effect, King believed, was probably due to some kind of mental reaction.

He said presently: "You're all right now?"

"Quite, thanks, Rod. Why: didn't I seem well? This is most frightfully interesting, don't you think? Father, do you really think it possible to photograph the—the Biogens?"

"Frankly—no," the scientist confessed. "But I mean to do my best, nonetheless. You see, I am not without hope."

"What a record it would make," King said enviously. "You would be furnished with indisputable proof of star life—"

"I doubt it," Dr. Montague said. He smiled dryly. "The world of science would probably accuse me of faking the plates. Still, what matter. It is the great moral issue of the affair that most concerns me now. It is the voice from the beyond that humanity has always yearned to hear, to set the seal of absolute conviction upon the poor certainty of its faith."

Ruth said, with a quivering lip: "It typifies the unending struggle between right and wrong, the forces of good and powers of evil—between God and Satan."

Her father nodded.

"All through the Gothic legends runs the thought of the battle of Light against Darkness, and the final triumph of the Light, after a temporary death. This great solar myth underlies all the ancient mythologies. It is the primeval form of the

resurrection and the life. The common belief in antiquity, as set out in universal tradition is not to be despised. It argues the fidelity of the common memory, and the unity of the race, if it does nothing else. There is truth behind all myth. Never doubt it."

Dr. Montague was well launched now upon his subject. He continued for some time to descant on these lines. He spoke of the nature of myths, and the significance of the ancient records; the exploits of the oldest mythological heroes; the Eddas, Sagas and Nibelungenlied; Hesiod, Aristophanes and Orpheus. King listened with intense interest, yet never for an instant relaxing his caution. All his senses were alert to catch the first intimation of aggression on the part of the intelligences that besieged their tiny oasis of light. Now and then through the dreamy tones of Dr. Montague's discourse, he thought to hear vague and awful movements up and down the strings of the blackness beyond.

There came silence presently. Dr. Montague had entered into one of his habitual abstractions. His head was sunk on his breast and his lips moved without sound. Joe Murgle was dozing on the sofa.

Ruth stirred at King's side.

"I'm so thirsty, Rod."

"We'll have some tea," Rod said briskly.

HE PUT fresh fuel on the fire and set the kettle over the blaze. As he rose to his feel it occurred to him that the illumination of the room was less bright. The lamps had each a kind of bluish halo about them, obscuring them like a fog. He turned up the wicks till the flames flared, and the light widened again comfortingly.

Dr. Montague came out of his reverie to say: "What are you doing, King? There should be plenty of oil."

"So there is."

But his expression was puzzled. The light had fallen once more, quite perceptibly. The flame of the fire, also, had grown sullen and fitful.

"It's nearly midnight," Dr. Montague said, glancing at his watch. His face was grave. "Ruth—"

The girl looked at him, but made no reply. King saw that she was breathing as though with difficulty, and that the old drugged drowsiness had returned to her. Her expression somehow alarmed him.

"Ruth!" Dr. Montague repeated, almost fretfully.

She stirred and essayed a smile. "Yes, Father . . . yes."

"You must rouse yourself, my dear. King, prod that lad awake. That's right. The danger is here. Something is happening at last."

The darkness beyond the door had movement. Joe Murgle, seeing it, felt the roots of his hair tingling responsively. He sat as though paralyzed, his heart hammering in his throat.

Dr. Montague said sharply: "The lights!"

"They won't go any higher," King said.

He was strangely without fear. He stood by Ruth, his hand pressing her shoulder, and his eyes fixed upon the oblong of the door.

THE darkness was taking shape. It fell apart—and became of a sudden filled with the rude, nightmarish forms of the crowding star-germs. The air was vibrant, charged with the breath of an incalculable malice. King was not quite sure whether the lamplight itself was failing, or whether the outside black was being thrust bodily, as it were, into the room. He only knew that the light was falling steadily. And, in spite of himself, his spine seemed crumbling under the weight of a mounting horror.

He heard his own voice issuing drunkenly: "Doctor—Doctor—the flare—"

Even as he spoke a magnesium light leaped in a blinding flash. There followed a second and a third. The smoke of them billowed in a heavy, acrid cloud. From the core of it came the voice of Dr. Montague, strident with excitement.

"Did you see it? Ruth—did you see it? King, where are you?"

"Here!" King called. He wiped his smarting eyes and moved in the direction of the scientist. At his back Joe Murgle burst into a strangled coughing. "What is it?"

He saw now, however, for himself; and the supreme wonder of it rendered him dumb. As if by magic the smoke had vanished. The lamplight had sunk to a twilight, and dimly he could distinguish in the pit of the corridor the writhing shapes that filled it. King stared at them. A ray of purest light, like the scintillation of a great diamond, moved upon the face of the darkness. As though it were a swordpoint it touched in turn the monstrous life that swam there, extinguishing it like a pricked bubble.

A planet creature, pulsing its terror, crossed the threshold of the room. The light-ray lengthened and pierced it into nothingness, almost at King's feet. The air of the corridor shook with the anguish of an unnatural convulsion. It seemed to swell and then recede. And was presently still, without movement, or sight or sound. . . .

Dr. Montague was crying: "The Light-biogen! The Urim and Thummin. The Light and the Perfection!"

He was hopping with the sheer intensity of his scientific ardor. "King! You saw it? The hypostatis! The very essence and personality of the Godhead!"

King was dazed. The lamplight was slowly returning to normal. He turned his eyes from the fervor of Dr. Montague, to glimpse the chalk-white face of Joe Murgle. A thought was beating at the back of his brain, but for the moment he could not focus it. There was something revolting in the room. His nostrils were curling to the echo of a mephitic stench—

And suddenly, sickeningly, his brain cleared. He said: "Ruth! God in Heaven! Where's Ruth?"

"Eh!" Dr. Montague stammered.

He came and stood at King's elbow, peering at the empty chair. His face grew ashen.

"She isn't here."

Joe Murgle came, walking a little blindly, from the corner where he had been crouching. King automatically thrust out a hand, or the boy would have fallen.

"Mr. King . . ."

"Yes!" King whispered, with dry lips.

"Miss Ruth, Mr. King-- It was the—the goat, Mr. King. It came in—"

King said, now with an awful calm: "Something came and took her away? Is that what you mean? Don't be frightened."

"I couldn't stop it," Joe Murgle said. "A thing like a goat. It smelt . . ."

He sat his shaking body on the sofa and began to blubber.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SYMBOL OF EVIL

"THE SATYR!" Dr. Montague said. The shock of his daughter's disappearance smote him deeply. He was reduced to an instant from a state of almost arrogant triumph to a nerveless condition pitiful to witness. All his initiative seemed to have deserted him. He stumbled from side to side of the room, wringing his hands.

"King, what is to be done? What is to be done? I never dreamed of this."

King said, with a haggard look: "What is to be done! Why, what do you think? What have you done with the torch?'

He snatched it from the trembling hand of the scientist, and strode to the door.

"What do you mean to do?" Dr. Montague cried.

"Search till I find her," King said. "Do you think I care what happens now?"

"Wait," Dr. Montague said. His hands fumbled at the bookshelves and came away clutching a pocket Testament. The trappings of scholarship had fallen from him like a garment discarded, leaving only the man, nakedly human. "Together, King. We three . . . Joe, my boy, come quickly. Now, King."

The corridor was sunk in heavy gloom. But now no terror lurked within its inky folds. The air was miraculously released of former threat. There was no sound but

the tread of their feet, and no light but that of the torch in King's hand.

"Where to?" Dr. Montague asked. His voice was firmer. "We must keep together."

King's impulse was to run shouting in pursuit, but the manifest folly of this restrained him. The need for caution had never been greater. The lesser Biogens, he knew, had been destroyed by the beneficent sword-ray of the Light-biogen; the Urim, as Dr. Montague called it.

So far as earth was concerned, at least, they were dead. The strange Flame-biogen —sensitive metabolisms that shortened at the approach of sound, and danced grotesquely at the rise and fall of speech— the geometrical creatures, the ectoplasms, the one-dimensioned and two-dimensioned monstrosities, and others too bizarre or horrible to permit of description; no longer would earth suffer threat of them. But the most potent for evil of all that travesty of life, the most powerful and most wicked, still lived. Somewhere in the darkness about them the great Satyr stamped goatlike, with Ruth held in noisome embrace.

KING choked at the thought of the girl's peril. An agony of fear swept him lest she was already, by some law of interstellar physics, removed forever from earthly aid. The thought pierced his mind like a white-hot wire, so that he groaned aloud.

Dr. Montague, at his side, said: "Courage, Rod. What was it she said herself? Can you remember? We had been talking of the Biogen, the mind-stuff. And Ruth said: 'It is a question not of research, but of religion. Our minds against theirs. Let us deny evil and admit good!' "

"I remember," King said.

"The Light-biogen," Dr. Montague said. "The Urim. Surely it is God's providence taken shape to save his creatures, made in His own image. See I fear no longer. When has the Light ever failed to overcome the Darkness? It will not fail now. God cannot deny Himself."

"Amen! We will search from room to room, and from corner to corner. Frightened, Joe?"

"Cri'!, not very much, Mr. King," Joe said. But his teeth chattered a little. "Cri'! I'd like to have a go at that goat thing, I would. I ain't afeared of no goat."

"Nor I," King said. Dr. Montague's assurance had not been without its effect. Courage was flowing back into his veins. "Let your thoughts say that, Joe, old man, with all your strength. Evil cannot harm Miss Ruth. It *cannot*. Now then—keep your eyes and ears open."

Each room was visited in turn. But the beams of the torch revealed no sign of the girl. The darkness unfolded upon emptiness and silence.

King called now and then, in a shaking voice: "Ruth— Can you hear me? Are you anywhere near? Can you touch me?"

"Cri'!" Joe Murgle muttered, under his breath. He glanced at King fearfully, as if suspecting his sanity. "How can she touch him when she ain't here? He can see that."

Dr. Montague, however, immediately caught at the terrified thought in King's mind.

He said: "You're thinking of Daniel. But it wasn't the Satyr that destroyed the cat. It was a geometric creature, probably; or the ectoplasmic germ that tried to envelop Joe at the tower window. Ruth's visibility isn't in question. She's still in the flesh, wherever she is. I am certain of it."

"How *can* you be certain of it?" King fumed. But he immediately took fresh hold of his fretting temper. "We must hurry on. Joe, keep close to us."

The search had narrowed to the upper story. They ascended the stairs and entered the short tunnel of the corridor, seeming now to move through an endless universe of darkness and silence. The ray of the torch had grown stunted and thin.

It was no longer fanlike, but ended abruptly in a pallid splotch, as though it pressed always against some impalpable

obstacle. The curtain of night had about it a curious suggestion of elasticity. It appeared at times to flow, after the manner of a turgid black stream, impeding their progress. It closed around them, as water closes, with a smooth and icy deliberation. The air had staled. And the lean torch-light drew from the nooks and corners an endless succession of crazily dancing shadows.

THE rooms on either side of the corridor were starkly empty. Their space appeared to overwhelm and suffocate the already diminishing beam of the torch in King's hand. As he regained the corridor the beam faded wholly. He stood blindly in a pit of soot, with tautened eardrums, and racing pulses. Dr. Montague's heavy breath was on his neck, and the drumming of the darkness echoed the sudden scared whimper that came from Joe Murgle.

"Battery failed," Dr. Montague said, speaking with evident restraint.

"No," King said. He worked the tiny switch unavailingly. "It was fresh in this evening. I attended to that purposely. It's failed, but not in the ordinary sense. See here . . ."

He held the torch with the globe uppermost. There came from it a faint smudge, like a pale mist.

"The battery is still working. Something has killed the light itself."

Dr. Montague said: "We can easily determine that. Matches, Joe? No; give them to me."

He struck one. It spluttered like a damp fusee, leaving only a phosphorescence on the fabric of the dark. There was not even a suggestion of flame. He struck match after match, with the same result.

"I'm afraid you're right, King. It appears to be a matter of atmospherics. Wait a minute. Shut your eyes tight, Joe. That will get them used to the darkness a little. Just where are we standing, King?"

King was already fumbling to find the handle of the tower-room door. His fingers closed upon it as he replied.

"We're at the tower room. Light or dark, we're going on. You might try a match here and there, doctor. Just for luck."

King's voice was steady, but his brain was racing. The breath rasped in his throat, his eyes burned in vain attempt to pierce the sightless space beyond the opened door. An odor, coarsely perceptible, fouled his nostrils.

He had had a moment of added nausea on first encountering the handle of the door. It came to him, with a sense of horrified impotence, that the door was made fast against his entry, by some demoniac agency, as had apparently been the case following their first discovery in the corridor of the cloven print.

His relief on finding the door to yield readily was immense. But this relief subsided almost at once. It merely proved, he decided, that the Satyr had withdrawn into still more inaccessible regions of darkness.

Yet the malign influences of the Thing were already in evidence. As King, his arm linked in Dr. Montague's, groped his way through the inky obscurity towards the tower ladder, he could feel the menace of unseen eyes. The triggers of his nerves were cocked, as it might be, to instant explosion.

The wall of night had a pulpiness, a semi-solidity, that was having actual effect.

It expanded and deepened as he moved, inch by inch, into the core of it. They had, he calculated, traversed half the length of the room only, when his opposing influence hardened against their further progress like a barrier of stone.

He came to a halt, thrusting out his hand to touch this amazing obstruction, while telling himself that it did not, could not exist. Nor did it, in the experience of his physical senses. His thrusting hand was checked not by contact, but by state. It became leaden and rigid. And this feeling was presently extended to his whole body. In vain he exerted his will to move forward. The sweat of defeat bathed

his face. No actual barrier of stone could have held him more securely.

AT HIS back Dr. Montague said thickly: "I can hardly breathe. The air is suffocating."

A hand clutched King's. He knew it for that of Joe Murgle, and an odd sympathy stirred him.

He muttered: "It's all right, Joe—it's all right. Shame to bring you into this. Nothing to gain."

"Mr. King. It's—pushing me."

King, emerged from a daze, was aware that they were all three again in motion. But now it was not of their own volition, nor in the desired direction. They were being crowded backward by almost imperceptible degrees. A terrible strength was being poured against them out of the impenetrable void, spreading its icy tentacles upon them, wrapping the curtain of the dark about them like a terrible shroud.

The name coiled like a spring at the back of King's aching throat, released itself in a single despairing cry.

"Ruth!"

He knew somehow that Dr. Montague was holding aloft his tiny pocket Testament. But no sound escaped the old man. But for the echoes of his own cry, and the ague of Joe Murgle's terror, King's ears were blank.

His eyes, however, were growing sensible of a steadily diminishing obscurity at one point. An oval of grayness had appeared. It whitened steadily; containing itself compactly, after the manner of a spotlight. King saw—

He thought, for a single instant, that madness had touched his brain.

He saw, clinging halfway up the tower ladder, the gross bulk of a Thing half man half goat. The head, with its stiff, pointed ears, and shaggy beard, was turned towards them. One hairy arm was about a run of the ladder, the other supported the crumpled body of the girl. King had an instant's agonized glimpse of her deathly face, with its closed eyelids, before the vision was blotted out as by an inky curtain released.

He tried to call out. He tried to burst the bonds of his physical weakness. He could do neither. He was turned to stone, with no life left to him, it seemed, save to his ears, wherein rang the horror of a bleating laughter. He had a feeling that he was dead, and that Hell was all about him.

How long this bitterness assailed him he never knew. He was all at once staring at a new appearance. On the white plaster of the wall shone a great orbicular, wheel-like plate.

Dr. Montague's voice came hoarsely into the silence.

"The wheel symbol of Kronos and Saturn. The sign manual of Satan."

The scientist choked. His thin fingers bit into King's shoulder. His voice rose to a scream of thanksgiving.

"Look! Look! Praise be to God! The Cross Tau—the symbol of symbols. The hidden wisdom of the true Cross . . ."

An oval of purest light had fallen directly over the image of the wheel symbol of Kronos. Within the oval, and glowing with the fervour of a great immaculate diamond, was the letter *T*, set upon the frustum of a cone. The mystical Tau of hallowed antiquity, emblem of creative power and eternity, of heaven and immortality. The traditional symbol used by earthborn, primeval man, to express a belief in the resurrection and the life to come.

But of this truth, with its sweet savour of Eden, King was to acquaint himself later. Now he watched, as in a dream, the slow inexorable erasing of the satanic symbol of the Cross Tau. Presently it alone remained to blaze supremely for an instant, before itself vanishing.

There was an elixir in King's veins. His senses were fully restored and the burden of the malignant influence no longer weighed upon him. He would have run forward, had not Dr. Montague restrained him.

The scientist whispered tremulously:

"Wait. Not yet. Be sure that Ruth is safe. The symbols were but the gage of the battle to come."

He drew King and the half fainting boy into the recess of the corridor.

He said, with tears in his voice: "The oldest fight in the world. The fight between Light and Darkness. Between Good—for the sake of man that He created in His own image—and Evil that would destroy man. See, my friends. The Urim . . ."

CHAPTER XXV

LIGHT IS ALL

OVER the jet background of the night moved, with infinite precision, the exquisite radiance of the Light-Ray. It was, King thought, as though a shining sword was being drawn slowly athwart the darkness in an ever-narrowing circle. In its wake a line of white fire clung to the air to form a kind of asymmetric structure, after the manner of a spiral nebulae. And within this barrier, which was shaped from above and extended inexorably downward, there seemed to dart a great bulk that was more black than night itself.

Beneath the devouring eye of the Urim's purpose the Satyr was turning frantically, as in a cage. The space in which it moved was alive with tiny sparks. There was no sound, but a hideous stench swelled the air. The darkness heaved like a turbulent sea.

The shining spiral, which as yet gave out no light beyond its own outline, grew steadily. King had an impression that the thin convolutions would presently multiply to such an extent that they would become fused, as it might be, into a cone-shaped whole.

He watched it fascinatedly. But suddenly his attention turned to the shape that bulked beneath. The Satyr, he decided, was perceptibly closer to the doorway and to themselves. The whole of the creature's influences appeared to focus themselves towards escape there.

Its outline became grosser each second. And, as if in recognition, the gyrations of the Light-Spiral quickened. A bell-like note came from it. It was answered by a sound so bestial that the blood in the veins of the watching humans was chilled with dread. From the vortex issued a trickle of bleating laughter. Inch by inch the Satyr was dragging itself clear of the labouring spiral.

The dreadful fact was apparent that in the direction of the doorway lay, for some reason, the Urim's weakness. Its bell-like voice deepened. King, rigid with apprehension, sensed therein a note of appeal. But, for the life of him, he knew not how to respond.

While he fretted impotently he was suddenly thrust aside. Dr. Montague stood in the open doorway. In the faint glow that now pervaded the room, King saw that the scientist held aloft the opened pages of the Testament. Intentionally or otherwise his attitude took on the appearance of a cross. His voice broke sharply through the eerie murmurings of the supernatural conflict.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

The effect, it seemed to King, was instantaneous. The black horror that was the Satyr dwindled and became without shape—a furiously palpitating amorphous, from the core of which arose a snarling deformity of sound.

The spiral of the Urim had come together in a cone of glorious radiance. So overpowering was the light that King was blinded. He threw up his hands to shield his eyes. As he did so the air shook to a single sharp concussion. Darkness rushed back into the room like an inky flood. His last impression, as he lost consciousness, was of an overpowering mephitic putrescence.

He came to himself to find Joe Murgle tugging at his arm.

"Mr. King. Mr. King."

King said shakily: "Where's Dr. Montague?"

"Here," the scientist replied. "Hush. Something stirs."

He seemed to crawl to King's side. The

three crouched in silent awe, staring at where a gray mist struggled against the blackness. Little by little it resolved itself into the outline of a face—a face of ineffable sweetness—neither of man nor of woman—unearthly in its beauty and purity—angelic. The wide, luminous eyes surveyed them almost sadly, but the lips smiled. They seemed, King thought, to move in wistful benediction.

The vision lasted but a moment. It was replaced by the glowing symbol of the Cross Tau. It, too, faded and vanished. A little breeze of fresh sweet air lingered on their faces, and was gone.

King whispered: "There's still a light."

"It's the dawn," Dr. Montague said.

His face was buried in his hands, as though he were praying.

Joe Murgle said: "Miss Ruth."

KING was already on his feet. He climbed the ladder soberly and presently stood in the little loft of the tower. Beyond the narrow windows the light was widening fast. A bird chirped from the eaves, and the tops of the trees were a sea of jasper floating to meet the sapphire horizon of the sky. The scents of Arcady rose from an earth still warm with dreaming.

Ruth lay sleeping on the floor by the window. Her head was pillowed on her arm, and the wind that slid over the sill paused to touch her hair. Her cheek was faintly flushed, and she breathed as easily and quietly as a child.

King fell on his knees and raised her gently in his arms. She opened her eyes and smiled.

For a long moment, then, King was unable to speak. His arms tightened around her, and when she murmured his name, he kissed her on the lips. At last he raised his head.

He said chokingly: "You're safe! You're *safe!* The Satyr is dead."

The dread name roused her fully.

"Dead! But that—of course, Rod. I was hideously afraid. And then somehow—it was gone from me. Do you believe in angels, Rod? Or what was it that lifted me from the Satyr's arms and carried me here? I wasn't afraid any more then. I was only dreadfully tired and sleepy. I knew it was going to be all right."

"It was the Light-Ray—the Urim," King said.

As he drew her to her feet Dr. Montague's voice called anxiously from below.

"King— Have you found her?"

"Safe and well," King answered. "I'm bringing her down to you.

Suddenly reaction came. Ruth clung to him in a storm of weeping.

"Rod! I thought I should have died—"

He held her tightly. "The world is all clean and sweet again. See, my dearest. The sun is coming. The blessed light . . ."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MURGLES' PRODIGAL

"NOISE! Damn kids!" said Mr. Murgle. He stood scowling on the porch of his home. The days were lengthening, and the Working Man's Residential Paradise was only then beginning to settle into the soft, enveloping twilight. Here and there lights twinkled. The smell of cooking gas would have delighted any member of the Board who might have happened—although purely by mistake—to be motoring homeward via the locality.

Jane Murgle, whose left hand held the ear of Horace, and whose right hand clutched the exercise book devoted to her home lessons, replied to her sire tartly.

"Well, you try doing your 'rithmetic and being a nursemaid at the same time. That's all I've got to say. Little Hermie, you come in out of that gutter."

"I won't be argued with," Mr. Murgle said. He waved majestically a large, brick-scored forefinger. "Tea ready?"

The voice of Mrs. Murgle, anemic with apprehension and the stress of cooking, issued from the end of the passage.

"Nearly ready, Father. Jane, can't you stop 'Orace shouting like that."

Mr. Murgle turned to regard his son. At the moment Horace was in combat with

his sister, and whatever he had been saying was no longer understandable. He was not, however, silent.

"What's he saying?" Mr. Murgle demanded.

Horace, evading the smothering hand of his sister, resumed his chanting with relish.

"Joe's coming 'ome Chewsday. Joe's coming 'ome Chewsday. Joe's coming—"

A spiteful twist of his ear turned the chant into a wail. Little Hermie, hastily abandoning a survey of her mud-stained lower portions, elevated her face. Her eyes disappeared and her mouth became a widening circle. As the first of a succession of piercing screams smote the outraged ears of her progenitor, the unbalance of her eager grief sent her toppling bodily into the gutter.

"A man's 'ome—" Mr. Murgle began.

Jane Murgle, thrusting him aside, withdrew Little Hermie from her moist predicament, like a garment plucked from the washtub. With the dripping infant under her arm as she stalked inside in a silent fury. Horace. sobered by tragedy, clattered in her wake.

"—ain't his own," Mr. Murgle concluded loudly. "That's what it is. A man's 'ome ain't his own. Always the same. Noise. Kids. Mouths to feed . . ."

He thrust himself presently under the kitchen sink. Still muttering he polished himself with a towel, and took his seat at the head of the table.

He sat a moment in gloomy silence, until small Horace in the process of seating himself upset a glass. A wordless sound escaped Mr. Murgle's lips.

Mrs. Murgle, advancing timidly with a plate of sausages, as though it were a votive offering, said: "I can't 'elp it. They won't be good. It's the eggcitement."

"What eggcitement?" Mr. Murgle asked. "I don't see no eggcitement. Jane, pass the mustard."

"Letter from Joe," his wife said. "He's coming 'ome next Toosday."

"What!" Mr. Murgle said. His brow darkened. "Sacked! I knew it."

Mrs. Murgle shook her head.

"Not sacked, father. The people are giving up the house. Joe ain't wanted any more."

"Joe's seen the devil," Jane Murgle announced.

"What!" Mr. Murgle said.

"'Nother sorsage?" Mrs. Murgle invited hastily. "Jane, don't you go frightening 'Orace. I won't have it. Here's Joe's letter, father."

Mr. Murgle took it with a stern hand. Undeterred by the process of mastication he began to read out loud.

DEAR MUM:

Mum I'm coming home on Tuesday. I've seen the devil. At least Mr. King said it wasn't the real devil mum it will be by the midday train I think. But I'll let you know. Well mum Mr. King said it is a thing we can't understand Joe and so we will be wise not to say much about it. Becos people will not understand Joe. And I said that is alright. You can rely on me. And he said the doctor is very pleased with you Joe. You are to have a bonus of five pounds (5£). We are sorry to lose you and Mrs. Puckett but we are all going away.

Well mum I must tell you all about it. The star germs got out of the laborty, you see. You see there was a good germ but all the rest were bad germs. And the good germ killed all the bad germs but one that was a goat. Well mum it was a very dark nite. Mr. King said to me Joe we need you with us. You are not afrade but the doctor and I are afrade. We will all sit in miss Ruth's room and we will have plenty of light. Becos they do not like the light Joe. Evil loves the dark. And I said I am on your side. Do not fear. And he said it is a great comfort to have a fine man like you to help us Joe. And I said why should I deny it.

Mr Murgle raised a purple and bewildered face.

"What's he talking about? I said before and I say it agin. Joe's dilerous. That's what he is. Goats and germs."

He glared about him in an exasperated fashion, as if he expected to find his ailing son in the room. His eye lighted on his wife, and she essayed a weak smile.

"'Nother cup er tea, father," said Mrs. Murgle. "Jane, don't let Little 'Ermie suck the jam knife. Well, father, I don't know what Joe means. You read it."

"Ain't I reading it?" Mr. Murgle enquired truculently.

He gulped at his tea, wiped his moustache, and resumed:

> Well mum I wish Jane could have been there she would have screamed with fear. But I was not afrade.
>
> Well mum we all sat in the room except Mrs. Puckett. She thought it would be safer in Mr. King's cottage and so she was there. It grew darker and darker.
>
> And all at once all the star-germs tried to get in but another germ came and killed them. And Mr. Montague tried to take a flashlight photo and it made a noise and I nearly choked with the smoke.
>
> But the photo is no good. There is nothing on the plate Mr. King said. And I can't understand that Joe becos the germs were half of this world you know. But there it is and we must make the best of our disappointment. And I said perhaps it is all for the best.
>
> And Miss Ruth said I am sure it is. We want to forget all about it. And Mr. King said yes darling we will do our best. But he was not talking to me then he was talking to Miss Ruth.

Mr. Murgle cleared his throat noisily and turned to the next page.

> Well mum all of a sudden Mr. King said where is Ruth? And she was gone. The Satire had got her. It had a dreadful smell like the big drain at the back of Billy Jones place. You know when Billy got the diptheria. Well it was like that. And I said we will get her back.
>
> Come at once.
>
> Lead on Joe said the doctor. Well mum we searched all over the house and miss Ruth was not there. And so we went to the tower room and the Satire was there. It was the devil. It had a horrible face. The germ that killed the other germs was there to and they began to fite and fite. And there was a thunderstorm. And the other germ that is the good germ won the fite.
>
> And Miss Ruth said today it was an angel Joe. And I said yes I know that.
>
> But when they were fiting she was not there. She was in the tower where the Satire had put her. And after the fite was all over I went to find her. And she opened her eyes and said I knew you would come Joe. And I said don't mention it Miss Ruth.

"'Ow much more of this is there?" Mr Murgle interpolated disgustedly.

"Only another page, father," said Mrs. Murgle.

"I'll tell you what it is," Mr. Murgle said. "Joe's sickening for something. When I was sickening the time I 'ad the fever I torked a lot of nonsince. You can tell how ill I must 'a been. Fancy me torkin' nonsince. I've told that to chaps and they wouldn't believe it. It's a fack. Well, then—"

With his pipe alight Mr. Murgle essayed the completion of his task.

> Well mum I'll be home on Tuesday. Emily that is Mrs. Pucketts neece is going to write to me and I said Emily I will write to you to. Becos mum she is a fine girl and you will like her.
>
> Well mum Mr. King and Miss Ruth are going to be married today the minister is coming up from town. And Mrs. Puckett has made a cake. I am bringing some home for Horace and Little Hermie.
>
> Well mum I will be home on Tuesday. I have no more news so will now close from your loving son
>
> JOSEPH MURGLE.

THE little silence that followed was broken by Jane. She said, glancing at Little Hermie, who slumbered with her head in her plate:

"Now that's over I suppose I can get on with my homework."

"Jane," said Mrs. Murgle plaintively, "don't be disreputable to your father."

Mr. Murgle stood up heavily.

He said: "Don't mind me. I'm nobody in me own house. Where's me 'at?"

He banged the table with his fist. The result was disastrous. Horace dozing, and Little Hermie asleep, awoke simultaneously. The air was rent with their united complainings.

"Damn kids," Mr. Murgle said. "Noise!"

He slammed the door as he went out.

THE END

The silver clinked at Solita's feet

Pieces of Silver

By DAVIS DRESSER

It is the law, Señor, that what happens to one who has insulted a woman of the Jurillos, must happen before two suns go down

THE gringo Thurston? *Si señor*. I remember him well. I was one of those who went with him on his trip into the hill country exploring for oil.

The trip, *señor*, from which he did not return.

You ask what became of him. That, *señor*, is a question no man may answer with certainty. Not even I, though I have the American education and am known through the Isthmus of Tejauntepec as the smartest man in Mexico.

I understand, *señor*. You are from the American insurance company and have come to Teluocan seeking proof of Thurston's death. I will tell you the story as I know it, and you will have to judge for yourself whether it is the proof you seek.

Seat yourself comfortably here on the veranda and listen well. It is not a long story, but it must begin when the gringo Thurston first stepped off the river boat which comes up from Porto Blanco.

You knew him, perhaps? No? A big man, *señor*, with broad shoulders and eyes holding the cold glitter of ice; a harsh voice, giving loud orders as though he spoke to dogs rather than to free men who have the blue blood of Spanish dons in their veins, mixed with that of native tribes who held this continent long before it was discovered by a wandering Italian sailor.

You comprehend, *señor*, that we of

Mexico are a race slow to anger. Gringo Americans mistake this for weakness or fear, and sometimes do not learn their mistake until too late.

Patience, *señor*. It is the story of Thurston I am telling. To understand his end, you must see him as he was when he came arrogantly among us with harsh words on his lips and contempt for us in his heart.

Ay, and with a look in his eyes when he gazed upon our women that was not good. He was a stranger to the tropics and he mistook a simplicity in the clothing of our women for an invitation to evil thoughts.

True, passions run hot and free here on the Isthmus, but within certain limits, *señor*. Limits which one like Thurston did not comprehend.

Mira, señor. In the street below are *muchachas* of twelve years or less who play unashamedly in the sunlight without covering above the waist.

Ay, there is the promise of womanhood to come . . . and soon . . . but it is nothing to kindle a light in the eyes of a grown man.

Be not impatient, *señor*. I seek to make you see the gringo Thurston as we of Teluocan saw him . . . that you may have better understanding of what happened inside such a man when he stood face to face with Lolita Simpson in the jungle.

Si, señor. Señor Simpson is an American, but not a gringo like Thurston. A little man with no hair on his head, and a mild voice. Twenty years ago he came from *Los Estados Unidos* to Teluocan.

Perhaps with scorn you would say he is one who has gone native. It is true that he took a wife from the Jurillo tribe, Indians of the hill country. But she has been a loyal wife to him and I think Señor Simpson has not regretted his choice.

With her, he settled near the headwaters of the *Rio Chico*, cleared a small plantation and planted bananas, reared six fine children of which his daughter, Lolita, is eldest.

SEÑOR SIMPSON was in town for supplies that day when Thurston came on the river boat.

I saw them meet upon this veranda, *señor*, as I stood close to them three nights later while Lolita danced the *fluencita* beneath the light of flaming torches and the warrant for the gringo Thurston's death was signed.

The gringo stood a head above Simpson, looking down at him with coldness, saying:

"They tell me you have a little two-by-four plantation up the river and could guide me that far on my journey into the hill country."

Señor Simpson looked up at the gringo, then away. It was as though the bad smell was in his nose. But he said:

"Yes. I am in Teluocan for supplies. I will be starting back in the cool of the morning."

"I'm pulling out up-river right after lunch. There's ten dollars in it for you to get together some Mex carriers and guide me as far as your place."

"After lunch is the *siesta* hour," Señor Simpson said. "They have a saying down here that only mad dogs and gringo fools venture into the sun during *siesta*."

The gringo threw back his head and laughed loudly. "Let them call me a gringo fool. I've been called worse."

Señor Simpson shook his head. "It is too hot for men to travel with packs. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

"Damn your *siesta* and your *mananas*," said Thurston. He was like that, *señor*. With a curse for everything not his own way. "If you don't want to earn ten dollars, I'll go alone."

Without anger, Señor Simpson admitted he had use for ten dollars. In a land where *pesos* are scarce, American dollars are much valued. But why, asked Simpson, did the other American wish to go into the hill country?

"My business is oil. The geological exploration. I've heard of oil seepages up there. Have you ever seen any?"

Señor Simpson shrugged his shoulders

and said he did not know. His business was to raise bananas.

The gringo snorted with loudness. "That's the trouble with you Americans that go native. You settle down with some slobby-fat Spick woman and lose all your American push."

I was watching Señor Simpson and I saw the look on his face when Thurston said that to him. It was not a look good to see. For it is true, *señor,* that his wife is not as slender in the waist as when he took her to the priest.

But he rolled a corn-husk *cigarillo* and said nothing. One knew he was thinking it was useless to try to make the gringo Thurston understand . . . and ten American dollars do not drop into one's hands in Teluocan every day.

In the end, *señor,* the gringo had his way. At the beginning of the *siesta* hour we started up-river. Six of us with packs, Señor Simpson with his two burros carrying supplies for the plantation.

And, mark you, *señor!* The gringo going ahead on the trail carrying a pack heavier than any of the rest.

THE midday heat on the Isthmus, you comprehend, is like no heat you will find elsewhere. There is a heaviness that crushes one. The breath comes hard into the lungs because it is steamy thick with vapors.

There is silence in the jungle with even the birds and monkeys retreating deep into shady places. And there is the heavy stink rising upward from damp decay which we of this country learn to endure but not to enjoy.

Through this, the gringo Thurston set such a pace as no man who knew the tropics would attempt. Such a man, *señor,* is a difficult leader. One who is in the pay of such a man cannot well lag behind.

For three hours, *señor,* we in the rear kept up the pace set by Thurston. It was too much, after three hours, for Alberto, the youngest among us.

He was sick in his stomach and could not keep up. His older brother, Pedro, pushed up the trail to tell Señor Simpson we must make the stop for Alberto to rest.

"I am not the *patron,*" Señor Simpson told him with regret. "Señor Thurston goes on without resting."

"But he has not the sickness *en la estomacha,*" Pedro said. "The other *patron* will stop if you tell him, *señor.*"

With the wisdom of the country and of our people, Simpson knew it would be best to rest Alberto's *estomacha.* He stopped and called: "One of your carriers is sick, Thurston."

The gringo turned and came striding back with anger on his face. We in the rear held Alberto up while he rid himself of all that had passed down his throat that day.

"Which of you," asked the gringo with harshness, "pretends the sickness to get a rest?"

Alberto was not without spirit. He lifted his head and said, "It is I. In a little time the sickness will pass. It is the too much heat."

The gringo was not one to hear excuses from weaker men. "It is not hotter for you than for me," he told Alberto. "Get ahead of me on the trail where I may kick your pants when the sickness comes."

It was not, *señor,* the wise thing to say to a sick man. There was a look of hatred on every face, and behind the gringo Pedro's hand went inside his waistband where a sharp knife is always concealed.

It was, *señor,* what you Americans would call the showdown.

The insult brought a blaze to Alberto's eyes but he was too sick to defy the gringo. He shrugged his shoulders and let the pack slide off, saying simply: "I rest here until the sickness goes."

"Not," said the gringo, "while I'm paying you good money. Take your sick belly back to town."

THERE was heavy breathing and the dangerous silence of hate there on the trail, *señor.* More than one hand itched for a knife, but the big gringo faced us with a snarl.

All but Pedro. Pedro was luckily behind him, crouched like a *tigre* of the jungle with hot sunlight gleaming on polished steel in his right hand.

Señor Simpson tried to save the gringo. He stepped forward and said: "You're making a mistake, Thurston. These men won't stand for talk like that."

To Señor Simpson, his own countryman, the gringo said: "Shut up," and it was as though the words were icicles dripping from his mouth.

It was not good to see Señor Simpson back away. One does not enjoy, you comprehend, to see fear soften the backbone of one's friend.

Behind the gringo, Pedro was moving closer. We waited in silence, the rest of us, for the quick death Pedro's knife is known to carry.

Something in our eyes, perhaps, warned the gringo.

He whirled with a quickness remarkable in a man so big . . . and he laughed at sight of Pedro's knife held low for the bellyrip.

A laugh, *señor,* that was more fearful than a curse.

He lunged forward with his fist that was like the kick of a shod mule. Pedro went down to the trail and his knife made a gleaming arc in the sunlight before it was buried in the muck.

There remained four of us . . . none unarmed. But the gringo faced us as we pressed forward, his hand going inside his shirt like a striking snake, coming out with one of your fast-shooting American pistols.

We have a saying in the tropics that hot lead is faster than cold steel. None of us were of a mind to put it to the proof. I hang my head, *señor,* recalling how like a pack of whipped curs we were as the gringo told Alberto to get out of sight down the trail while he ordered the rest of us to divide his pack and move ahead of him up the trail.

Pedro went with us, licking blood from his mouth, leaving his knife where it had fallen, and for the remaining hours of that day we stayed far in front of his *pistole.*

The sun was below the treetops before he gave the order to halt. Our rear-ends were dragging behind us, as you Americans would say it, *señor,* and none among us was of a mind for anything but food and rest.

Darkness comes swiftly to the jungle after the sun drops from sight, and the blackness of night was on the trail by the time we had a fire built.

The gringo gave no orders, said not a word to us. He settled himself down-train with his back against a tree where the firelight flickered on his face.

There was something about that one, *señor,* that gave us pause before lifting a hand against him. We were not timid men, but five of us that night were held by a fear that was more than fear of the gringo's *pistole.*

How to explain it? There is no explanation for the way of a man like Thurston over other men. From him there came a feel of evil that took away our courage.

Truly, *señor,* sleep came but brokenly to us that night while the gringo lay stretched across the trail snoring with the loudness of a woman who is faithful to her husband.

THE same evil sense of fear drove us on the next day. It was a journey that men will speak of in hushed voices for many years to come. We in the lead, with the gringo striding behind us: Señor Simpson following behind his burros, prodding them with a sharp stick that they might not lag behind.

Mark you, *señor.* It is a trip of three days from Teluocan to the plantation of Señor Simpson and yet we sighted it late that afternoon . . . after a day and a half on the trail. Of a certainty, *señor,* it is not strange that Americans die young.

A welcome sight the plantation was to us who were as dead men on our feet. Palm-thatched houses in the bend of the

river, with rows of banana plants leading back into the jungle.

A dog came yapping to meet us, followed by the running figure of a girl who stopped by the side of the trail at sight of many pack-burdened men instead of only her father.

Si, señor. The girl was Lolita Simpson.

There was the coldness of ice in my veins when she stood for Thurston to look upon her with those eyes which I had seen lighted with unclean fire as he gazed on the innocent young of our village.

How to describe Lolita to you, *señor?*

Dios! but she was more beautiful than I can tell. Beneath her cotton dress were the soft young curves to quicken the heartbeat of any man. With the innocent questioning of childhood in her eyes, a virgin freshness of her cheeks; yet one knew that inside, the red blood of her mother's people ran hot and near the surface.

She was only sixteen, *señor,* but the tropics make a woman at sixteen.

She did not look at us as we passed before her on the trail. Her gaze was for the broad figure of Thurston behind us. *Señor,* the sweat stood on my forehead as I turned my head to watch that meeting.

The gringo stopped in the trail and looked at her with that in his eyes which would have sent her flying for concealment if she had read it aright.

But she knew nothing of the evil lust of men. She was as unawakened and unafraid as any wild young thing of the jungle. Yet, with this difference. American blood was half in her veins with that of the hill tribe.

I think Thurston was the first American she had seen except her father. Who knows what took place inside her? What secret longing was locked in her breast to be lighted to flame by the bold gaze of the gringo?

I saw it happen, *señor.* I saw her take one slow step toward him. Her face was blank like one who is hypnotized. I swear she knew not what she did.

No one can say what might have happened had not Señor Simpson come up in time. He was panting and there were deep lines of more than weariness on his face.

I heard the gringo say to him: "You are not needed here. Go on . . . while the girl stays with me."

And Señor Simpson replied. "It is my daughter, Lolita." His voice was thin, like a tight wire singing in the wind.

Thurston laughed at him. "You don't need to tell me. I can spot a half-breed a mile away."

It would have not been so brutal, *señor,* if he had slapped Simpson on the face.

He turned to the girl and said two words: "Come here."

THERE was no sound except the heavy breathing of the father. A spell was on the jungle.

It was broken by Señor Simpson's voice shouting, "No!" at Lolita.

She had taken one step forward. She drew back with a frightened look, as though she had just wakened from sleep.

"Go back to the house," her father said in a hoarse voice. "Go quickly."

She went submissively, *señor,* without looking back. And Thurston said:

"You can't keep her away from me. She'll come when I crook my finger. It's the breed blood in her."

Murder blazed in Simpson's eyes. There was the feel of death in the air. His lips were back from his teeth and there was no longer the look of mildness on his face.

The gringo laughed. It would have pleased him to kill the man who stood between him and Lolita. His hand went inside his shirt and he waited.

I think, *señor,* I will never live as long a minute, until Señor Simpson turned his head away and began rolling a *cigarillo.* His fingers shook and he spilled tobacco on the trail. Then he went past the gringo toward his house.

He did not ask Thurston to stay at his house. He took his pay from the gringo and had no words for him.

Thurston understood, but he was a man who enjoyed feeling the hatred of other men.

He moved up the river two hundred paces and had us make camp there. He seemed not anxious to go on, telling us he might stay in camp for several days before continuing into the hills.

Señor Simpson came to me that night under the cover of darkness . . . taking me aside where Thurston could not hear.

He asked me first whether we went on in the morning, nodding with melancholy when I repeated what the gringo had said.

"I am afraid for my Lolita," he said in a sad voice. "She has been acting strangely since meeting Thurston."

I understood. I told him, *señor,* I would do what I could.

He asked me if I would ride into the hills that night bearing a message to Ruoey Urregan, son of the head-man of the Jurillos to whom Lolita was promised in marriage.

I agreed, *señor,* and the message was this: "The betrothal ceremony between you and my Lolita must be at once instead of waiting until next month as planned. Come tomorrow night lest you come too late."

I understood, *señor.* It was the wise strategy to save the girl from herself. Among the Jurillos, the ceremony of betrothal is as binding as marriage. And they are a fierce, wild tribe, zealous of the purity of their maidens.

I slipped away from the gringo's camp while he slept, and rode one of Señor Simpson's mules into the hills.

I was proud, *señor,* to have a part in the undoing of the gringo. It was a dangerous, hard trip, and another might well have failed, but I am a man of many talents and know the trails of the hills as well as I comprehend the difficulties of your language.

I delivered the message and was back in camp before the sun rose again, and before the preparations began for the *baile* that would celebrate the ceremony that night.

NOT knowing the reason for the stir, Thurston sat three hours beneath a banyan tree waiting, *señor,* for Lolita to come to him.

True, *señor,* it is hard to understand the ways of such a man. Another might have tried by stealth to see the girl. That was not the gringo's way. It would have pleased him to humble the father by having her come to him openly. But Lolita did not come.

At noon Thurston went to Simpson's house and knocked on the front door.

I was in the yard with some others preparing a pit of charcoal for the roast pig on which the guests would feast that night.

Señor Simpson opened the door to the gringo's knock. He had a two-barreled shotgun in his hands which he held pointed at Thurston's belly. I do not know why he did not shoot. You Americans, *señor,* have many ways that are puzzling to us.

He stood in the doorway and told Thurston of the betrothal ceremony. Then he closed the door in the gringo's face.

Thurston went back to his camp on the bank of the river, saying no word to anyone. What his thoughts were, no one could guess.

He was forgotten as the noisy preparations went on. Messengers had gone out to spread news of the festivity and the guests began coming in the afternoon. Native planters riding on burros, with their women and children behind them on foot as was proper. Indians from the jungle, naked but for loin-clothes.

A platform on the wharf was cleared for dancing, banked with pink and white flowers of the mimosa mixed with the flaming blooms of hibiscus and with sprays of jasmine for fragrance. Wood that was heavy with pitch was gathered and tied in bundles with bamboo shoots to the tops of green poles for torches around the edge.

In the yard was the chatter of many women and the shrill cries of naked children running between the legs of their elders, the clean smell of wood smoke and

the odor of pigs roasting over the charcoal pits, the pleasant smell of beer made from the red *tzuo* berries of the hills.

Ay, a happy, festive scene, *señor,* bringing a smile even to the face of the host as he mingled with his guests and kept his eyes turned away from the camp on the river where Thurston sat motionless, watching.

It was dusk when a band of young bloods from the Jurillo tribe came down from the hills escorting Ruoey Urregan to his betrothal.

Mounted on shaggy native ponies and brandishing spears tipped with iron, they burst like a whirlwind into the clearing with young Urregan proudly in the lead.

Dios! but there was a man, *señor.* A true son of many generations of tribal chieftans. Tall, *señor,* and slim of hip, with broad shoulders and muscles rippling beneath the skin.

The gringo, I think, got what you call the full-eye as he watched silently from his place on the river.

Their medicine man came with them to make the ceremony; a shrunken little man with piercing black eyes that were never quiet, and looking to have more than the hundred and fifty years he claims.

THEY made a half circle there in front of the house while dusk came on swiftly, the young men with their lances held before them, chanting low to the beat of a drum in the hands of the medicine man.

Rouey Urregan stepped to the front as the door opened and Lolita came out on the arm of her father.

Ay! they made a picture, *señor,* that one does not soon forget. Lolita, in a Spanish *mantilla* and a lace gown of black that had been her father's wedding gift to her mother; her tall Indian lover with tight-fitting white pants and a red sash above his waist.

They stood side by side before the medicine man and there was a hush over the watchers.

I, *señor,* am educated and do not believe in the power of ill-smelling herbs burnt over coals and the sing-song of an old man to make magic. But I tell you, *señor,* there was magic in the clearing as darkness came on.

Patience, *señor.* The end is near. I must tell the story my own way for each happening that night is burned upon my memory and has its proper place in what is to come.

Later, there was the dance, the *baile.* There were guitars to make the music, the torches flared in the night air above the platform casting light and shadows upon the moving couples.

Thurston's campfire burned in the darkness close by, but it was late in the evening before he showed his face at the *baile* to which he had no invitation. The guitars were in the slow rhythm of a tango and Lolita was dancing in the arms of her lover when I saw the gringo moving toward Señor Simpson who stood near the edge of the platform.

I stepped forward, *señor,* my blood fired with fear for what was to come.

The gringo's eyes were upon Lolita, feasting themselves upon her young body yielding itself to the movements of her lover. Truly, *señor,* Lolita dancing the tango was a sight to draw the eyes of any man.

The other dancers were stepping back, giving to the affianced couple the entire floor. The tango is the dance of youth, you comprehend, the dance of courtship.

The gringo's gaze clung evilly to Lolita as he stood beside Simpson and said:

"I suppose her sweetheart will be going back into the hills after the *baile.* He's not allowed to hang around her until they're married, is he?"

There was a sneer in his voice, *señor,* but Simpson answered with a nod of his head:

"Yes. Back to the hills . . . where you will be going."

Thurston's reply was not one to make Simpson happier: "I'm getting an early start in the morning. I'll finish my work and return soon . . . in time for a little

vacation here before I go back to the states. Business before pleasure is my motto."

I was standing close behind Señor Simpson and I saw a trembling take hold of his body. He did not say anything.

The gringo's tongue licked his lips. His eyes bulged, watching Lolita.

I moved a little closer, *señor,* and I do not deny that my hand was on my knife. Señor Simpson was my friend and I did not know what was in his mind. He was a father, you comprehend, and the gringo was looking at his daughter.

But more than a tango was to come.

THERE was the clapping of hands when the dance ended. Lolita and her Jurillo lover faced each other breathlessly. In that moment of silence, a single guitar began tapping out a strange rhythm that was like the distant beat of a jungle drum.

The other guitars took it up one by one and Lolita swayed back in the torchlight, her young bosom lifting the lace of her mother's wedding gown, a look as of dreaminess on her upturned face.

From all about us there came excited cries: *"Ola. Bravo. La fluencita. Aie. La fluencita!"*

Ruoey Urrengan stood stiff in the center of the platform with his arms folded and his eyes bright. He turned slowly as Lolita circled about him with her arms curved above her head, fingers snapping like castanets.

It was the *fluencita, señor.* The passion-dance of the Jurillos. A sight for a man to carry locked in his memories until he grows old and has need of such memories. A dance, *señor,* which none but an affianced maiden may dance for her lover.

Ay, there was the fever-heat of the jungle in the song of the guitars. A strange note of madness, *señor,* which struck deep inside a man to set the pulse drumming.

Faster and more fast was the beat of the music, and Lolita circled faster and yet faster, stamping her right foot sharply, her eyes holding those of her lover, a strange quiver in ever muscle of her young body that was bent backward like a drawn bow.

Ah, *señor,* to see Lolita dance the *fluencita* was to feel again the fierce fire of youth and of love in one's veins. Even now, *señor,* I close my eyes and I stand again beside the platform. . . .

But it ended suddenly. Over the heads of the watchers, half a dozen American dollars clattered at Lolita's feet.

The music stopped. Lolita looked down at the coins with round eyes, a flush of shame on her cheeks. Ruoey Urregan whirled about, his face black with anger.

"Do you comprehend, *senor?* It was the insult supreme. A sign of contempt such as one makes to a cheap dancing girl who entertains men for pay.

The gringo had turned his back and was striding toward the circle of darkness beyond the torchlight. Urregan leaped forward, off the platform in pursuit, his hand going to a dagger in his sash.

But Señor Simpson caught his arm and held him back. I heard him say in the young man's ear:

"No. In his shirt is concealed a pistol. He goes into the hills tomorrow . . . exploring for oil."

That was the end of the *baile, señor.* There were black looks toward the gringo's camp, and muttered threats, but Ruoey Urregan whispered to his friends and they went back into the hills leaving the insult unavenged.

WE BROKE camp before sunrise the next morning. Business before pleasure, you comprehend.

We traveled far that day and made dry camp at night, went upward into the hills until noon the next day when we were approached by two Indians on shaggy ponies. They had heard, they said, that the *Americano* sought for signs of black oil in the hills.

It was so, Thurston told them with excitement. Did they know of such?

They told him of a spring not far away which bubbled up with black scum upon it

which would burn. He offered them money to take him there, and they agreed, *señor.*

He went with them eagerly telling us to make camp and await his return.

We stood together and watched while he and the Indians went from sight over a small hill. Pedro crossed himself and said *"Vas con Dios"* through lips that were bruised from the gringo's fist.

We then turned back, *señor,* and no one has seen the gringo Thurston again.

No, *señor.* It would have been useless for us to wait there for him to return. The Indians who guided him away were Jurillos. They have a tribal law that one who insults a woman of their tribe must die before two suns go down.

And they obey that law.

But no, *señor,* it would be useless and perhaps dangerous to look for proof of his death. Even for the purpose of insurance, it would not be wise.

The tribal law of the Jurillos has to do with rubbing honey on the body of their victim and stretching him with grass ropes across a nest of ants. The ants, you comprehend, are without knowledge of American insurance rules and leave little that is recognizable.

He was a fool, you say, to throw money at the feet of Lolita while she danced the *fluencita* for her lover?

But yes, *señor,* that indeed would have been a foolish thing for the gringo to do.

You have misunderstood me, *señor.* It was not the gringo Thurston who threw the money at Lolita's feet. *Dios,* no!

But it was very unwise of him to pay Señor Simpson with American silver dollars.

Looking Ahead!

CUT LOOSE YOUR WOLF

When Blue was hanged, his son knew it was because he hadn't had enough money to hire a smart lawyer. So Larry Blue swore he'd never be poor—and that somehow he'd make an attorney out of his kid brother. . . . Beginning the epic story of one man's courageous struggle to win a place for himself in the West of our fathers, by
BENNETT FOSTER

KID SILK

There was something the matter with the Kid. He had speed and style, but he could never get started. . . . It took two misplaced shiners and a blind man's second-sight to turn him into the champion he really was. An unusual novelet of the ring, by
ROBERT GRIFFITH

BREAK-UP

It is the Grand National of the Yukon—the sourdough sweepstakes with every stepson of the North betting his poke on the exact moment when the Big Freeze will crack and the ice come piling down the river. Any year it is an event, but the year that No-Shirt McGee gambled the destiny of his two best friends against all odds—it was terrific. A vivid novelet by
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—AUGUST 6th

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE'VE JUST been talking to a friend of ours who happened to drop into a riverside cafe the other night. It seems that the place is quite a hangout for the city's sandhogs. Our friend struck up a conversation with them and finally got around to mentioning the ARGOSY serial, "Sandhog" by Borden Chase. Accustomed as we are to the fault-finding of sharp-minded readers, we trembled a little at what actual experts might say on a story that touched their lives so closely.

We need not have worried; for apparently the sandhogs were delighted with Mr. Chase's yarn, and were proud and pleased that they had been so realistically and sympathetically chronicled. . . . A large spanner and a couple caissons to you, Mr. Chase.

The mail continues to surprise us. Instead of all loyal Californians leaping ferociously on Carl Rathjen for his hint at super-humidity in "It Rained One Night," most of the letters seem to have been written by people who are good and sick of the glories of the Pacific Coast climate, and relish a little rainstorm now and then. For instance:

C. L. ANDREWS

I have just laid aside a copy of ARGOSY, June 11th issue, after reading Argonotes. I also read your very interesting story, "It Rained One Night." Therefore, this letter; and if it helps any, Mr. Rathjen, you have my sincere sympathy.

Doubtless this is a hackneyed question, yet I've never heard a satisfactory answer: What peculiar complex causes Californians (who, by the way, seem to come from almost every other state in the Union) to act so touchy over such minor things as quakes and floods?

As a citizen who first appeared in Flint, Michigan, I've roved through states from coast to coast and border to border with their climates, scenery, desolation and other points good, bad and alibi-able. I've resided in Los Angeles twelve years and in other parts of the State for lesser periods; but I've yet to see a season when something unusual did not occur—deluge, drought, fire, frost, scandals of speed tickets. I know that within the past twenty years Los Angeles alone has suffered three flood-stage disasters of which this last we obviously the worst. And the "natives" are crusty enough to imagine they should be immune to what cannot be prevented.

You, Mr. Rathjen, tossed some fiction into the laps of our C. of C. fable supporters, and because your fiction embraced too much truth—are they mad!

Perhaps I would not have decided to unload my opinion in your story controversy if I were not dabbling at the writing game myself. I got a pretty fair start years ago, but let down after joining my step-father in his business. Changes in my fortunes have shoved me back behind the fiction-producing typewriter. Whether or not my efforts again greet eyes of John Q. Public, I prefer to be a spontaneous booster, but not along California C. of C. lines. If ever I'm called upon to be a critic, I aim to be a constructive one, sans sarcasm.

Again, I repeat: your story of abnormal dampness was fine. More power and success to you.

Los Angeles, California.

We are pretty sure that Mr. Rathjen will get a good deal of honest satisfaction from that letter.

TIDINGS DEPT. All you hayfork-quibblers take notice. Hollywood was so impressed with Charles M. Warren's story, "Midnight Haul" that they have whisked him out there to do the original story on the next Edward G. Robinson film. Since the yarn the moguls liked concerned trucking, need we whisper that Mr. Warren's film chores have to do with horse-racing? Ah, Hollywood. . . .

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